



EMERGENCY CONTACT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN LAYNE

and ANTHONY LEDONNE

Subscribe to our newsletter for title recommendations, giveaways, and discounts reserved only for subscribers.

[Join here.](#)

PRAISE FOR *EMERGENCY CONTACT*

“Pure rom-com gold. You can never go wrong with a Lauren Layne book, and her comedian husband as coauthor takes this story to the next level.”

—Rachel Van Dyken, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Rom-com perfection. Laugh-out-loud witty banter is perfectly balanced with achingly tender moments.”

—Jennifer Probst, *New York Times* bestselling author

“An exceptional second-chance rom-com. *Emergency Contact* was such a fun read!”

—Monica Murphy, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A brilliant rom-com. Whip-smart banter, opposites-attract tension, and a madcap series of travel errors make for a heartwarming and festive holiday read.”

—Devon Daniels, author of *Meet You in the Middle*

“[A] sparkling second-chance romance . . . This is a gem.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Delivers the humor and poignancy of *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* in true enemies-to-lovers style. I cheered for this couple even as I kept laughing at the increasingly bizarre situations they had to deal with . . . Hilarious and big-hearted and filled with holiday spirit.”

—Linda-Marie Barrett, executive director of Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA)

“*Emergency Contact* is laugh-out-loud funny and perfect for fans of *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*.”

—Beth Seufer Buss, program director of Bookmarks, NC

BOOKS BY LAUREN LAYNE

CENTRAL PARK PACT

Passion on Park Avenue

Love on Lexington Avenue

Marriage on Madison Avenue

STILETTO & OXFORD

After the Kiss

Love the One You're With

Just One Night

The Trouble with Love

Irresistibly Yours

I Wish You Were Mine

Someone Like You

I Knew You Were Trouble

I Think I Love You

THE WEDDING BELLES

From This Day Forward (novella)

To Have and to Hold

For Better or Worse

To Love and to Cherish

21 WALL STREET

Hot Asset

Hard Sell

Huge Deal

MAN OF THE YEAR

Yours in Scandal

Yours to Keep

REDEMPTION

Isn't She Lovely

Broken

Crushed

I DO, I DON'T

Ready to Run

Runaway Groom

NEW YORK'S FINEST

Frisk Me

Steal Me

Cuff Me

BEST MISTAKE

Only with You

Made for You

STANDALONE NOVELS

To Sir with Love

Made in Manhattan

You, Again

Walk of Shame

The Prenup

Blurred Lines

Good Girl

Love Story

Ex for Christmas

Emergency Contact (with Anthony LeDonne)

EMERGENCY CONTACT

LAUREN LAYNE
ANTHONY LEDONNE



Copyright © 2023
by Lauren Layne and Anthony LeDonne
E-book published in 2023 by Blackstone Publishing
Cover design by Sarah Riedlinger

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious.
Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors.

Trade e-book ISBN 979-8-200-89934-0
Library e-book ISBN 979-8-200-89933-3
Fiction / Romance / Romantic Comedy

Blackstone Publishing
31 Mistletoe Rd.
Ashland, OR 97520

www.BlackstonePublishing.com

To our real Emergency Contacts:

Allie “Sis” Ganton

&

Michael “Chach/Mikey” LeDonne

We are so grateful to call you siblings and best friends.

CONTENTS

1. [Katherine](#)
2. [Tom](#)
3. [Katherine](#)
4. [Tom](#)
5. [Katherine](#)
6. [Tom](#)
7. [Katherine](#)
8. [Tom](#)
9. [Katherine](#)
10. [Tom](#)
11. [Katherine](#)
12. [Tom](#)
13. [Katherine](#)
14. [Katherine](#)
15. [Tom](#)
16. [Katherine](#)
17. [Tom](#)
18. [Katherine](#)
19. [Tom](#)
20. [Katherine](#)
21. [Tom](#)
22. [Katherine](#)
23. [Tom](#)
24. [Katherine](#)
25. [Tom](#)
26. [Katherine](#)
27. [Katherine](#)
28. [Tom](#)
29. [Katherine](#)
30. [Tom](#)
31. [Katherine](#)
32. [Tom](#)
33. [Tom](#)
34. [Katherine](#)
35. [Katherine](#)
36. [Katherine](#)
37. [Tom](#)

38. [Katherine](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Author Note](#)
[About the Authors](#)

ONE
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:06 a.m.

I'm just going to come right out and say it:

The Grinch was misunderstood.

Before you jump down my throat, I'm not going to claim that the whole breaking-and-entering thing wasn't a *little* over the top. Or that shoving someone's Christmas tree up a chimney while dressed as Santa isn't something to be unpacked in a therapy session.

Nor can I pretend to understand the level of childhood teasing that must have resulted from being hairy and green.

Though, it should be noted that preteen Katherine (that's me) certainly scratched the surface on that score. Picture, if you will, an aggressive, gangly growth spurt. Then pair it with cystic acne that came *well* before anybody else's first pimple showed up.

And then top all that with an unrelenting halo of dark frizz and a single father who didn't know that smoothing products existed, much less how to direct his eleven-year-old daughter on how to use them.

If you're thinking that maybe I spent most of junior high sitting alone at the lunch table, you're quite correct. Though, hypothetically, I'll grant that my lack of popularity *might* have been due to my know-it-all attitude. At

least, that was Mrs. Cabrera's stance during parent-teacher conferences.

But back to the Grinch. I'll just say this: When it comes to his stance that the holiday season is hell on the nerves? I stand in solidarity with the hairy green guy.

"Excuse me. *Excuse*— Walk right, pass left, please!" I say in a perfectly pleasant voice. Or at least, I'm pretty sure my tone is amiable. My definition of *pleasant* hasn't always lined up with other people's. Another tidbit first dropped during parent-teacher conferences, but I've heard it quite a few times since then, courtesy of report cards. Job interviews.

Ex-husbands.

The last one stung the most. Because I cared the most.

I'm off track again.

All I'm saying is that "drive right, pass left" is standard freeway rules. Fifth Avenue at Christmas is *at least* as busy as any interstate. Why shouldn't the same rules apply?

If you want to amble or shuffle past sparkly window displays? You do you. But *you do you* on the right side of the sidewalk and leave the left side open for people with places to be.

I'm nothing if not reasonable.

But one thing I've learned over the years? Christmas isn't about *reason*. The tourists currently clogging up our sidewalks are in the city for the "experience." Heavy air quotes on that one.

I try to pass but get blocked by a family walking four abreast (another Manhattan peeve of mine, but one sidewalk etiquette issue at a time).

A woman in a green sweater with honest-to-God *bells* sewn onto the front turns and gives me a glare that's equal parts scathing and incredulous. "Take it easy, lady. It's Christmas."

"Oh, is it? Is it Christmas? I wasn't sure." I gesture to a window display with a snow machine and dancing elves.

She rolls her eyes and turns away but makes no effort to move aside so I

can pass.

I've worked on Fifth Avenue for more than a decade now, so it's not like I'm new to the congestion. But December? It's a special kind of hell. The music alone could motivate me to play hooky. In addition to the usual standbys pouring out of every revolving door, Tiffany & Co. bumped it up a notch this year, playing a remixed version of "Silver Bells" on repeat.

Something I know, not because I treat myself to a little aqua box now and then, but because my office is right next to their flagship store.

Nothing reminds you more that you're alone than walking by a store with engagement rings in the window twenty-four seven.

My phone buzzes, and I let out a little sigh of relief when I see the name on the screen. Finally. Someone who deserves my ire.

"Well, *hello*, Jerry." My voice is all sugar, and I can tell from the way he pauses chewing whatever he's eating that I've caught him off guard.

"Katherine?"

I roll my eyes. "Why do you sound confused, Jerry? *You called me.*"

"Yup, it's Katherine, alright," he mutters, resuming his chewing. "Look. I've only got a few minutes before Jamie drags me off to Connecticut to spend the holidays with her family, but I wanted to run something by you."

"Oh yeah?" I say with fake curiosity, as though I don't know exactly what he's about to propose. I've been waiting for this exact phone call for weeks now.

Jerry Dodge is a fellow attorney, albeit at a different firm. And he's actually a pretty decent guy, as far as prosecutors go. As a human being, I like the man. But Jerry as a *lawyer*? Meh. He wouldn't exactly be on my short list if I needed a prosecutor with teeth. As opposing counsel, on the other hand, he's an absolute dream.

"About this Hallinger case . . ." Jerry says.

"Uh-huh . . ." I placate him as I grab a tiny red cup off the tray a smiling Starbucks barista holds out, offering samples to the passersby. Generally

speaking, I find this sort of holiday-themed chain-store nonsense to be everything that's wrong with the world, but I'm not so lofty in my principles as to pass up complimentary caffeine.

Too late, I realize the itty-bitty cup is more whipped cream and sprinkles than coffee. But to be totally objective, I'll grant that the chocolate peppermint flavor's not quite as terrible as I always imagined it would be.

I wind my way through the slow-moving crowd, giving Jerry only half of my attention, waiting for the magic phrase that I know is coming because it always does.

“. . . so we can save everyone time and headaches if we talk plea bargain . . .”

There it is.

Some of my colleagues call him Jerry *Dodger*—less because his last name is Dodge and more because the man will try to dodge going to trial ten out of ten times.

“Jerry,” I interrupt. “Come on. I don't settle for nonorganic, non-GMO bananas in my smoothies. Why would you think I'd advise my client to settle on what we both know is going to be a slam-dunk verdict in my favor?”

He makes a grumbling noise. “You think all of your cases are a slam dunk.”

Jerry's lucky I'm trying to tap the last glob of Starbucks whipped cream into my mouth because it keeps me from pointing out that every time he and I have gone toe-to-toe in the courtroom, my cases *have* been a slam dunk.

“Come on, Katherine,” he cajoles. “Think about your client. Think about justice.”

I crush the mini sample cup with my fist and drop it into the trash. “You want to talk about *justice*, Dodger?” I say, letting the nickname slip out on purpose. “How about while you're out in Connecticut with your in-laws, you ask Santa for a pair of balls and actually try to fight for your client for once.”

Jerry's sigh is weary and resigned. “Fine. We'll do it your way,

Katherine. We always do.”

He pauses. “We’ll still see you for New Year’s Eve, right?”

Oh yeah. Me and Jerry? Kind of, sort of friends. And I don’t have many.

“Um, of course,” I say indignantly. “I wouldn’t miss it. You’re *sure* I can’t bring anything? Apps? Champagne?”

“Absolutely not, we’ll have plenty of both. And hey, rumor has it, we’ll have something else to toast other than the new year. Partner, right?”

I’m glad he can’t see me wince, and I force my voice to sound cheerful. “Fingers crossed!”

“Really? I thought you would have heard by now—”

“Hey, look, I’m sorry I bit your head off just now,” I interrupt, as much because I know my rampage was harsh, even for me, as well as because . . .

Well, I don’t want to talk about becoming partner.

“Please, Katherine. You know I enjoy our spats. I give as good as I get.”

I purse my lips. Well, I don’t know about *that* . . .

I decide to quit while I’m ahead. “Have a good Christmas. Tell Jamie I say hello.”

“Will do. Remind me again what you’re up to for the holidays?”

“Oops, Jerry? I’ve gotta run. Another call coming in.” I hang up. And feel a little bad about the lie, but it’s for his own good, really.

Like I said, I don’t have many friends. My frizzy hair and acne may have faded with age, but my sharp edges haven’t. I try not to burden the few people who care about me with the truth.

The Grinch was lonely.

And loneliness?

It cuts the deepest at Christmas.

TWO
TOM

December 23, 11:07 a.m.

You know who I've never understood?

The Grinch.

What sort of person *actively* dislikes the festive happiness of the holiday season?

Well, actually, I know exactly what kind of person. I married her. And divorced her.

But that's a story for another day, and by another day, I mean *never*.

Let's move on.

Now, that is not to say I channel Buddy the Elf or own a Santa costume or anything. But I'd be lying if I didn't say that December in New York? It *does* something to me.

Take, for example, Manhattan's iconic Fifth Avenue. Sure, it's a little crowded at Christmas.

Okay, fine. A *lot* crowded. In January, this would just straight-up piss me off.

But in December?

Fifth Avenue is a *good* kind of crowded. There's a sort of unique contagious energy that comes from a huge mass of people all trying to enjoy

the same things within a limited amount of time. The iconic Rockefeller tree, the Rockettes, a half-dozen ice-skating rinks, *The Nutcracker*, festive window displays, Nativity scenes tucked inside historic churches . . .

Not that, as a local, I actually *do* any of that stuff. But I like knowing it's there.

I smooth a hand over my tie—red with candy canes, a gift from my mother—and inhale deeply.

Now, I need to explain something.

Inhaling in Manhattan? *Risky*. Very risky. Midtown's "perfume" typically has distinct notes of trash, exhaust, and horse poop. Ask any local the key to surviving summer in this city, and they'll say breathing through one's mouth is *essential*. Well, unless they're rich. Because they're in the Hamptons.

But again, Christmas in New York is *different*. It smells like the holidays in the city are supposed to smell, starting with that incomparable aroma emanating from the "hot nuts" guy on the corner.

(Normally, I'd make a hot-nuts joke, but in December, I leave it alone.)

Chestnuts are the star of the show this time of year. Roasting on an open fire and all that. But I myself am partial to the honey-roasted peanuts.

My current contentment slips, just a tiny bit, as an unwelcome memory creeps in, an echo of my own Ghost of Horrible Christmas Past pontificating about how peanuts are not actually nuts. And how, if street vendors had any self-respect, they'd be yelling "hot legumes."

But I'm well practiced at shoving that ghost back where she belongs, deep in the cave of deliberately forgotten memories.

Back to the smells. Mingling in with the nuts is the exhaust (admittedly, even December can't improve upon that) and the waft of searing street meat—and if you're cringing right now, you obviously haven't enjoyed the pleasure of inhaling a gyro on a quiet street corner after midnight because you forgot to eat dinner.

But there's a little extra something in the air today:

Snow. Or rather, impending snow, and if the meteorologists know what's up, a shit ton of it.

I like snow as much as the next guy. There's still a little part of the boy from Chicago inside me who remembers what it felt like to hear that school was canceled, and instead of my long-division test, my day would involve sledding with my friends, throwing snowballs at my sisters, and sipping hot chocolate with extra marshmallows.

But currently overriding that little-boy memory is the slightly stressed-out grown man who needs to get back home to Chicago in time for his mother's annual December 23 Bolognese by the fire.

Snow might be magical and all, but I just need it to hold off until I can accomplish the mission that's brought me to Fifth Avenue two days before Christmas in the first place.

I try to pass a slow-moving family in front of me, but another woman has the same idea at the same time. My leg collides with her Bergdorf bags, sending one of them to the ground, a gift box tumbling out and sliding onto the sidewalk.

A quick glance at my watch tells me I really don't have time for this. But a quick glance at my *conscience* tells me I won't be able to face my mother this evening if I don't do the gentlemanly thing.

I manage a strained smile at the woman. "I'm so sorry. Let me help you with that." I kneel and slide the rogue box back into her shopping bag.

When I stand and hold out the handles to her, she's still scowling ferociously.

It's a bruise to my ego.

Honestly? Most people find me effortlessly charming, and I'll confess that when they don't, it's a bit of a red-cape-and-bull situation. I can't help but engage.

"My fault entirely, miss," I say, turning the wattage of my smile up as I say it. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Bingo.

As I knew it would, her scowl turns into a delighted smile at my generous use of the word *miss*.

The woman is nearer to my mother's age than mine and, technically speaking, is solidly in the *ma'am* category. But I've learned over the years that *technically speaking* will rarely get you where you want to go.

A well-timed "miss" will earn you a smile nine times out of ten. And because it's Christmas, I decide not to stop there.

I give the handles of the shopping bag a little jiggle. "Hmm. What are we dealing with here?"

I squint thoughtfully, pretending to test the weight of the bag. "Cashmere sweater? For your husband. Black, because it's the only color he'll wear. Because he doesn't listen to you when you tell him that purple would bring out the brown in his eyes?"

She laughs. "Aren't you the charmer, young man."

Young man? Now it's her turn to be generous. I'll be thirty-eight in March.

I hand over the bag, and she accepts it with a grin (score!). "You're only partially correct. It is a sweater. A dark blue, for my son. Gray would suit him better, but he doesn't listen to me either."

I run a hand once more over my gifted red tie. "A shame. A son should always listen to his mother. Happy holidays to you."

She waggles her fingers and continues on her way. I've started walking in the opposite direction when a familiar red kettle and the sound of a bell catches my attention. I open my wallet and pull out the only cash I have—a five—and, folding it up, use it to shove someone else's more generous twenty into the kettle.

"God bless. Merry Christmas," the bell ringer says.

"Merry Christmas," I respond on autopilot, a little distracted by the time. Playing the "guess the sweater" game has cost me, and my already narrow

window of time is now a sliver.

And even my delight in Fifth Avenue at Christmas can't completely stifle my irritation that I'm here today in the first place.

My plan was foolproof: wrap up work for the holidays, stop by the downtown Tiffany store on my way home to grab my suitcase, and then go to the airport with enough time to grab a beer.

Instead, thanks to some mix-up, my custom order was sent to the flagship store instead.

You know what *hadn't* been part of my plan?

Picking up the engagement ring for my future wife. From a store right next door to the office of my ex-wife.

Rationally, I know that the Grinch doesn't own that entire block. But I also can't deny that, somehow, her presence seems to haunt this entire *street*. As though at any moment she's going to pop out of nowhere to explain sidewalk etiquette to tourists, or pontificate on legumes, or go on one of her infamous tirades about societal double standards on the way men and women are perceived.

The kicker is she's not wrong. About any of it. Katherine's never wrong, which is both part of her charm and part of her antagonism. Heavy on the last part.

"Excuse me, sir?"

I turn, grateful for the interruption.

A trio of women smile at me. "Would you mind taking a picture of us?"

"Absolutely," I say, accepting the iPhone as the three women position themselves in front of the store's window display. Behind them, fake snow swirls around safari animals wearing blue Santa hats.

I try not to hate it. Call me old-fashioned, but Santa should be wearing red. Always.

"Okay, squeeze in," I say, gesturing with one hand before steadying the camera and taking the shot.

“Hold,” I say before they can move. “I’m going to take a couple more so you have options.”

One of the women grins. “You know what you’re doing. You either have a girlfriend or sisters.”

“Both,” I say with a smile, and I can’t deny it does a little something for my masculine ego that she looks a little disappointed that I’m off the market.

Little does she know that being in my thirties and on the market was never, ever part of the plan.

After a few more hair flips and photos, I hand the phone back, only to find yet another person needing my services.

“How close are we to the tree? And please, for the love of God, tell me it’s close.”

I glance to his left, where three hyperactive boys play “swords” with candy canes.

“You are,” I reassure him, with a point in the right direction. “And even if you weren’t, you’ve gotta do it. There’s nothing like it.”

The middle boy’s candy cane becomes a sidewalk casualty, and losing interest in the game, he shifts his attention toward me. “You’ve been?”

“Of course! I make time to see it every year!”

I feel a little guilty as I realize it’s a lie. I haven’t made time to see the tree in years. But maybe saying it aloud will ensure that next year I’ll make it a reality.

And that in five years, ten years, it will be me who’s exhausted but determined to haul my three kids to the tree.

“Is the tree really that big?” the tallest of the boys asks, clearly determined to be very skeptical, very *cool*.

“You’ll have to decide that for yourself, but as a little preview, I’d say . . .” I squint my eyes at the youngest and shortest of them. “It’s nearly as tall as this guy!”

The littlest one grins, too thrilled at being described as tall to judge me for

my lame dad joke. The older two boys are less generous, rewarding me with eye rolls. Respect.

“Anyway, just a few blocks that way,” I tell their dad, pointing. “You won’t be able to miss it.”

“Thanks, man,” he says with obvious relief. “It feels like we’ve done nothing but walk today. My dogs are killing me.”

“Dad, *no*,” the oldest says with a groan.

“What!” The dad ruffles his hair. “‘Dogs’ is another name for feet.”

“Yeah, according to *Grandpa*,” one of the boys replies as he trails after his dad and brothers in the direction of Rockefeller Center.

I watch them for a moment. Outdated use of “dogs” aside, the man is probably younger than I am, yet already he’s got three kids.

It’s fine. It’s fine. I took a Grinch-shaped detour, but I’m back on track now. Same plan, just a new timeline.

A timeline that I’m dangerously close to delaying, I realize with another glance at my watch. I step toward Tiffany’s revolving door. Toward my future.

They’re playing some remixed version of “Silver Bells,” and while I’m a purist about Santa’s costume, I have to admit, this version’s not half bad.

Mostly, I try not to think about *her* in her office next door because there’s no doubt in my mind that’s exactly where she is. It’s where she *always* is.

Katherine’s love of her job over all things? That’s the *exact* reason why I’m here to buy an engagement ring for somebody else. That much I can readily admit.

Much harder to acknowledge? That maybe, deep down, I know that the *real* reason I’ve dragged my heels all day in getting to this spot, to pick up this ring?

That reason?

Is Katherine herself.

THREE
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:18 a.m.

I step off the elevator and into the comforting familiarity that is my law firm. Well, not *my* law firm. Not yet. But, you know. *Soon*.

My mood lifts almost instantly at the reprieve from the holiday madness on the street below. Now, it's not a *total* reprieve because some moron decided we needed Kenny G working that sweet saxophone magic to the tune of "Let It Snow!"

A nod, perhaps, to the doomsday forecast, but personally, I think Kenny G's a fool to get his hopes up about snow. The weather guys so rarely get these things right.

Still, the song is a marked improvement over the rap version of "Silver Bells." And even with the current blight that is Kenny G's holiday album, stepping into my glossy, semisterile office always feels a little bit like coming, well . . . *home*.

Which probably sounds sentimental, but it's more about the fact that in the past several years, I've spent more time in this office than I have in my *actual* home.

A reality that hasn't been without consequences, if I'm being honest. But that's what life is, right? A series of choices and repercussions. You win

some, you lose some, and you just hope that in the end it'll all balance out in your favor.

I spot Hunter Jett, one of the more promising junior associates, and pretend not to notice when he acts as if he doesn't see me.

"Hunter!" I call, stopping him just before he can escape into the men's room.

He almost-but-not-quite hides a wince. "Hey, Katherine!"

Hunter's one of those twentysomething guys who, despite being smart, handsome, and genuinely likable, also seems like he's just one *tiny* backslide away from regressing to his fraternity identity. One minute, Hunter will uncover a genuinely brilliant precedent, only to utter *duuuuuuuuuuuuude* when he tries to explain it to me in the next.

He has potential. A lot of it. It just has to be sort of . . . wrangled. Lucky for Hunter, I'm a really good wrangler when I have the motivation. And when it comes to my work, I'm always motivated.

"That updated Hallinger brief on my desk?" I ask.

"By end of day," he says with what I'm sure he thinks is a winning smile. Hell, it *is* a winning smile.

It's going to work wonders on a judge someday. But I'm not a judge, and today is not someday.

I lift an eyebrow. "I hope that when you say 'end of day,' you're referring to yesterday."

Hunter tugs at his blue tie, which I'd like a lot more if it wasn't covered in snowmen. "I had to make a quick appearance at the stupid 'winter brunch.'"

"Why are you saying it 'like that.?' " I add air quotes to mimic his.

Hunter shrugs. "That memo HR sent out about appropriate workplace dialogue. Wishing someone a 'Merry Christmas' has always been on the outs —"

"Thank goodness," I mutter.

“But ‘Happy Holidays’ is on the chopping block too. Apparently, it’s disrespectful to people who don’t celebrate any holidays.”

Huh. I suck in my cheeks, torn between disdain for any policy that demands we treat our colleagues like delicate little flowers and delight that I now have justifiable grounds to report anyone who asks me the location of my *holiday spirit*.

“Hey, wait,” Hunter says with a frown, snapping his fingers. “Weren’t you in charge of the brunch this year?”

I make a sound of derision and flick my ponytail over my shoulder. “Sure. If by *in charge* you mean I was coerced by Harry and Joe to ‘take point.’”

Strictly speaking, I’m not a big believer in skipping workplace obligations, even stupid brunches. But I draw the line at forced festive camaraderie during December.

Hence the rare “play hooky” move I’ve pulled off today, one I’m likely to hear about from my bosses.

Harry Kaplan and Joe Gosset are the senior partners at the firm, and I’ve got a lot of respect for them. *A lot*. They hired me right out of law school. They’re mentors, they’re friends, and they’re genuine miracle workers in front of a jury.

But while they’re typically fairly tolerant of my prickliness (their word) and logic (my word), when it comes to the holidays, they, like the rest of the world, seem to have their brain matter replaced with tinsel and gingerbread.

Not only do they insist that each associate—that includes me—host a holiday event—sorry, *winter* event—every single week of December, we’re not even allowed to outsource it to our assistants. We’re supposed to bring a personal touch to this “festive time of year,” to share a bit of ourselves with our employees.

Here’s what I shared:

A blow-up Santa, a tiny fake Christmas tree, and a plastic menorah, all of

which I picked up on my way into the office this morning.

And because I'm one step ahead of them and their inevitable, "Katherine, what part of personal do you not understand," I even rummaged around in my lone decades-old box of Christmas decorations to come up with an ancient string of lights and a few ornaments from my childhood.

I'm sure Hallmark will be calling *any* minute to write my story.

"Hey, don't worry about the party thing," Hunter says, giving me a light punch on the shoulder.

"I wasn't." I look pointedly at his hand, which he drops immediately. "What party thing?"

"The food was good, nobody minded that you forgot the decorations."

I frown and cross my arms. "I wasn't in charge of the food. And I *didn't* forget the decorations."

I take a few steps forward and look pointedly toward the glass walls of the conference room where I begrudgingly set up the decorations this morning.

"See?" I point.

Hunter comes to stand beside me. "Ah. Yes."

I narrow my eyes, trying to see the decor through his eyes. Okay, so, the inflatable Santa didn't *quite* inflate all the way. And maybe the tree's got a little Charlie Brown energy to it. But the string lights from my childhood are downright vintage! People like that, right? Even if half of the bulbs are dead?

As if on cue, the remaining bulbs flicker out as well.

I turn back to Hunter. "So. The Hallinger brief?"

Hunter lets out a long sigh. "Yeah. I'm on it." He tries that smile on me once more. "Anyone ever told you that you've got a little bit of a Grinch thing going on, Tate?"

I give his snowman tie a little pat. "I do love a good compliment, but flattery won't get you an extension, Hunter. I want it before I leave today."

He brightens. "So that'll be, what, midnight?"

“Don’t get cocky, I’m leaving at three today.”

Late to arrive *and* early to depart. Who says I can’t cut loose?

“Good for you!” Hunter says. “You deserve a little holiday break. Doing anything fun before the storm rolls in?”

“Depends. You count Pap smears as fun?”

He winces. “I’ll have it on your desk by three.”

“There you go,” I say. I head to my office, giving the conference room that was the site of the “winter brunch” one last look.

And then I really *do* feel a little like the Grinch, or whatever, because the now dark strand of lights slips off the tiny, sad tree, throwing it off-balance.

Which knocks over the menorah.

And then the struggling, inflatable Santa apparently decides he’s over the whole scene and slowly deflates into a flaccid plastic mess, letting out a loud farting noise as he does so.

I feel my first genuine smile all day at the scene before me. *That’ll* have them think twice about putting me on decoration duty.

I’m almost back to my office when I come to a halt. I bite my lip and, after a moment of deliberation, walk back into the now deserted conference room and kneel in front of the pile of defunct decorations. I rummage among the crap, flicking aside a few plastic ball tree ornaments until I find what I’m looking for.

Gingerly, I lift a tiny ballerina. Her frayed pink tulle skirt has seen better days. And her dark brown bun that looks more like a helmet than hair has chipped off in some places, which has left her sporting a couple of bald spots.

I smile and stand, touching a finger to her tiny ballet shoe.

Bringing her in had been a whim, a rare nod to sentimentality, and it’s an impulse I’m regretting. How could I have left her in the conference room like that?

Carrying her carefully back to my office, I set her in my top desk drawer next to the blue-light-blocking glasses we got as a company gift, which I

never wear.

Then I close the desk drawer without a second glance.

See, that ballerina ornament?

Precious, yes.

But also, a painful reminder of all the reasons I came to hate Christmas in the first place.

FOUR
TOM

December 23, 11:20 a.m.

“It’s absolutely *stunning*.”

The saleswoman says this with a touch of flirtatiousness that feels misplayed, given it’s her literal job to assist men in getting engaged to other women.

“Seriously,” she continues, touching my sleeve just briefly. “This is the one. She’s going to love it.”

I force a smile and nod because the woman isn’t wrong—Lolo *is* going to love it. I know because I sent links to three options to her mother and sister, and both had unhesitatingly confirmed *this* one.

I adjust the knot in my tie, trying not to chafe at how contrived this all feels.

It was, after all, *me* who asked for input from her family.

It was *me* who decided to forgo the family heirloom route this time and get Lolo something brand new, something just for her.

So why does this feel so . . . wrong?

I was supposed to get it *right* this time, fixing all the missteps of my proposal to Katherine.

The ring I tried to slip onto Katherine’s finger was a half size too small

and didn't slip so much as skid on down to just above her knuckle and get stuck. This one? Sized to Lolo's exact ring measurement, which she oh-so-casually dropped into conversation a few months ago.

And I'm getting the timing right with Lolo as well. The men in my family have a long-honored tradition of proposing on Christmas Eve. Something that didn't even cross my mind the last time around.

With Katherine, it was all impulse and instinct, and look where *that* got us.

And really, I should have known better.

I've been a planner ever since I asked my parents if I could take the reins on my own birthday party. I presented a color-coded itinerary (thank you, Crayola), right down to specifying that pterodactyls be excluded from the dinosaur theme because they are not, in fact, dinosaurs.

I was five.

But apparently there is a difference between planning a birthday party and planning a proposal because something feels distinctly *off* about this whole process.

Shouldn't this whole thing be more . . . spontaneous? Dare I say . . . *romantic*?

I shake my head. I don't do spontaneity. Not anymore. And a plan *is* romantic.

More to the point? I can't afford this ridiculous flight of whimsy. Not to keep harping on my age, but prematurely gray temples aside, I'm not one of those guys who start referring to the impending forty as "over the hill." I know what I want out of my life, and wife and kids—a family—are at the very top of my list. Always have been.

And I want those things now. Hell, I wanted them years ago.

I simply can't afford to get it wrong. Not this time.

I roll my shoulders, trying to ignore the unwelcome memory of last time, when I *didn't* get it right. Not with the ring, not with the proposal, certainly

not with the woman.

But man, do I remember the *buzz* of that moment. That breathless anticipation when you've just put your heart, your entire future, on the line, when nothing in the entire world matters as much as the next single word that will come out of her mouth.

Yes.

A yes with thorns, as it turned out. That almost unbearable burst of happiness had been followed by what would eventually degrade into the darkest, most frustrating years of my life.

"Christmas proposal?" the woman asks, jarring me back to the present, to *this* proposal.

"Yeah," I say, forcing a smile her way. "The men in my family always propose at midnight on Christmas Eve."

Not always.

"Oh, that is so cool," she gushes. "So many people think proposals these days have to be lavish and over the top. And those have their place, but there's something meaningful about the quiet ones, especially when there's a tradition behind it."

I can't help the laugh. "I'm not sure how quiet it will be. My parents and siblings all know my plan, so I'll be lucky if she can even hear me ask the question over them trying and failing to stay silent."

"You said family tradition . . . how far back does it go?"

I have to think for a minute. "I'll be the fifth Walsh man to carry it on, though my brother-in-law asked my sister on Christmas Eve as well, so I guess this will make five Walsh marriages and a Bowman."

The woman places a hand just below her throat as though overwhelmed. "*Best* story I've heard all day. And that includes a guy who's planning to do it while skydiving."

Good God. For his sake, I hope that guy won't opt to pull out the ring during the skydive because these things are not cheap. I've been factoring

this into my budget for months now, but seeing just how tiny an object you're getting for such a whopper of a price tag . . .

The saleswoman seems to sense my hesitation, and even though I've already bought the damn thing—this is just the pickup—she moves to close the deal. “Tell me about her. How'd you know she was the one?”

I know who she's talking about, obviously, but for a horrible split second, my mind goes to someone else entirely, to the first “one.”

I knew the first moment I saw her outside an exclusive restaurant holding up a complete stranger's leg like he was a horse, using her business card to scrape gum off his shoe. She pointed right at me and ordered me to go find some legume butter—which may be labeled as peanut butter—to help with the process. I fell in love.

“We met at a bar,” I say. “She was there for after-work drinks with her colleagues, I was there with mine. Our two groups were next to each other. We bumped elbows. Started talking . . .”

I trail off.

It's not the first time I've answered that question. It is the first time I've realized how lame it sounds.

But the saleswoman knows her craft, and she lets out a happy sigh over my tepid response. “Those are always the best starts. The ones that start out quiet, right smack in the middle of real life, when you don't realize what's happening.”

I hope she's right. She probably *is* right because I've learned the hard way that the other kind of meetings, the ones that are anything but quiet and where you think you know exactly what's happening . . . those leave a mark. When they start and when they end.

But if you're lucky, very, very lucky, you find someone who can smooth over the edges of your mistake, someone who will wait for the memories and pain to fade.

I'm very, very lucky.

I'm claiming my do-over. My second chance.

"I'll take the ring."

"Excellent!" the saleswoman says with enough relief to signal she was worried I was going to ask about the refund policy on online purchases.

Me too, for a minute there.

But I'm in increasingly better spirits as I step back out onto Fifth Avenue, "Silver Bells" still blaring, the sky turning that wonderful, thick gray that promises the potential of a white Christmas for those staying in New York for the holidays.

With the jewelry bag securely in hand, I head back down the street, accepting a little Starbucks sample from a barista with a tray. It's more whipped cream than caffeine, which I confess, I rather like. I could do without the peppermint flavor, though.

A cliché bout of cold feet, that's all that was back there, I reassure myself. Tomorrow night, I'll pop the most important question in my life to the woman I love. She'll say yes.

And I'll have one more reason to love Christmas.

FIVE
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:27 a.m.

My dad died on Christmas.

Not just *Christmastime*—thank you, stupid “Silver Bells”—but actual Christmas. December 25, nine years ago.

The logical part of me knows that the specific date shouldn’t matter. Realistically, would the holidays hurt less if he passed on December 22? Would this time of year be any less painful if he slipped away on December 26? Would my heart have felt less broken if he died in February? Or June?

I doubt it.

Rationally, it just shouldn’t matter what day of the year my dad finally decided to let go of his pain, to give in to the cancer.

But somehow, the day *does* matter. The specificity of the date feels particularly savage because there’s this very unique sort of countdown effect that comes into play in December.

Advent calendars. Those construction paper chains that kids make. The chalkboard displays outside neighborhood bars declaring, “Only 6 days till Christmas!”

Because nothing captures that holiday spirit like fifty-cent wings, I guess. But anyway, the point is there’s an entire season built around the march

toward Christmas Day. And it feels like a ticking time bomb of my grief.

A day-by-day countdown to the day when I'm guaranteed to hurt the most.

Every year, I tell myself it'll be a little easier than last year. And perhaps that's true. There's a comfortable resignation that comes with the certainty of knowing I survived it last year, so I can survive it this year too.

In that way, perhaps the "countdown" effect actually works in my favor. It gives me time to prepare.

In theory, anyway.

In reality, there's no amount of mental preparation that can properly brace me for the onslaught of memories that hit me on Christmas Day. Reliving those last, final moments? When Dad had enough?

Well.

Christmas sucks.

But here's the kicker. My dad *loved* Christmas.

I mean, sure, yeah, lots of people love Christmas. But my dad *really* loved it. We're talking the kind of enthusiasm rivaled only by Will Ferrell's Buddy the Elf and kids under the age of ten. And once upon a time, I loved it because he loved it—and because he was all I had.

I grew up in Fort Wayne, on a cozy cul-de-sac that was probably a little slice of suburban heaven when it came up in the fifties. Alas, by the time I came around, it was a little rough around the edges. The trees headed toward rot, the street potholed, the paint on the houses was more chipped than not.

Still, it was the kind of place where everyone took the time to mow their lawn and pull their weeds. And even more telling, it was the kind of place where if you had to skip the weekly mowing due to a double shift at work, your neighbor would do it for you. And when that neighbor's uncle was in the hospital, you made damn sure you returned the favor.

"*Tight-knit*," Dad used to say about our little cul-de-sac. "*We take care of each other.*"

I'm sure he was right about that, but I always felt a little *apart* when it came to the neighborhood. The loose thread in that tight-knit little community.

Not because I was a bit of a weirdo, though I totally was. It was more that my age fell into an unfortunate "no-man's-land." A few years behind me were the "little kids." They traveled as a pack and were always together.

A few years ahead of me, there were the "big kids." They traveled as a pack and were always together.

I was smack in the middle of the two groups. I traveled alone and had no one.

I was basically like a middle child, except without the benefit of siblings.

I didn't mind so much. Another personality might have been lonely, but I was a pretty solitary kid even before I realized that I didn't quite belong anywhere. It's hard *not* to be solitary when you're an only child whose mom died in a car accident when you were four and whose dad has worked two jobs your entire existence.

Or maybe I was just born reclusive and a little prickly.

It doesn't matter. Whether nature or nurture, I was perfectly happy getting through childhood on a steady supply of mystery novels and peanut butter cookies, which I'd load into the basket of my red bike as I escaped to whatever nearby park or pond ensured I could be left alone to daydream.

But at Christmas?

Christmas was different.

Dad and I never took summer vacations, and he never took sick days. Not back then, anyway. Apparently, the universe decided to gift him with excellent health as a young man in exchange for a whopper diagnosis in middle age.

But anyway, the point is, Dad would save up any and every vacation day so he could take off to coincide with my school break.

Christmas glory ensued. All of the usual things, really, but they didn't

feel usual. They felt special. *Magical*.

We baked really mediocre sugar cookies. Watched the same old holiday movies year after year, relishing the classics (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, obviously), and gleefully disparaged any newcomers to the Christmas movie scene that dared to try to shove their way onto our carefully curated Christmas classics list.

Our neighbors were big into Christmas too, so everyone decorated their houses and yards. Ours was never the best—money was a little too tight to compete with the full Nativity scene on the McNalley lawn or the Kimmers' light-up Santa sleigh with *all* the reindeer.

But, man, how I loved those long, cold December afternoons. I'd spend ages getting the big red bow on our front door wreath just right. Always a fresh wreath—Dad was very anti faux greenery. The bow never looked as lavish and poofy as I wanted, but he still declared it “best on the block” every year.

Then, with frozen fingers, we'd set about hanging the lights. I remember those moments as the best parts of my childhood. Even when he handed me a big tangled ball of last year's lights. Maybe *especially* then because the tighter the knot, the more time we got to spend together.

I think he felt the same because when he climbed the ladder to staple the lights above the garage, he would redo it a dozen times to get it perfectly straight. He'd insist that he needed me to follow along beside him, holding the tail of the lights to keep it from dragging.

I know now it was never about getting a straight line. I probably knew it then too. But a chance to talk to him about what a waste of time I thought art class was, and my dreams of being a lawyer, and to state my case on why we should get a dog, or a cat, hell, even a bird . . .

We never talked about boys. Obviously. He didn't ask, and I sure as hell wasn't going to tell him that the handful of crushes I experienced were painfully intense. And even more painfully unrequited.

So, yeah, I loved those outdoor decorating sessions.

But the shining star of memories? Decorating the tree.

It was our tradition to wait until the second Sunday in December. Never before, never after. There was a Christmas tree lot an hour out of town. There were plenty of spots closer to our house, but my dad used to work with Big Rob, who owned this one, so we always got a Big Rob tree.

Every year, I'd want the *biggest* tree. And every year, my dad said he did too . . . before suddenly being disappointed when he realized that our ceilings were only so high and directing me to one with an appropriate height.

Still, he let me pick the fattest tree. Let me pick out an ornament from the tiny gift shop and help myself to one too many free candy canes while Big Rob's son wrapped the tree in a big net and strapped it to our car.

When I was thirteen, Big Rob died of a heart attack sometime around Halloween. We still went out to his lot that year to support his family. I bought my usual ornament—a ballerina, because Dad had just taken me to *The Nutcracker* the weekend before and I was going through a phase.

By the next year, Big Rob's lot had become a Dairy Queen, so Dad and I got our tree from a lot just up the street where all the proceeds went to charity.

It was nice. The trees weren't as fat, and there were no ornaments to be purchased. But they still had candy canes, and the branches still held my beloved ballerina ornament.

The point of all this . . .

I didn't always hate Christmas. Quite the opposite.

But.

Things change.

And sometimes they change slowly, so slowly that you let yourself cling to the hope that you can keep them the same with sheer force of will.

The first small, slow change started when I headed off to undergrad. I went to Harvard on scholarship. But my dad's two jobs turned into three to be

able to pay for my books and board, so I made *damn* sure that I saved every single penny from my job at the campus library to ensure that I could pay to come home at Thanksgiving and Christmas. A few changes had to be made to the routine, of course. We bought the tree the day after Thanksgiving instead of the second Sunday of December because I was home. We'd do the outdoor lights then too, and that part stayed blissfully the same, a chance for me to trail behind him pointlessly holding a string of twinkle lights while catching him up on my life.

And then . . . law school.

That's where things started to go awry. Not simply because my schedule was more demanding, my expenses tighter than ever, and I met my first serious boyfriend and experienced loving a man other than my father.

All of that was true, but the real change, the kind that causes your entire world to crumble, had nothing to do with the slow, bittersweet transition from girl to young woman to woman.

It was a single phone call.

Cancer.

Now, my father's not the first person to get that diagnosis, and I'm not the first daughter to get that phone call.

But let me tell you, in that moment? It feels like the universe is singling you out. Punishing you for something.

In that moment, everything seemed to fade away, and there was only me and Dad up against a brutal disease with a prognosis that felt like a punch in the gut. A punch in the pancreas, I guess you could say.

They gave him six months to a year. Two years, if we were really lucky.

Lucky, they said.

As though we should feel fortunate that a fifty-year-old man who'd never missed a day of work in his life would be dead in a year.

Dad made it three years.

And sure enough, I *did* feel lucky. That we had a few more months than

expected.

Except when I felt horribly, uncontrollably angry.

Angry that he didn't make it just a few more months to see me graduate from Harvard Law, something he'd wanted for me almost more than I did.

Angry, most especially, that the disease took him on his favorite holiday. Angry that on that particular December 25, he woke up only twice.

Once, to whisper, "*Merry Christmas.*"

And once more, toward the very end. To whisper that it was okay that he wouldn't see me graduate, that he wouldn't see me become a lawyer. It was okay because he'd dreamed it. Seen me in a cap and gown, seen me popping champagne the day I made partner at a fancy law firm in New York City, where I'd always wanted to live.

To this day, I'm not sure if he actually had that dream, or if he was just remembering that it had once been *my* dream—one of the "when I grow up" fantasies I'd shared while hanging Christmas lights with frozen fingers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, all those years ago.

I suppose it doesn't matter. He saw what he wanted to see, whether it was a dream or a wish. And those last minutes gave my life purpose: to make that life he saw for me a reality.

So, go ahead. You can call me the Grinch. You can call me Scrooge. Because, no. I don't love Christmas these days. No matter how firmly I remind myself that I don't have to let my warm childhood be sullied by the *one* Christmas when pancreatic cancer won the day, I can't quite get there.

But I think this might be my year. The year that I have a Christmas to reset all the Christmases.

The year my dad's dream for me comes true. And maybe when it does, maybe when I make partner, I can finally ease up on being Katherine Tate, Esquire, and simply be . . .

Katherine.

But first, I've got to get *the call*.

Harry and Joe have this obnoxious tradition of naming partners the week of Christmas.

Only, they didn't take a note from Santa's book and do it the same precise time every year. Some years it's December 21. Sometimes it's Christmas Eve.

Last year, it was December 23.

Which is today's date, and yes, I am obsessively glued to my phone.

Honestly, I don't think they thought it through all the way. That *not* getting the call during what's already a painful time of the year for some people is . . . excruciating.

I know because I've been through it a few years in a row now. Hoping. Waiting.

Crying.

Yes. Even Girl-Grinches can cry.

But this year, I'm not just hoping or waiting for the call. I'm expecting it. I've been at Kaplan & Gosset for seven years now. I'm thirty-six. I'm the most senior nonpartner, and I'm the best they've got.

There's a knock at my door, and when it opens before I say, "Come in," I already know who it is because there's only one person on this planet who can get away with that sort of thing, and she knows it.

Irene Diaz steps inside and shuts the door again, her dark brown eyes expectant. "So? Did he ask?"

I give my assistant a look. "If he'd popped the question, do you think I'd be calmly sitting here?"

"Honey, honestly? I know you as well as anybody, and I don't have the faintest clue how you react to these things."

She's got a point there. Irene does know me as well as anyone. Technically, she's my assistant, and she's a damn good one. But mostly, she's the closest thing to family that I've got. Not that I tell her that. But she knows.

I hope she knows.

I glance at my watch. It's old and delicate and does one thing and one thing only: tell the time. I refuse to get on board with those stupid step-counting monstrosities that also tell me the weather and my next period and every time one of the paralegals has a question.

This watch is my mother's—one of the few precious things I have to remind me of a woman I barely remember. My dad said she never took it off, so I don't either.

"Aren't you supposed to be on your way to the airport?" I ask.

Irene's face crumples a little, but she tries to disguise it by reaching up and adjusting her huge, oversize red glasses. "Actually, Manny and I decided to spend Christmas in the city this year!"

Her voice is bright. Way *too* bright.

"What are you talking about?" I say. "How many years have we been working together? You've never not spent Christmas in Boston with Dani and the grandkids."

"I know. But we couldn't make it work this year. After our cruise *and* the Europe trip this summer, I'm out of vacation days. We'd have had to fly back on the twenty-sixth, and it just didn't make sense . . ."

I'm surprised by how much the words sting. I know that Irene doesn't mean them to wound me—that they're not even *about* me.

But it hurts to know that even my beloved Irene thinks so little of me that I'd let her miss Christmas with her family. That she didn't even bother to ask.

I link my fingers and set my clasped hands on the desk, expression firm. "Irene. If I see you in the office a day before January third, you're fired."

She blinks. "Oh, but, Katie, I don't have the days, and . . . HR—"

"HR, if they ask, which they won't, will be informed that you're working remotely, because that's what I'll tell them. But don't get any crazy ideas. If I see a single email or message from you about work, you're fired for that too."

Stubborn as ever, Irene shakes her head. "The Hallinger case starts up

first week of January. You'll need me here to prep . . .”

I hold my hands out to the sides. “Actually, I’m all good on that. I just spoke with Jerry, and there’s a settlement on the table that for once is actually looking like a viable option. So we may just be a mess of paperwork that we can handle when you get back.”

Irene looks rightfully confused at my mention of settling. “But you never —”

I shrug. “The client hasn’t made any decisions yet, but no point in you hovering nearby while we wait.”

This is, of course, an outright lie. Irene is quite right; I never settle. And if I did, it wouldn’t be this case. My client is a small-time family company that the massive Hallinger conglomerate is trying to take out at the knees with a nonsensical patent suit.

I’ll take Jerry’s BS offer to my client because I have to. But I don’t expect them to accept because I sure as hell won’t recommend that they do.

Irene gazes at me steadily, and I realize she knows every thought going through my head, knows that I’m lying through my teeth.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

I smile back. “You’re welcome.”

It’s the least I can do for this woman. Irene is . . . how can I put this? A *gift*. She was the longtime assistant of the attorney who had this office before me. When he retired to Vermont the same month I started, Irene was packing up her desk, planning to follow her former boss’s steps into retirement.

Irene took one look at me, twenty-seven, newly orphaned, and as furious at the world as I was broken by it, and began unpacking her box.

She’s been my assistant ever since, playing the part of mother, friend, secretary, and cheerleader.

Though, dear as she is to me, at this time of year, I’m more aware that *like* family is not quite the same as *actual* family. Come Christmas morning, she’ll be where she belongs—with her daughter’s family in Boston, watching

her grandkids tear into their Santa haul.

And I'll be right where I belong—in the swanky apartment I've worked very hard to be able to afford, in the peace and quiet that was the consequence of all that hard work. Sometimes it feels like a reward; other times a painful trade-off.

Mostly, I try not to think about it.

Irene has an annoying way of reading my thoughts, and she seems to do so now because her eyes are narrowed behind her thick glasses.

“Come with me.” It's more order than request, one that I hear every December, and because I'm used to it, I shake my head almost before she's done speaking.

I smile to placate her. “I'm all set with my holiday plans, but thank you as always for the invite.”

“Plans.” She makes a dismissive sniff. “To be by yourself? Christmas isn't meant to be spent alone.”

“Christmas isn't meant to be a lot of things, but they happen anyway.” I generally soften my tone around Irene, but right now I let just enough of an edge slip in to let her know the conversation is over.

I appreciate Irene's Christmas offer—I really do. But I don't know how to explain that spending time with her family would only highlight my own *lack* of family.

Irene is probably right. Christmas *isn't* meant to be spent alone. But it's like I said before, life is a series of choices.

I have to learn to live with mine.

SIX
TOM

December 23, 11:31 a.m.

“Honey, tell me that you’re holding the ring bag carefully? With two hands.”

“Nope. Just idly twirling it by the very tip of my pinky finger, dangling it out into the street,” I tell my mother. “Is that a bad idea?”

She lets out a suffering sigh into the phone. “Everyone’s cocky about these things until they’ve been pickpocketed, Tommy.”

I smile. It’s been a while since I’ve heard this particular lecture. Or that particular nickname.

“Now, see, this would be the perfect time for that money belt I got you for your birthday!” she continues. “I know those reviews said that the chafing can cause hair loss on the abdomen, but if you think about it, it’s really a small price to pay for peace of mind and security of your valuables. And speaking of hair loss, in that last picture you sent, I noticed a little thinning at your temples. I talked to my hairdresser, and she gave me these drops to give to you . . .”

My mother, ladies and gentlemen. Meet Nancy Walsh.

Believe it or not, this isn’t the most awkward conversation we’ve had this month. Or even this week. On Monday, she sent me a photo of a mole on my father’s hip, asking if it had always been there. Because apparently I track

these things.

Also, Dad was asleep at the time the picture was taken, and I can't decide if that makes it better or worse.

Mom is, well . . . a mom.

She worries, she interferes—all because she loves *hard*.

Topics of concern range from her grandkids not having home ec as an option at school, unfamiliar moles, my sister's inability to bake a cake that doesn't "fall" in the middle, and when it comes to me:

The fact that I live in New York City.

I'm the only one of her four children who doesn't live in the same time zone as her. Hell, I'm the only kid who doesn't live within a thirty-mile radius of my parents.

And all of this manifests in her exaggerated concern about crime in New York. Shout-out to my mischievous younger sister for setting up a Google Alert for "New York City crime" on Mom's phone, which, as you can imagine, means I get a lot of texts verifying I wasn't in Morningside Heights at 3:00 a.m. or a bar in Alphabet City at midnight.

"Just promise me you won't get on the subway while you're carrying the ring," she continues. "Did I send you that video about the subway pirates? I saw it on the YouTube."

Okay, that one's on me. Last Thanksgiving, I sent her a link to a YouTube cooking video explaining that you don't have to cook the turkey in a bag anymore.

(Spoiler alert: We had turkey cooked in the bag.)

But the point is, I introduced her to YouTube. Which she's *very* into, and the algorithm has been feeding her a steady diet of "the country's on the brink of disaster" videos.

How many disasters can one country have? *Lots* if you ask my mother.

"Anyway, if you *do* have to take the subway, I wouldn't think less of you for packing heat," she says.

“Mom. Don’t say ‘packing heat.’ And why do you say it like Robert De Niro?” I step into the street to avoid an oncoming family of eight wearing matching sweaters on the sidewalk. A bicyclist swerves dramatically and digs his bell at me, even though we avoided any sort of collision by at least six feet.

“What was that?” she asks, having to raise her voice over the sound of a passing ambulance’s siren. “Tom? Were you knifed?”

“No, Mom. I wasn’t *knifed* because I’m not in the chorus of *West Side Story*.” I take a deep breath. “Look. The ring is safe. I’m safe. Please, for the love of God, don’t put Mace in my stocking again.”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey! I already tucked it into your underwear drawer so as not to embarrass you on Christmas morning. I know this particular Christmas is special.”

Finally. A normal topic.

“Yes. Very special. Is Lo there yet?” I ask.

In a perfect world, my soon-to-be fiancée and I would be flying from New York to Chicago together. Especially since it’s her first time meeting my family.

But Lolo’s best friend from college had a baby shower in Minneapolis last night, so we’ll be arriving in Chicago from different cities, a couple hours apart.

“Not yet,” Mom replies. “Lucas just went to pick her up. I’m just so excited that all four of you will be here for the holidays, and that *two* out of the four of you have a special someone. The highlight of Brent’s Christmas will be having another non-Walsh at the table.”

“Definitely.” I know my brother-in-law as well as I do my actual brother, and I’m betting the real highlight of Brent’s Christmas is the new grill Meredith bought him that he already spotted in the garage.

“It’s a mother’s dream come true, Tommy. Hearing you so happy. You are happy?”

“Yes. Mom,” I say automatically. “I’m very happy.”

“I can’t wait to meet her. Your dad too. Everyone! I know we’ve talked on the phone and FaceTime, but I really want her to feel like part of the family. Now, I know you said she’s a vegetarian. So I added some mushrooms to the Bolognese this year. She eats those, right?”

“Well.” I blink. “Yeah, she can have mushrooms, sure. But isn’t there still . . . meat in the Bolognese?”

There’s a puzzled pause. “Well, of course, Tom. It’s Bolognese.”

I rub my forehead. “A” for effort? Sort of?

“Okay, Mom, I’ve gotta run. I’ve got to find a cab in the middle of rush hour. So I don’t risk it with the subway pirates.”

“I knew it!” she says, a little smugly. “I just knew those were a thing.”

I roll my eyes, but only because she can’t see me.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, Tom.”

I smile. “I can’t wait to see you in a few hours.”

SEVEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:48 a.m.

I do a double take when Irene comes back into my office a short while later. “What are— Get out of here! You should be on your way home. Better yet, you should be on your way to the airport!”

“I’m going, I’m going.” Irene needlessly adjusts her glasses, the way she does when she’s nervous. “I just keep wondering. What if this isn’t the year, sweetheart?”

My stomach clenches a little at the words, but faking calm and confidence, I set my phone aside. “It’s the year.”

Irene’s worried expression doesn’t waver. “But if he *doesn’t* . . . You’re going to be heartbroken. I can’t watch that again.”

“I’ll stop you right there,” I say with a smile. “Haven’t you heard the rumors? I don’t have a heart to break. Or if I do, it’s three times too small.”

Irene doesn’t smile back. “You don’t have to pretend with me. You don’t have to pretend like nothing matters to you.”

I look away, uncomfortable as ever with overt references to emotions. Specifically *my* emotions. I know Irene believes otherwise, but it’s genuinely never bothered me when people call me cold. Or a robot. Or the Grinch. In fact, I prefer it. When people believe you don’t care about much of anything,

they don't try to talk to you about the *sticky* stuff.

They don't bring up things that make your eyes start to tingle if you think on it too long. Or the topics that trigger that strange lump in your throat when you try to swallow.

"I just wonder if you haven't placed a little too much importance on this one single moment," Irene adds in a rush. "There are other things in life. *Important* things. Especially this time of year . . ."

I stifle a sigh. This topic again?

"This time of the year isn't created equal for everyone," I say gently but firmly. "I *love* that it's such a happy time for you and Manny and the kids. And I respect that, for most people, this time of year is about family and connection, and blah blah blah. But for me, December has meant something else, a lot of it painful. So, please. Please don't disparage me for wanting this one thing *very* badly. It's something to look forward to. It's important to me."

It was important to Dad.

Irene sighs in resignation. "You're right. You're right, of course. Your life, your choices."

Indeed. I nod gratefully and pick up my phone once again, thinking the conversation is done. "Thank you."

"It's just that ever since the . . ."

My head snaps up, and I lift a single warning finger. "Irene. I love you. You're perhaps the only person in this city that I do love right now. But what's the *one* word we don't speak of? Ever?"

She huffs. "I know."

"And the one *person* we don't speak of?" I add.

Irene's expression fades from frustration to sympathy—or worse, is that . . . pity?

It grates on every last one of my nerves that Christmas tourists and "Silver Bells" haven't shredded to pieces.

To avoid Irene's prying gaze, I pivot my chair and look out the window,

where the sky has turned that sort of opaque white that gives kids everywhere a sort of breathless anticipation for snowmen and hot chocolate.

“You’d better call Manny and tell him to start packing for you,” I say. “You guys are going to want to head out soon so you don’t get caught in any weather on the way to the airport.”

“I appreciate you using miles to get us those last-minute tickets. You’re *sure* you don’t need anything before I leave?”

“I’m headed out early today too,” I say. “Doctor’s appointment for the lady parts, remember?”

This is a lie. They called me a few minutes ago to reschedule to next week due to the inclement weather. But I know Irene’s various expressions, and the one on her face is telling me she’s about to dig her heels in and attempt to baby me, even if it means missing her flight.

I won’t stand for that. I stand, and sliding my laptop into my briefcase, I grab that and my purse. “I’m leaving right now, actually!”

“Okay, but—oh! Katherine! I just realized, I haven’t given you your gift. I was going to bring it in tomorrow.”

I round my desk and wrap my arms around her in what is admittedly an awkward hug because I don’t have a ton of practice in any form of physical affection.

Irene seems surprised by the gesture but doesn’t seem to mind my stiffness because she hugs me back tight and warm, smelling like cinnamon and oranges.

On a rare impulse, I kiss her cheek, having to dip down to do so. I’m five feet eight without heels, and I always wear heels. She’s five feet one and only wears flats.

“Let’s do a New Year’s gift exchange,” I tell her.

“You don’t get me a single thing, young lady,” Irene commands in her mom voice. “You’re gifting me extra vacation time. Time with my family is the best present I can ask for.” She says it in a low whisper, as though HR is

lurking in the shadows, ready to demand her resignation. “Okay? No gifts.”

I salute in confirmation.

We both know I’m going to give her the gift anyway. It’s a designer handbag she would never buy for herself. I bought it months ago when I saw it in a window in SoHo. It’s huge, because the woman carries around half her life in her purse, and red, because it’s her favorite color.

I make Irene swear on the health of her beloved desk orchid that she’ll leave within the next five minutes, and then I escape to the elevator lobby. I’m a little surprised at the flicker of thrill I feel at leaving the office early.

And while I don’t for one second believe all the hype about this huge snowstorm, I do believe people are going to lose their collective minds when flakes start falling, and I’d rather be tucked on my sofa with a nice Barolo when that happens.

Apparently, I’m not the only one with that bright idea because there’s a longer-than-usual wait for the elevators. To shut down the possibility of dreaded small talk about the weather, I pull out my phone and try to look busy.

It doesn’t work.

“Hey, Katherine! Merry Christmas.”

I look up from my phone and blink at the man I know, but whose name escapes me.

Mike?

Matt?

Huh. Nope. All I know is that he’s a newbie from Texas. Harry and Joe made a big deal about “scoring him,” as he was apparently a hotshot in the Dallas legal scene. I’m reserving judgment until I see him in action.

Mike-Matt . . . Martin? . . . Huh. Still nope.

Anyway, he’s . . . fine. Late forties. Brown hair. Seems nice.

I can afford this sort of lavish compliment because I know he’s not my competition for partner. Too new.

For this, I reward him with a smile. “If you say so.”

He blinks but pushes through my awkward response as we step into the elevator. “You ready for this storm?”

“Sure. Got my skis and flare guns right here.” I pat my hip.

“You joke, but I keep hearing Winter Storm Barry is supposed to be a real monster.”

I look up from my phone. “Who the hell is Barry?”

“That’s what they’re calling it. The storm.”

“Ah. By ‘they,’ you mean the meteorologists,” I say in the same tone I might refer to astrologists. One is a pseudoscience. So is the other.

“It’s been the top headline on just about every news source all day. Supposedly Barry’s looking to be the storm of the century.”

I can’t even dignify this with a response, but he doesn’t get the hint because he continues chattering on as he looks down at his own phone.

“Damn. Surge rates are nuts right now,” he mutters, showing me an app on his phone like it’s supposed to mean something to me. “You live uptown a bit, right? Want to share a car? Estimate’s only an eight-minute wait. Not bad for this time of day on Fifth.”

I make the tiniest scoffing noise, and he gives me a quizzical smile. “What am I missing?”

“I get you’re new here, but . . . real New Yorkers take cabs,” I tell him.

“How long do I have to be here to be a real New Yorker?” he asks, bemused.

It’s probably rhetorical, but I consider the question seriously anyway because it’s a legitimate query deserving some attention.

How long *does* it take to be a New Yorker?

It depends. I hate that sort of wishy-washy answer, but in this case, it’s true. Some people can live here twenty years and never quite make the mental shift. Others seem to absorb the city into their very blood within a matter of weeks.

“Relax, Katherine. I was joking,” Matt-Mike-Martin says. “I figure I’ll always be a Texan at heart. I’m good with that.”

We step out of the elevator, and it should be a reprieve, but there’s a rush of people so we’re forced to walk slowly. And together.

“So, you’re staying in town for the holidays?” he asks.

Ugh. The small talk persists.

“I am.”

“Same. In-laws are coming in,” he says with a pained expression. The grimace actually makes me like him a little more. Not because I can relate to awful in-laws but because it makes him the first person today who seems to understand that Christmas is something other than candy canes and snowflakes.

“They’re great,” he continues in a forced, cheerful tone as we step outside. “It’s just . . . you know. I’ve got four whole nights to figure out how to keep them occupied so conversation doesn’t descend into a diatribe about the state of the country’s health care or the rising cost of wheat.”

“Uh-huh.” I navigate immediately to the curb and lift a hand, scanning the packed avenue for yellow cars. Specifically, ones that have their lights on to signal they’re available.

“You can’t seriously think you’re going to get a cab during Fifth Ave. rush hour in December,” he says with a laugh. “I may not be a New Yorker, but even I know that’s nuts. Come on. Seriously. Share my Uber. Only a six-minute wait now.”

“Sorry, Texas. I only ride in the yellow ones. Safest, most reliable way to get around the city.”

I can’t resist a smug smile over my shoulder as a taxi pulls over, stopping right in front of me. *See?*

He shakes his head, still smiling that relentless smile of his. “Point proven then. Well, Merry Christmas, Katherine.”

“Okay.” I drop my laptop bag into the cab and start to climb in after it,

then at the last minute, turn back reluctantly. “You want to hop in? If we’re going the same way?”

“Nah.” He lifts his phone and waggles it. “Five minutes to go. Thanks, though.”

“No problem,” I say, hoping my relief isn’t too obvious.

I start to climb into the cab a second time, but once again, I pause and turn back.

I have no idea what comes over me. I really don’t.

But suddenly I find myself pulling an envelope out of the inner pocket of my peacoat and walking toward M-whatever. I slip it into his suit pocket. “Two tickets to the Rockettes on Christmas Eve. Send your in-laws to give yourself a little break.”

He looks genuinely surprised, and I can’t really blame him. I’ve surprised myself a little bit too.

I’m not exactly the spontaneous giving type. And just yesterday, in the ladies’ room, I heard the paralegals joking that I’d probably give out coal as the holiday gifts, which, honestly, offended me.

I would *never*. Coal is awful for the environment.

I got every person in the office, save Irene, practical electric toothbrushes, thank you very much. To be delivered *after* Christmas when everyone has started thinking about bettering themselves for the new year.

“Thanks, Katherine! This is beyond generous. I appreciate it, truly. I really appreciate it.”

I shrug as though it’s nothing, even though it means I’ll have to find some other way to spend Christmas Eve.

I know. Me? At the Rockettes? The very center of New York’s Christmas tourism?

But listen. As far as I’m concerned, twenty women kicking in perfect unison is a far more impressive feat than watching people throwing or kicking a ball around.

But something tells me that this guy needs them more, and I'd have been wasting one of the tickets anyway.

It's nice, though. Spreading a little of the holiday spirit crap. I immediately scowl at the forbidden thought. It must be the sprinkles and peppermint mocha upsetting my Grinch-Scrooge equilibrium.

I lift a hand in farewell. "Merry Christmas, Mike."

"Mitch."

Damn. So close.

I lift an apologetic hand and climb into the waiting cab. "Fifty-Seventh and Park."

Nodding in confirmation, the cabbie pulls into traffic.

A second later, I hear a screech followed by the terrifying sound of crunching metal.

Then everything goes black.

EIGHT
TOM

December 23, 11:55 a.m.

God bless Uber.

As far as I'm concerned, ride-sharing services and their handy corresponding apps are just about the best thing to happen to this city since the first subway line opened in the early 1900s.

(And yes, I do ride the subway on occasion. Don't tell my mother because I don't think I can survive hearing about the subway pirates conspiracy a second time.)

But when I'm on a tight schedule? Headed to the airport? While carrying around a ring that costs a couple months' salary?

Uber.

There are those New Yorkers who think cabs have the upper hand. These people would be wrong.

With Uber, you don't have that ghastly little TV built into the back of the seat forcing you to watch recycled Jeopardy questions.

With Uber, you don't have to stand at the curb and wave your arm in the air to try to lasso the attention of your ride.

With Uber, there's no chance that you can be patiently waiting for an available car to drive by, only to be upstaged by someone who appears out of

nowhere and steals your cab.

Unfortunately, there is one downfall to both taxis and ride-sharing options:

Traffic.

And in New York City, there's always traffic.

But in the days leading up to Christmas? There's *a lot* of it. My car hasn't moved so much as a half block in nearly five minutes amid the gridlock. We're not even to the Brooklyn Bridge yet, much less approaching JFK.

I check my watch. *Shit.*

I try to smile through my anxiety and lean forward to talk to my driver. "What if we try South Street?"

He meets my gaze in the rearview mirror and points to the navigation screen on his dash. "This way's faster."

I glance at where he's pointing. The fact that his map is entirely red does nothing to assuage my concern.

Trying to distract myself, I pull out my phone to see if there's anything from Lolo. I haven't heard from her since she texted earlier that she'd landed and that my brother Lucas—who is apparently "too cute"—had picked her up at the curb without incident.

There's nothing from her. Nothing from my family either, and I try not to let that bother me. She and Lucas definitely should have made it to my parents' house by now, which means the family would have met her by now.

So where are the gushing texts about how great she is? The voicemail from my mother, whispering excitedly from the powder room that Lolo is an *absolute doll*?

I lock my phone and tap it impatiently against my thigh with a frown. Maybe it's a good thing that I haven't heard from anyone. Maybe they're all so caught up in lively conversation that they lost track of time.

Because they're going to love Lolo. Everyone loves Lolo. She has that sort of disposition that puts everyone at ease. She's sweet, but not sugary.

Friendly, but not in-your-face. Smart, but never a know-it-all.

She's perfect.

So why haven't I heard a damn thing?

The first time my family met Katherine, my family had practically swooned with collective approval, and Katherine was a termagant.

I bring an actual *nice* girl home to my family, and . . . silence?

It makes no sense.

And I hate that I'm not there to control the narrative of this first meeting. Or to check to see that my mother had the wherewithal to remove all photos of *her* from above the mantel. And to ensure my siblings don't tell one of their nine million adoring "Remember that time that Katherine . . ." stories.

To their credit, they do check themselves before telling the actual story. But the meaningful eye contact exchanged between the three of them, the "we'll reminisce when Tom's not around"? That's almost worse.

My phone buzzes.

Finally.

Only, it's not Lolo. Nor is it my mother. Or anyone I have saved in my contacts.

Which normally would be a "straight to voicemail" kind of situation, but this one gives me pause because it's area code 212. Manhattan.

Curiosity wins, and I pick up. "Hello?"

"Hi, um, is this Tom Walsh?" The feminine voice has a stressed quality to it, as though she didn't want to be the one to make this call but lost a coin flip.

"Yes. Who's this?"

There's a sigh of relief. "This is Alicia Grant. I work in HR at Kaplan & Gosset."

I sit up very straight. And very still.

There's a company name I haven't heard spoken in years. And one whose very office I passed by just minutes ago.

“Okay?” I say because honestly, I cannot think of a single reason why they’d be calling me now, after all this time.

“Mr. Walsh, I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but . . . there’s been an accident.”

NINE
KATHERINE

December 23, 12:49 p.m.

Even before I open my eyes, I know where I am.

See, hospitals have this *smell*.

Hospital Smell likes to *think* it's a clean scent. But it's *too* clean. Suspiciously so, because it knows it has things to hide.

Like bacteria and sepsis and bad news and permanent goodbyes.

Slowly, reluctantly, I open my eyes to slits and immediately groan because the horrible neon green of the fluorescent lights sends a laser of pain straight back into my eye sockets.

I manage to keep my eyes open just long enough to look down and see that I'm wearing a horrible hospital gown. The kind that your ass hangs out of. There are clouds on it.

This tells me two things:

I'm the patient in the hospital.

And I'm in hell.

But the whole "how did I *get* to this hell?" That part eludes me.

I close my eyes again, trying to force my brain to sort through the muddiness. I remember talking to . . . Martin?

No. Marvin. No. Matthew? No.

That I have no idea the guy's name is actually a relief because that's normal for me.

Once again, I force my eyes open and call out into the empty room. "Um, hello?"

The only response is the monotonous beeping of machines. Slowly, I turn my head toward the source of the sound, alarmed to realize that I'm hooked up to one of the machines via an IV in the back of my hand.

Nope. Don't like that one bit.

"Hello!" I try again, my voice a little louder this time. A bit impatient. Fine, *a lot* impatient. "Is there, like, a room service button I'm supposed to press?"

Room service probably isn't the right phrasing, but maybe it'll annoy someone enough to pay attention to me.

Alas. No response. I turn my head toward the door with the intent to better project my voice in the direction of people with answers.

The movement is a huge mistake. I feel a pain I can only describe as my skull caving in on itself, followed by a wave of nausea.

"*Holy—*"

I slam my eyes shut once more against the green light because I'm quite sure that the greenest thing in the room now is probably my face. I inhale deeply through my nose and pray that the nausea stays dormant rather than escalating to projection.

Thankfully, after what feels like forever, the queasiness recedes.

Lesson learned, I don't move. Instead, I begin gently picking through my thoughts, trying to sort through my most recent memories.

Let's see, we've got . . .

Slow-moving tourists.

Starbucks sprinkles.

"Silver Bells."

Michael. Matt. Martin.

Mitch!

Rockettes.

The cab.

Crunching metal.

That's where it all stops.

"Well, hell," I mutter.

The only thing that makes sense is that I was in an accident. One that I can only assume is the fault of someone other than my driver because New York cabbies don't *do* accidents.

My brain fuzziness must be receding a little because I finally think to fumble through the rough, paper-thin sheets of the hospital bed for a little remote thingy. I know from my dad's extended hospital stays that there was always one near his hip when he needed help.

And I definitely need help. Help *outta* here.

I hate hospitals. I *really* hate hospitals at Christmas.

My fingers brush the cool, hard plastic, and I push the largest button rapid-fire until I hear the padding of footsteps. Even though the soles of the shoes sound like rubber, I can still sense the irritation in the gait.

Which seems unfounded. I'm the one tethered to the bed in a butt-baring gown; they are mobile and thus don't get to sulk.

The footsteps stop by my bed, and I open my eyes.

"Finally," I mutter, turning my head ever so slowly toward the nurse.

I inspect her carefully.

I have a lot of respect for all nurses, I really do. I met plenty over the course of my dad's illness, and I know it can be a thankless, devastating job.

I also know that even the nicest nurses can be a little testy near the end of their shift. *Very* testy at the end of a double.

"When did you start work today?" I ask.

She stares at me. "I'm sorry?"

"Your shift. How far into it are you?"

She looks confused as she checks her watch. “I get off in just under an hour. Why?”

“Your first shift? Or second?”

“My first. Honey, do you need something?”

Oh, where to begin. I need an explanation. A cab ride home. My clothes.

My phone! Oh my God. What if I missed a call from Harry? *The call from Harry?*

“Can I have my phone? Please,” I add quickly to assert myself as one of the *good* patients.

Instead of answering, she studies her tablet, glancing between it and the machines attached to me. “How are you feeling? You thirsty? Hungry?”

Neither. But even though my nausea is still lurking, the headache is way, way worse, and in my experience, there’s no migraine that a solid, nutritious meal can’t make a dent in.

“I could eat. But no hospital food, please. Respectfully, it’s gross, which will just make the queasiness worse.”

She nods. “No hospital food, got it. Why don’t I just go ahead and order something in,” she says. “How about some Chinese? I could go for an egg roll.”

“Hmm.” I purse my lips. “Sushi? Some rice might help my stomach.”

“Sure, sure. Sashimi sampler okay?” she asks.

I shrug. “Great. But no eel. Oh, and can you make sure they don’t try to sneak in that low-sodium soy sauce? I like the high-voltage stuff.”

“Absolutely!” she says. “Why don’t I go ahead and just run out, get it myself,” she says. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

I smile gratefully. “That’s so nice . . .”

Her droll expression finally registers, and my smile slips.

It finally clicks. “You’re being sarcastic.”

She smiles, not unkindly, and pats my shoulder. “How about we start with some nice Jell-O?”

I stare at her. There is nothing nice about Jell-O. “Please tell me that’s also a joke.”

“You have to admit, sashimi and Jell-O are basically the same texture.” Her smile is wider this time. More genuine.

I try to smile back. “My phone. Please?”

“No can do!” Her voice seems to be getting more cheerful the longer she’s in here, as though her mood improves a little each time she gets to shoot down one of my requests.

“You’re *sure* on Jell-O,” she continues. “I have cherry, orange, lemon. And my personal favorite, blue.”

Dear God.

“Blue isn’t a flavor,” I feel compelled to point out.

The nurse doesn’t respond, and I dimly register the sounds of someone else entering the room. No rubber soles this time, but the sharp, heavy click of a man in dress shoes. The steps are accompanied not by a squeaking hospital machine but by the smooth roll of an expensive suitcase. Sturdy wheels.

And then there’s the *smell*. A smell that supersedes the hospital smell. All smells, really.

Fresh. Yet spicy. Masculine.

I begin to feel a rising panic that overtakes my annoyance at the nurse, my pounding head, and even my anxiety over my missing cell phone.

Because I know that cologne. I’ve *gifted* that cologne.

There is, of course, the possibility that the cologne belongs to another man. A different man. *Please, God. Any. Other. Man.*

Even still, I feel the unmistakable fight-or-flight instinct.

Unfortunately, *fight* is severely hampered by this earthquake of a headache. And *flight*’s a no-go because I’m tethered by a damn IV.

I contemplate a third option. Playing dead?

No. Absolutely not. It would give him way too much satisfaction, and I’d

actually rather *be* dead than give this man even a modicum of gratification.

I settle for last-ditch protective measures. I take a moment to ensure the wall I've steadfastly built up around my heart since I last saw him is in absolute peak condition. I mean, we're talking Fort Knox levels of *impenetrable*.

Only when I'm sure that all is secure, that there will be no scaling the walls, no storming the moat, do I turn my head.

And meet the unreadable gaze of my ex-husband.

TEN
TOM

December 23, 12:54 p.m.

I would never admit it to a single soul. I can barely admit it to myself. But . . .

I've thought about this moment.

Thought about the next time I'd see *her*.

In my daytime fantasies, my ex-wife is haggard, unemployed, and has lots of cats. All of which she's named after me.

In my nighttime fantasies, the ones I can't control, well . . . those feature a different Katherine entirely, and I pretend they don't happen.

Mostly, though, I've always figured that if and when our reunion were to ever happen, I'd simply . . . bump into her.

We may live in a big city, but it's still the *same* city. It's not completely out of the realm of possibility that we could run into each other at a friend's cocktail party. Or one of the restaurants we both used to love.

Hell, just this afternoon I passed directly by her office.

But in all the scenarios I was braced for, both the feasible and the outlandish, never did I ever imagine that the next time I'd lock eyes on the woman who nearly destroyed me would be . . .

This.

Katherine is . . . Katherine . . .

Well, she looks *terrible*.

Her eyes are glassy, her long dark hair matted, and there's a gash on her forehead. The frumpy hospital gown is a far cry from the smart, expensive black blazers she buys from Saks by the half dozen.

In fact, she's alarmingly close to my daytime fantasy Katherine, minus the cats.

But instead of feeling the expected sense of smugness at seeing a chink in her prickly armor, I feel something puzzlingly close to worry.

What's ironic is that toward the end of our marriage, I *begged* the universe to make her somehow seem more human. To give her even a sliver of vulnerability, so that I knew I had a fighting chance. To show that she *needed* me.

The universe has finally provided.

And it could not be at a worse time.

To balance out the unwanted emotion of *caring*, I give Katherine a slow, deliberate once-over. "Nice outfit."

"*Ugh*," she utters with feeling. "You're even less funny than I remember."

I widen my grin. "Ah, but see . . . you *do* remember."

Her eyes narrow. "What are you doing here?" Her brown gaze drops to my suitcase. "Oh, no. Tom. Are you . . . *homeless*?"

And just like that, any worry I felt for this woman fades.

She's fine.

"You poor thing. Are you hungry?" she says in syrupy concern. "This nice lady was just about to bring me some Jell-O. I'm sure she can scrounge up an extra."

The nurse opens her mouth as though to argue, then shrugs. "I can, actually. What flavor? I like blue."

"Settled. Two blues," Katherine says. "But his is a to-go order. Bye, Tom!" She gives an insulting little wave.

I clench my teeth, trying to keep my temper in check. I don't even really *have* a temper. At least not one that I admit to.

But there are exceptions.

Just the one exception, actually. *Her*.

"I'm not homeless. I was on my way to the airport," I say in a level voice. Then, I can't resist adding, "Obviously. It's Christmas."

Katherine's eyes go wide. "*What?* Christmas, you say?! Why did nobody tell me? Where were all the signs? That holiday's just so *subtle*, isn't it?"

I scratch my temple. "Look, Katie. You're obviously alive and feeling like your usual self. So if you're good, I'm gonna jet."

"Wow, I believe that marks the second time ever we've actually agreed on something."

I shouldn't ask. I know I shouldn't, but I take the bait anyway. "What was the first?"

Her gaze is steady. "When we agreed to sign divorce papers."

Right. That.

"Yeah, so I'm gonna go," the nurse says, jerking her thumb toward the exit as she's already edging out of the room. "The doctor will be in soon with an update. Push the button again if you want the Jell-O. Just push it *once*," she adds, looking pointedly at Katherine.

"Bring my phone!" Katherine calls after her. "Please?"

The nurse doesn't reply or even look back, and I'm itching to follow her lead and escape, but for some reason, my feet don't move.

"Ma'am?" Katherine calls after the nurse. "Did you hear me?"

I'm not at all surprised when the nurse doesn't exactly come rushing back to do Katherine's bidding, and apparently Katherine isn't either because she heaves out a resigned sigh. "I should have called her *miss*."

I press my lips together to hide an unwanted smile, wondering if Katherine remembers that my mother taught her that trick.

I look over my shoulder, feeling the distinct urge to take a note from the

nurse's playbook. *Walk away. Don't look back.*

Still, my feet don't move.

The urge to flee is strong. But the tingling feeling in my hands when I got that phone call that is just now starting to subside? That's stronger.

"There's been an accident."

For a moment there, I feared the worst, and my whole world seemed to stop. Do I miss Katherine? Not exactly. The woman is hell on the nerves.

But a world without her in it? The ache in my chest tells me I'm not ready for that.

Katherine is studying me with that steady gaze of hers that always seems to see way too much. More than I want her to see.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tom?"

There, that's better. Keep that up, and I might have a sliver of a chance of making my flight.

Not much of a chance. But my prayers about the delay came true, and if I leave now, maybe . . .

But I can't seem to stop looking at the IV in the back of her hand. Or hearing the subtly malicious beep of the hospital machines. Or noticing that her barbs seem just a little bit duller than they used to be.

I try a smile. "I don't suppose you'd believe that I was just in the neighborhood?"

Katherine doesn't smile back. My usual brand of charm doesn't work with her. Never has.

I sigh and let the smile drop, a little surprised at what a relief it is to do so. I never had to pretend with Katherine.

"Your office called me," I explain, setting my briefcase atop my roller suitcase to give my shoulder a break. I cross my arms. "Apparently, I'm still listed as your emergency contact."

I'm about to ask if the oversight was her way of torturing me, but I can tell by the too-fast flutter of her eyelashes and lack of snarky rejoinder that

this revelation catches her off guard.

“You didn’t know?” I ask. “That you’d forgotten to make the change?”

“No, Tom, I didn’t know.” She lifts a hand to her forehead, then winces. “Sorry to bust your little fantasy that I was manufacturing a reason to see you again.”

“Huh.” That Katherine missed something is . . . interesting. A missed birthday? Anniversary? Scheduled date night? Those details I can see Katherine forgetting. I’ve experienced them firsthand.

But when it comes to anything related to her work, there’s no *t* she won’t cross, no *i* she doesn’t carefully dot.

Katherine’s face is scrunched in concentration. “Okay. I can maybe see why they called you. What I don’t understand is why you actually *came*.”

“Believe me,” I mutter. “Been asking myself the same question.”

She lifts her eyebrows and waits for me to elaborate.

I sigh. “Look. It’s just what decent people do when they hear that someone else has been hurt. Not that I’d expect you to understand these sorts of human concepts.”

“I’m decent.” She mutters something unintelligible about the Rockettes, making me wonder if her head injury is more severe than I realized.

But I force myself not to ask what the hell she’s talking about. The less detail I know about her current life, the harder it will be to get sucked into it. I know from experience once I do, it’s nearly impossible to get untangled from this woman once I’ve engaged.

“If it helps,” I add. “I completely regret coming.”

Katherine touches the bandage on her forehead gingerly and gives a tiny smile. “That does help, actually. Thank you.”

I roll my eyes, then steady my gaze back on her. For a moment I’m reminded of *back then*. Back when I cared about her. And her me.

Back before it all went to hell.

Time has dulled that pain. Hell, up until this moment, I thought that time

had banished it from existence entirely.

Seeing her again, though . . . I realize the ache is still there. Duller, but definitely present. A bit like a TV at a sports bar that's tuned to a channel you wouldn't have chosen. It's not showing your team. It's not even showing your preferred *sport*. But for some reason, it demands a little bit of your attention anyway.

That's Katherine right now. Not my team. Not my sport. And yet I can't seem to look away.

If there was a gun to my head? Sure. I could admit that I think about Katherine in a dim, muted kind of way. But since, odds are, the person holding said gun would be Katherine herself, I'll never admit *any* of these complicated emotions to her.

Katherine thinks other people's feelings are a weapon, and it's one she's not afraid to use when she's feeling wounded. Which, given how banged up she looks, is now.

And yet, the way she's looking at me, I don't think she wants to hurt me. It's almost as though—

Our almost-not-quite-a-moment is interrupted by a new face and the confident stride of a doctor. "Hi there, how are we? I'm Dr. Palmer."

The doctor looks my way. "Ah, he made it! You must be the husband."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Only in my nightmares."

"Oh. I apologize." The doctor looks down at her screen with a frown.

"There was a paperwork mix-up," Katherine explains. "Tom was just leaving."

Whatever human feelings she *might* have been having are apparently gone because she tries to shoo me away, tugging the IV in the process. She winces at the pain but recovers quickly to glare at me. My presence here clearly is aggravating the hell out of her. It's all the invitation I need.

I give a taunting grin and wheel my suitcase up against the wall out of the way with a flourish. To really sell the "I'm here to stay awhile" effect, I shrug

out of my jacket and drape it over the handle of my suitcase.

Katherine's glare intensifies, and when I meet her eyes, she mouths, *I will kill you.*

Then she draws a line across her neck.

I can't help but laugh. She's so . . .

Katherine.

"So, what are we dealing with here?" I ask, turning all my attention to the doctor and crossing my arms with a worried frown, giving my best "concerned spouse" performance.

If there's a touch of truth to the performance, I'll never tell.

"Let me guess," I continue. "Aneurysm caused by excessive cell phone use?"

"Speaking of my cell phone, I can't find it," Katherine interjects. "And the nurse. Blue Jell-O wouldn't bring it to me, even though I asked very nicely."

I give her a look, which she ignores.

"Being without your cell phone? Your worst nightmare," I say under my breath.

"*You're* my worst nightmare," she shoots back. Not under her breath.

"By all means, Katie," I say, spreading my hands to the side. "Feel free to call your *other* emergency contact. Oh, wait . . ."

Katherine looks away quickly, and I feel a knot of guilt in my chest at the realization that my barb landed a little more sharply than I intended.

Obviously, her reasons for not updating her emergency contact information have less to do about oversight or some sort of weird revenge agenda, and more to do with the fact that . . .

Katherine doesn't have anyone else.

I can't seem to make up my mind how I feel about this.

Katherine's attention returns to the doctor. "So, what's the story? When can I go home?"

“Well, we got the results of your CT scan.” The doctor glances my way, clearly reluctant to discuss Katherine’s medical details in front of a nonfamily member.

Katherine picks up on this too because she waves her hand dismissively. “It’s fine. Tom and I used to be . . . lovers.”

“Gross,” I mutter. “Don’t phrase it like that.”

“We were married, actually,” Katherine clarifies. “I know. It’s hard for me to believe too. But I was the love of his life who broke his heart.”

Now it’s my turn to look away, but not before I see her frown. Perhaps I’m not the only one shooting unintended barbs with unexpected landings.

The doctor wisely declines to acknowledge any of our romantic history and instead studies her tablet once more. “As we expected when you were brought in, that nasty headache you’re feeling goes hand in hand with a concussion.”

“Impossible,” I say. “Her head’s much too hard for that.”

It’s not one of my best quips, and both the doctor and Katherine ignore me.

“How bad a concussion?” Katherine asks, frowning.

“Well, you lost consciousness for a good while, so we’re definitely talking more than a little bump on the head. But I see no reason why you won’t make a full recovery.”

“Excellent.” Katherine is already shoving aside the hospital blankets. “Let’s get me some magic pills for this headache, locate my phone, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Not so fast,” the doctor says, stepping forward and setting a hand on Katherine’s shoulder before she can stand. “Concussions are a minor traumatic brain injury, but they’re still a brain injury. You’ll need follow-up observation to ensure we’re not dealing with any serious side effects.”

“Thanks, but I’m good,” Katherine says. “As Tom pointed out, I’ve got a hard head.”

“Actually, it’s not *just* the head that I’m concerned about.”

Katherine goes still with just enough worry on her face that I have to resist the urge to move closer, to offer comfort that I know she won’t want. Not from me.

The doctor is reaching behind Katherine, gently pulling aside the side of the gown. “You got a pretty nasty gash back here just between your shoulder blades. It’s a good eight inches long and was deep enough to require stitches.”

“Jesus.” I drag a hand over my face, more bothered than I want to be by the news. “What the hell happened, Katie?”

“None of your business,” she snaps. “Hasn’t been in a long, long time.”

“My understanding,” the doctor cuts in before we can go into full battle mode again, “is that Katherine’s taxi was T-boned at an intersection by another driver who mistakenly hit the accelerator instead of the brake. The medics said that based on the state of the crumpled cab, she got pretty lucky.”

“Yeah. I’m feeling *real* lucky,” Katherine mutters, though the sarcasm lacks her usual trademark edge. “How’s the driver?”

“He’s fine. Treated at the scene with just a couple scratches.”

“Good,” Katherine says, distracted. “That’s good.”

“I’d like to keep you for at least a day. Then we can assess,” Dr. Palmer says.

“An entire *day!*” Katherine exclaims. “For what’s basically a paper cut and a headache?”

The doctor is impressively patient. “Well, in addition to the standard postconcussion observation, you’ll also need someone to change the gauze on your back every few hours. To keep an eye out for infection. Unless you have someone who can stay by your side around the clock for the next few days to help you out?”

Neither the doctor nor Katherine so much as glance at me as a possibility for this role, and I’m relieved. I think.

Katherine hesitates only a moment before nodding emphatically. “Not a problem. Once I get my phone back, I’ll give Joel a call.”

My head snaps up. Joel? Who the hell is Joel?

And why do I have the nagging sense that I should know that name?

“Oh. Well, great.” The doctor smiles, looking a little relieved. “I’ll figure out where your things are and have them brought in.”

The doctor pauses in the doorway and turns back. “I can’t release you until Joel gets here. We’ll need to explain to him how to change the bandage, which symptoms to watch for.”

“Sure, absolutely. He’s probably out of his mind with worry and waiting for me to get in touch.”

It’s because I’m watching Katherine closely. And because I once knew her as well as I know myself that I see the lie.

And abruptly remember why the name Joel is so familiar.

My heart sinks in resignation. There will be no Joel coming to Katherine’s rescue. It’s me or no one.

There’s little doubt in my mind that if Katherine had it her way?

She’d go with *no one*.

ELEVEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 12:57 p.m.

“*Joel*, Katherine? Really?” Tom says.

I keep my expression serene, even though my brain has just berated me with that exact same phrase.

Joel, Katherine? Really?

Why did I have to go and use *that* name?

Why not Pete or Devon or Jack? Why did I have to use the one name that would expose my lie in front of Tom? Maybe my head injury is more severe than the doctor thought because I *know* better than to let my guard down around my ex.

Still, I do my best to preserve the lie. I lift my chin and give Tom a dismissive look. “Yes. Really. New lover. Very virile.”

“Uh-huh,” Tom says, moving closer to the bed. “Would you also describe him as . . . succulent?”

Damn it. “Don’t be weird, Tom.”

My deflection doesn’t work. Not that I really expected it to.

Tom sets both hands over his face for a second, then drags them slowly downward, looking exhausted and exasperated. “Katherine, we both know your Joel is a cactus. Why do you even still have that thing?”

“You said I couldn’t keep him alive. I wanted to prove you wrong. It’s what I *live* for.”

“Fantastic. I’m glad to see you’ve given up being the most stubborn, proud, and ridiculous person I know.”

I ignore this and reach around to try to touch the bandage on my back. Before the doctor brought it up, all my attention had been on my throbbing head. But now that I know about the cut, it’s all I can think about. I want to know what we’re dealing with since I’ll have to take care of it myself.

After a moment, I let out a frustrated huff and drop my arm because I can’t reach it. For a woman determined to be self-sufficient, the bandage could *literally* not be in a worse place.

Tom is watching my every move carefully, and I don’t like that one bit. I scowl at him. “What are you still doing here, Tom? Don’t you have a plane to catch? Homemade marshmallows to make, your mom’s famous December twenty-third Bolognese to eat?”

His chin snaps up in surprise.

Yeah. I remember, I want to say. I don’t want to remember any of it. But I do.

Tom apparently remembers things too. Even the name of our cactus. Which is not exactly working in my favor. The only thing worse than confronting the realization that I have nobody to call is *Tom* having that realization as well.

“What’s your plan, Katie?” Tom asks, a little wary.

“That’s not really your concern, is it?” I say. “It hasn’t been for a long time. Just the way you wanted it.”

His eyes flash in anger. “That isn’t fair.”

Maybe it isn’t. But my head hurts way too badly to have this conversation now. Or ever.

“What about Irene?” Tom asks.

“Good idea,” I say quickly, latching onto it. “I’ll give her a call as soon as

I get my phone and she'll be right in. Bye now!"

"Except," Tom says, his frown deepening, "she always goes to Boston for the holidays to visit her daughter."

I lean back against the pillows tiredly. "I hate your memory. Like an elephant."

"What about Ana?" Tom asks.

For a moment, I feel a flare of hope. My best friend from law school lives out on Long Island. Which isn't exactly close, but she usually sticks around for the holidays, and I know she'll come into the city for me if I really need her.

And I *really* need her.

My heart sinks as I remember that Ana took her in-laws on a European cruise for the holidays this year.

Before I can think of a convincing lie to tell Tom, Nurse Jell-O returns. She holds up a plastic bag. "Found it!"

I reach for the bag, recognizing the clothes I was wearing earlier and, more importantly, my phone.

I immediately begin fumbling for the device, then pause when my hand brushes shredded black fabric.

"Um." I pull out the shreds. "What happened to my bra?"

The nurse purses her lips and takes the bra out of my hand, studying it. "Sometimes the medics have to cut it off."

"Cut it off?" I stare at her. "Why, was the clasp too tricky? And did they use a machete?"

Tom lifts a hand to his mouth as though to cover a laugh, and I narrow my eyes at him. "What are you laughing at? As I remember, you weren't exactly a wizard with these things."

He rubs his forehead, looking bemused. "Look. Katherine. If you want me to leave, just say so."

"I want you to leave," I say, and I mean it wholeheartedly. Having him

this close after all this time . . . It conjures up all sorts of crap I can't deal with. Not right now. Not ever.

Tom studies me for a long moment, then nods. "Alright, Katherine. Alright."

"Finally," I say with feigned relief, trying to ignore the pang that, with him gone, I'll be really, truly alone in the hospital. At Christmas.

Nurse Jell-O gives Tom a disappointed look, and all of her Jell-O sins are instantly forgiven for taking my side, even though I clearly just asked him to leave.

"Perhaps you could wait a few more minutes until someone else can get here?" the nurse says.

Tom hesitates. "I'm already at risk of missing my flight . . ."

Guilt flickers at the realization that I've turned his holiday plans upside down, and because guilt has never brought out the best in me, I go on the defensive.

"Here's what you need to know about Tom," I say, pretending to address the nurse, even though all my attention is on my ex-husband. "Each and every thing he does is according to a plan. It's not merely a flight he has to catch, it's a flight he probably booked two years ago. He can't have little old me putting him off schedule."

"Exactly," he snaps. "You've done enough of that in my lifetime."

Ouch.

I've earned it because I'm being a bitch. But still. Ouch.

The nurse opens her mouth, but Tom cuts her a glare. "Look, Katherine doesn't want me here. And you couldn't pay me enough to stay."

"Why would anyone pay you *anything* to be here?" I retort.

Tom looks at my shredded bra, still dangling from the nurse's hand. "Can I have that?"

"For what, your collection?" I ask.

"No." Tom's voice is calm. "To strangle you."

It almost makes me smile, but the nurse is unused to my and Tom's special brand of rapport and presses her lips together in disconcertion, then bunches up the bra into a ball as she eases toward the doorway. "Yeah, I'm just gonna go ahead and toss this."

"Thanks for my phone!" I call after her.

Tom adjusts the collar of his jacket, and though he reaches for the handle of his suitcase, he doesn't yet move toward the door.

"Call someone, Katherine." It's a quiet command. "And for the love of God, *please* update your emergency contact info."

"Aye, aye," I make a mocking salute, though it lacks snap.

My ex merely shakes his head and reaches for his briefcase. I wonder if he remembers that I got it for him for his birthday, the first year we were married. I doubt it. If he did, he'd have burned it.

Tom starts to turn away, then glances over at me. He opens his mouth, then shuts it with a shake of his head. "Merry Christmas, Katherine."

He heads toward the door, and I swallow and stay stubbornly silent. Or at least I try to.

Before he can leave the room completely, I hear myself say his name.

He looks over his shoulder.

"Thanks," I say awkwardly, forcing myself to make eye contact. I swallow. "You know. For coming."

Surprise flickers in his brown gaze, and he gives me a nod of acknowledgment, looking as awkward as I feel. "Sure."

He starts to leave again and has just disappeared when I blurt out his name again. "Tom?"

He steps back into view. Looks at me.

"I hate you."

Tom gives me a little smile. "Back at you."

Then he's gone, and I let out a little gust of air at how much it hurts. I mean, I'm not surprised that he left. I certainly don't even blame him. I

haven't seen the man in four years, and our parting was anything but amicable.

Let me tell you, you have no idea what a euphemism the placid *irreconcilable differences* is until it happens to you.

And I'm *truly* grateful that Tom came, but . . .

I also wish he wouldn't have. It feels a bit like the scraping of a scab that was finally starting to heal.

And speaking of scabs . . .

Once more, I reach around for the wound on my back. Surely there's *got* to be a way to reach this damn thing myself so I can go home . . .

Someone comes into the room, and I fight back the wave of disappointment that it's a nurse—a different one—and not Tom.

This nurse is short and round and is smiling, even as he makes a tsking noise at me. "Don't mess with that, honey. You can't see what you're doing, and you don't want to accidentally pull out the fresh stitches. Dr. Palmer says you've called someone? When he gets here, buzz me, and I'll show him how we can keep that baby cleaned and get you good as new in no time."

"Ah. Right." I clear my throat. "About that—any chance you can show me how to clean it myself? Maybe with a mirror, and if I stretch, I bet I can reach it."

I try to demonstrate, but I can't get anywhere near where I need to be, and the movement is excruciating. A little whimper of pain slips out.

"Honey, no," the nurse says, coming toward me and tucking me back into the bed. "Don't worry, we'll take good care of you here."

"I can't spend Christmas in the hospital," I say, hating the begging note in my voice. "Please."

He gives me a sympathetic look. "It's not ideal, I know. But bright side, I'm working a double. I'll come visit lots, and I may be known to sneak in cookies."

You don't understand, I want to plead with him. *My dad died in the*

hospital on Christmas.

“Okay?” Cookie Nurse says, giving my arm a little pat.

All I can manage is a weak nod as I look out the window so he can't see my tears.

What do you know, the meteorologists got it right for once.

It's started to snow after all.

TWELVE
TOM

December 23, 12:59 p.m.

If you'd have asked me this morning if I was a good guy, I'd have said *absolutely*. I might even have been a little smug about it because, damn it, I really do *try*.

I hold doors. Call my mom. Give generously. Speak to my colleagues with respect, even Alan, who I once saw pull a Tupperware out of the office fridge, toss the sticky note in the trash, and then chow down on homemade lasagna that clearly wasn't his.

Hell, if you'd have asked me an *hour* ago, I'd have said I was a good guy.

Right now, though? I'm a little less sure. As I step out of Katherine's hospital room, I certainly don't feel like a good guy.

And pulling out my phone to call a car seems to take superhuman strength, as though the universe is saying, *Really? Really, Tom?*

I ignore the universe and then wince because the surge rates are astronomical. And the wait time for a car means that even *with* the flight delay, it's going to be close.

Katherine was wrong, by the way. I didn't book this flight two years ago. Airlines don't allow you to book flights more than 331 days in advance.

So. I booked mine 331 days ago.

It's like I've said. I'm a planner. Most people find this fact to be somewhere between impressive and endearing.

Katherine, on the other hand, has always managed to make me feel like a jerk for it.

Which is unfair. It's not as though I'm a *prepper* with a secret bunker stocked with beans and batteries. I just have a knack for looking ahead to the future and figuring out what needs to be done to ensure that I have the life I want.

I'm also pretty good at avoiding snags, dodging things that don't fit into the plan.

But Katherine is a bit more than a snag. And though I've managed four years of dodging her, apparently my time is up.

Because while there are about a million reasons why I should be heading to the elevator, I find myself loitering outside her hospital room, blatantly eavesdropping on her conversation with the nurse.

A mistake. Because her quiet plea makes my chest ache.

"I can't spend Christmas in the hospital. Please."

I drag a hand over my face because I know—I am perhaps one of the only people on the planet who does—that her entreaty is more than the standard hospital aversion.

I never met Daniel Tate. Katherine's father passed away a couple years before we met. If I'm being honest, I hate that I didn't have a chance to meet the man who raised a woman like Katherine all on his own. A man who sacrificed everything to get her through law school. Who loved her, even when, let's be honest, it wasn't the easiest thing to do.

But I've heard enough of Daniel to feel like I know the important things about the man. I know he was short and fair and looked nothing like his daughter—Katherine got her dark hair and eyes and taller-than-average height from her mother, who passed away when she was a child.

I know that Daniel was kind and patient. That his favorite Christmas

movie was *Scrooge* from the 1950s. And that he vehemently discounted *Die Hard* as a Christmas movie, and I regret never having the opportunity to state my case because I'm confident I could have convinced him.

I know that Daniel Tate got sick with terminal pancreatic cancer.

And I know that he died.

On Christmas.

In a hospital.

I close my eyes. *Damn it.*

My phone buzzes, notifying me of what should be good news. My Uber driver has made better time than estimated and will be here in three minutes.

I force myself to conjure Lolo's face in my mind. My girlfriend, who at this minute is with my family, all of them eagerly awaiting my arrival. My girlfriend, who in two days will become my fiancée, and eventually . . .

My wife.

I set my hand on my computer bag, feeling for the slight bulge of the ring box, and let it serve as the impetus I need to move toward the elevator doors. To put my past behind me, once and for all.

Katherine will be fine on her own. She prefers it that way.

Something I repeat to myself over and over in the elevator. And as I wheel my suitcase toward the exit.

For good measure, I remind myself that the woman legitimately hates my guts.

My sticking around would merely be a selfish way of assuaging my own conscience.

And my *leaving* is the best Christmas gift Katherine could ask for.

There. My good-guy status is restored.

If only I could believe it.

The sliding doors of the hospital open, and even though I've seen the forecasts, the blast of snow that hits me in the face still catches me by surprise.

When I got to the hospital half an hour ago, flakes had just started to fall. Now, everything's covered in white. Luckily, it looks to be a thin layer. Not the type to cancel flights. Not enough to prevent me from getting to Chicago to propose.

I don't see my car yet, so I move under the awning to dodge the worst of the whipping snow. Two guys dressed in scrubs and winter coats are on their break, sipping from steaming paper cups.

"This is nothing," one of them says in a bored voice, glancing out at the snow. "I thought this was supposed to be a blizzard."

"Yeah, but it's early yet," the other says, looking up at the sky. "It wasn't even supposed to start snowing for another couple hours, and an inch has already accumulated in thirty minutes."

His companion gives him a look. "The weather guy from Channel Seven called. He wants his job back."

The snow watcher smiles and shrugs. "I'm from Phoenix. The white stuff still fascinates me."

"Well, I'm from Buffalo. Trust me, it gets old." The other guy drains the rest of his cup and tosses it into the nearby trash. "I almost don't mind getting stuck here for another eight hours."

"You pulling a double?"

The first nods.

"That sucks. But at least you didn't get the Christmas Eve shift. I hate being in a hospital for the holidays."

"I can't spend Christmas in the hospital. Please."

I check my phone. Two minutes to go. *Come on, Uber.*

"Whenever my mom gives me shit for missing Christmas to work, I remind her I'm one of the lucky ones," their conversation continues, torturing me. "Much as it sucks to be changing the beds, at least I'm not *in* one on Christmas."

I swallow. *Damn it.*

I lift my phone once again. And when I tap the Delta app, I tell myself I'm checking availability on later flights only as a backup plan. Not *the* plan.

But when I try to come up with an excuse to explain to myself why I'm searching availability for *two* tickets to Chicago instead of one, I'm faced with the awful, unavoidable truth:

I'm taking my ex-wife home for Christmas.

THIRTEEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 1:04 p.m.

“Listen up, Tate. This is how it’s going to go, and if you argue, I swear to God, I really *will* strangle you with your shredded bra.”

I jolt awake.

I’ve just started to doze off, so at first I think the bossy, horrible voice is a dream.

“Katherine.” Tom’s fingers on my cheek are none too gentle and all too real. “I don’t think you’re supposed to fall asleep with a concussion.”

He’s right. I’m not. Cookie Nurse made that very clear. He also promised to come in every five minutes to make sure I stayed awake.

Which at the time the nurse threatened it had seemed fairly terrible, but this is way, way worse.

I struggle into a more upright position, still trying to orient my thoughts. “Tom? What are you—”

He holds up a finger, and there’s something in his expression that, for once, has me shutting my mouth.

“This is how it’s going to go,” he repeats. “We’re leaving the hospital, together. I will make sure you don’t fall asleep. I will horrify both of us by making sure the wound on your back doesn’t ooze or whatever. But the

second the timer's up and you don't need to be babysat? You're on a flight back to New York. You got that?"

I must have hit my head even harder than they thought because all of this feels impossible to compute.

I latch on to the easiest of his statements, and the most crucial.

"What do you mean flight back to New York? I'm not leaving New York," I say.

"Ah, ah, ah," he says in a chiding tone, wagging his finger. "No arguing, remember? I'm heading to Chicago. Ergo *you're* heading to Chicago."

I stare at him as the reality of what he's saying sinks in, and even then, my brain rebels at the idea. "You can't be serious. You want me to spend Christmas with your family?"

"*Want?* God, no." Tom doesn't shudder, but I sense he has to hold himself back.

"But," he continues, "it's either this, or you completely ruin my holiday by making me feel guilty for leaving you in the hospital."

"Yeah, because you're clearly the victim here. I hope this hasn't been too hard for you."

Tom's expression doesn't show even a flicker of sympathy. "Please," he says. "It's hardly my fault you insist on rolling around in cabs while simultaneously refusing to wear a seat belt in one."

My current predicament means I have no comeback to that, so I settle for scowling at him.

He scowls back, then reaches out toward me, his hand fumbling in the thin hospital sheets, and the brush of his fingers against my hip does something to my stomach that it shouldn't.

"Hey," I slap at his hand. "Your days of being able to cop a feel are long behind you."

"Thank God for that," he mutters as he comes up with the little remote to call for assistance and pushes the button. "Let's hope they can make these

instructions fast. We've got a plane to catch."

Reality starts to sink in, as does panic.

Just a moment ago, I couldn't have pictured anything worse than spending Christmas in the hospital, but somehow this plan . . . spending Christmas with my in-laws, *ex-in-laws* . . . *ex-husband* . . .

And being reminded of all that I had and all that I've lost?

I can't. I won't.

Especially since Harry *still* hasn't called to make me partner, and considering my all-out obsession with that goal is part of what caused me to lose everything in the first place . . .

"I'll try my luck with cookies and Jell-O," I tell Tom, snuggling into a bed that is anything but snuggly. "Hand me the TV remote, would you?"

"Come on, Katherine," Tom says, exasperated. "You don't seriously want to stay here. I know you don't. And I know *why* you don't."

I flick my eyes toward his, and for a moment, our gazes hold. Tom is one of the few people who knows why I hate Christmas. One of the few who understands.

It makes his kindness all the more unbearable.

"Come on," he says again, his voice soft. "We can survive each other for forty-eight hours. Can't we?"

I squint my eyes. "Honestly? I don't know."

"Yeah, me neither," he admits. "But let's try it. It'll be like one-on-one holiday *Survivor*," he says, his tone returning to its crisp, businesslike clip. "We can make a competition out of it."

"I *do* like the prospect of winning," I muse, mostly to myself. "But I also have a problem."

"Just the one?" He lifts an eyebrow as his gaze travels over the mess that is my entire being at the moment.

Fair point.

I point to the plastic bag with my belongings. "It wasn't only the bra that

didn't make it. Whatever sliced my back also sliced through my coat and my blouse."

"You know, I thought of that," Tom says, returning to his suitcase, where I just now notice something bright red draped over the handle. "I got you something in the gift shop."

He holds up a red sweatshirt with the biggest Rudolph face I have ever seen. The nose is a sparkly red pom-pom the size of a baseball.

I groan. "You really do hate me."

He grins. "I really do."

FOURTEEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 2:09 p.m.

When the doorman at my apartment building rushes to open the door for Tom, it's impossible not to notice that his eyes go comically wide before he quickly resumes his usual default poker face.

The reaction was clearly shock. Less clear is what Melvin was most surprised at:

The fact that my hair is matted to the side of my head by a bit of blood?

Or perhaps the fact that I'm wearing a garish Christmas sweater paired with my usual stilettos?

It could also be the fact that I'm in the company of a man.

Who are we kidding. It's *definitely* that last one.

It's not that I've been a nun since the divorce. I've dated. A couple volatile flings sprinkled throughout. I even had a perfectly pleasant relationship with a nice man named Andy for four months until I realized that *perfectly pleasant* is the equivalent of *boring*.

But generally speaking? My romantic life is not exactly thriving, and male visitors are definitely not the norm.

The *why* isn't exactly a secret. I learned early on that my particular personality type?

Not likable.

I've also been called another certain word often enough to know that it really hurts the feelings most people don't think I have, so I'll simply say it rhymes with *glitch*.

So, yes, I'm apparently not likable.

And let me tell you. In our society? Above all things, a woman damned well better be likable.

I specify *woman* because there is a double standard, and it drives me crazy.

Sure, we women are allowed to be smart. Strong is applauded. Beautiful is required. But apparently, the only way a woman can possibly be a good person is to never be too blunt, never have too rough an edge.

Men? Different ball game entirely.

Don't believe me?

Just imagine for a moment Jane Austen's oh-so-famous Mr. Darcy. He's taciturn. Brusque. Judgmental. Rude. Condescending. Interfering. *Prejudiced* (or prideful, I was never quite sure which).

And he is considered one of the greatest, most romantic heroes ever written.

Now, go with me for a moment, if you will: ascribe all of Darcy's attributes to a woman. Let's pretend that *Willa* Darcy is taciturn, brusque, judgmental, rude, interfering, and prejudiced—or prideful. Do you stick around to see if she has a hidden heart of gold and buys her sister pianos and is secretly just a little shy?

Or do you declare her unlikable? "*Ugh, loved the story, but the heroine was a rather unlikable person up until the very end . . .*"

Not a *Pride and Prejudice* fan? Here's another one:

Severus Snape. The man is downright horrible for literally the entire Harry Potter series, and yet I have not met a Potter fan who doesn't declare him delightful—possibly even a *favorite*—even before you discover his

hidden depths.

You know what they call a *woman* who's horrible for the entire Harry Potter series? Dolores Umbridge.

Even my boy, the Grinch—he freaking *steals Christmas*, but nobody reads that book or watches that movie and thinks, *The protagonist was a total tool. One star!* I just can't help but wonder what the reviews would be like or if the Grinch would be as beloved if he were a she, or if she would be less Grinch, more . . . *Glitch*.

And after a while, being unlikable makes me feel like I'm unlovable.

How did I get on this? Oh yeah. My lack of male companionship and the reason for it:

I'm not the docile little lady most men seem to want, at least not for the long term.

The one exception?

Him.

Or so I thought.

"Ms. Tate. Welcome home," the doorman says in the same smooth monotone voice he always greets me with.

"Thanks, Melvin."

He's not frosty to me, *per se*, but he's never quite friendly either. At least not the way I've seen him with the other residents, all of whom seem to know the names of his mother and pets. I want to know those things too! It's just when I try, it comes out as an interrogation.

Tom notices the stilted dynamic, because he notices everything, and leans down to murmur in my ear, "Let me guess. You tried to offer free legal advice in lieu of a holiday tip again?"

"Okay, I only did that *one* time," I defend myself. "And weren't you the one always lecturing me about how the 'art of gift giving' is all about personal touches?"

I add mocking air quotes for emphasis.

“I didn’t mean that to be an excuse for you to be miserly. I was just trying to point out that you regifting that pen to my boss’s wife for her fortieth didn’t exactly do wonders for my career.”

“She’s in publishing. I thought she would like a nice pen.”

“The pen had my initials engraved on it,” he grumbles. “Because it was a gift from my boss, a.k.a. her husband.”

“Oh, is that what happened?” I ask with a dramatic, puzzled frown. “I had no idea, it’s not like you reminded me during every single argument.”

“*You* had arguments. *I* had discussions,” he says in that Tom way of his that makes me want to punch his too-handsome face.

“Oh, that’s right.” I push the button for my floor, then decide to push his too. “It’s all coming back to me now. You, reasonable and faultless. Me, responsible for everything wrong with the world.”

“See, I know you’re being sarcastic, but . . .”

“Oh, shut up,” I mutter as we step off the elevator onto my floor.

Tom whistles. “Marble floors? Fancy. How long have you lived here?”

“Four years. Give or take.”

“Huh.” It’s a thoughtful “huh.”

An irritating “huh.”

One that I should just let go, but I was never good at that, especially when it came to Tom, so I stop in my tracks and give him the full blast of my glare. “What. What is that.”

“What’s what?” he asks, all innocence.

“That ‘huh.’ I hate when you do that. And don’t say, ‘Do what?’ I hate that too.”

Tom’s gaze rests briefly on the bandage on my forehead, and I’m pretty sure it’s only out of misplaced deference for my injury that he doesn’t give in to his usual urge to push my buttons like only he can because his next words are surprisingly innocuous.

“I guess I thought you might stay at the place on Lex awhile longer. You

loved that apartment.”

A little jolt of pain tightens my stomach at the memory of the old place. A year or two into our doomed marriage, Tom and my respective careers had grown to the point where we were able to upgrade from our nice but small studio on the Upper West Side.

Tom wanted to move farther downtown, to the Village, or even all the way downtown to Tribeca.

I pushed for something closer to work—*my* work. I wanted either Upper East Side or Midtown. And back then, when the only thing he fought me on was sushi versus pizza on Friday nights, he agreed without question. Back when things between us were . . . different.

Back before I had to confront the frustrating fact that my own happiness was apparently all tangled up with Tom’s and that when he wasn’t happy, I wasn’t either.

Especially when he wasn’t happy with me.

“I did love that apartment,” I say, continuing down the hall to my unit. *I loved a lot of things.*

The meds they hooked me up with at the hospital must be making me sentimental, while also simultaneously failing to do their job. The headache that just minutes ago I thought couldn’t get any worse has created a whole new standard of pain for itself.

As a result, I feel a little unsteady and shaky. As I fumble around in my purse for my keys, I manage to drop my bag, and all my crap spills out.

I start to bend to pick it up, but the pain in my back is immediate, and Tom reaches out to grab my elbow, stilling me. “Hey. I’ve got it.”

The touch is innocent and brief, and just as with his fingers brushing my leg in the hospital bed, I hate how aware I am of him.

Or how, for an insane split second, I wish he would linger.

Which, of course, Tom doesn’t. I became repellent to him long ago.

Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. *Especially* emotionally. He made that

part quite clear toward the end. I remember because it hurt the most.

Tom kneels to pick up my stuff. Obviously, I'm not feeling myself because I can't think of a single quippy line about the joys of having him kneel in front of me.

What a wasted opportunity.

With one large hand, he grabs my lipstick, a pen, and my wallet. With the other, he reaches out for my birth control case, his hand hesitating for just the briefest of seconds before picking it up.

He hands it to me, expression tense, and I wonder if it's because it reminds him of that last year, the one when all the cracks started to show, or because he wonders what that tiny little package says about my sex life.

I could tell him the truth. That I'm still on the pill for the purpose of regulating my cycle, not for pregnancy protection. Because, you know, you actually have to have sex for that, and it's been . . . *a while*.

Instead I give him what I think is a sultry smile, a little flutter of eyelashes. Yeah, that's right. Since you've been gone, new apartment, new men.

He blinks, looking alarmed. "You okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your face just now. You look like you're having a stroke, and with the concussion . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, I'm fine," I mutter, grabbing the rest of my belongings and then waving the key fob to enter my apartment.

Tom follows me in and makes a surprised but approving noise. "Damn, Katie. You've moved up in the world."

"In more ways than one," I say. There. Finally, a decent comeback.

He goes to the window. "Central Park view. You always wanted that." Tom looks back at me. "Obviously that partner dream you held above all else finally came to fruition?"

I look away but not fast enough because he turns all the way back toward

me, his expression questioning.

I lift a shoulder, looking down at my phone, willing it to ring. It does not. And even though I don't say a single word, he makes a sound of comprehension.

"Ah," he says. "Well. My day didn't exactly go as planned either."

"No?" I say. "What, no butterflies landed on your shoulder?" Excellent. My comebacks continue to be on point, but Tom looks unimpressed.

And maybe a little distracted.

"You okay?" I ask, then immediately bite my tongue in regret. Tom is no longer mine to check on, but old habits die hard, apparently.

He shrugs. "Let's just say, you didn't get a call you were hoping for. I got one I was never expecting."

It takes me a second to follow. "Oh. The one from my office. About my accident."

"Yes. Obviously, that one, Katherine," he says, a touch impatiently.

"Oh, well, gee, you poor thing," I say, upending the bag from the pharmacy onto the counter. Gauze, pills, and antibacterial ointment come spilling out, satisfactorily making my point. "Can I get you anything to make up for your terrible day?"

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. "Just go pack so we don't miss our flight."

"We have plenty of time."

"How about we skip that particular argument," he says, poking through the assortment of medical supplies on the counter. "I think we both know it never goes anywhere."

It was one of our favorites. The airport argument. If it were up to him, we'd be at the airport three hours before every flight "just in case" there was an extra-long line in security. Or there was an issue checking our bags. Or our car broke down on the way to the airport. Or if there was a tornado. Or hurricane. Or blizzard.

I glance out the window. Okay, that last one is fair today.

But even with the blizzard, and even though I have a bad habit of getting into arguments with TSA about whether I should be allowed to cross through with a container of salad dressing, I'm more of a "last person on board" kind of gal.

He hates that.

I hate him.

It's all good.

"Fine," I say because he's right about one thing. That old argument isn't going anywhere fast. "While I pack, make us a couple of cocktails, would you? Your Manhattan is just about the only thing I miss about you."

He picks up a pill bottle, frowning down at it. "Are you sure you should be drinking while you're taking all this stuff?"

Probably not. "Maybe you'll get lucky and I'll die."

"I'd never be that lucky," he mutters. But the possibility of my demise must be all the incentive he needs because he walks to my bar cart to retrieve the bourbon as I pull my suitcase out of the hall closet.

In my bedroom, I start to lift the suitcase onto the bed and immediately wince. Well. This isn't good at all. If I can't even lift an empty suitcase with my injury, I'm going to need Tom's help for the next few days.

My ultimate nightmare.

Then my gaze snags on the picture frame on my nightstand, and my heart hiccups in panic. I scramble toward it, knocking the frame to the floor in my haste before frantically shoving it into my nightstand drawer.

I slam the drawer shut, my heartbeat slowing a bit now that I've averted a major crisis. My struggles with the suitcase wouldn't hold a candle to the misery of Tom learning that I have a picture of us by my bed.

And knowing his supersize ego, he'd make it all about him.

Nonsense.

It's just that I happen to look fantastic in my white ski clothes on that trip.

And I was having a good hair day, the rare kind where my hair was shiny and full without a single fuzzy in sight. The backdrop of the Swiss Alps hadn't been half bad either.

My companion in the photo was a blight to be tolerated, not the reason I'd kept the damned thing in the first place.

Suddenly, I feel more exhausted than ever, and I sit on the edge of the bed. I know the second my butt hits the mattress that it's a mistake because it beckons.

I run a hand over my duvet. Was the blanket always this soft? My other hand strokes my pillow. Well, hello there, have you always been this perfect?

There's only one way to find out. Moving gingerly so as not to aggravate the stitches on my back, I slowly lower to my side, stifling a moan as my aching head sinks into the soft, squishy comfort.

I know I'm not supposed to sleep with a concussion, but surely it can't hurt to close my eyes . . . just for a minute . . .

FIFTEEN
TOM

December 23, 2:14 p.m.

I've poured two Manhattans nearly to the brim. A good idea? Certainly not. But I remember quite clearly that bourbon makes Katherine infinitely more tolerable.

Of course, I'll only let her have a sip or two, given her current state. But I fully intend to finish mine.

And maybe hers as well.

I carry the drinks carefully, my gaze locked on the rims of the cocktail glasses so I don't spill on the wood floors of Katherine's fancy apartment.

A fancy apartment that, if I'm being honest, bothers me more than it should. Not because it's not nice (because it is). And not because she doesn't deserve a swanky piece of real estate (because God knows she's worked for it).

It's just that it's not . . . *her*.

Or at least it didn't use to be.

The Katherine I knew, the Katherine I *married*, had been all about prewar architecture and buildings with "historic character." But I'm pretty sure I have a block of cheese in my fridge that's older than this building.

And then there's the furniture. It's all white and uncomfortable looking,

whereas I vividly remember Katherine fighting to the death to keep her dad's ugly old Barcalounger when we moved in together.

But her old, beloved, beat-up chair was nowhere to be found in the living room, and not in the second bedroom she's using for a home office either. I know because I snooped a little.

I almost wish I didn't because I also found Joel.

And the damn cactus wasn't relegated to some back bookshelf or dusty windowsill, but front and center on her desk, where she can't miss it. And wouldn't she want to miss it?

That cactus was *ours*.

I haven't thought about that stupid houseplant in years, and now he—yes, I'm apparently personifying the succulent—has popped into my mind twice in a single day.

Honestly, I'm not a big plant guy. I wasn't back then, and I'm still not. Joel was more of a joke than anything else, the only "pet" we had time for, the only plant we could keep alive. But after we moved in together, he was the first thing that wasn't Katherine's or mine, but ours.

It bothers me that she still has it, and it bothers me even more that she's clearly been taking care of it, though that admittedly is not hard to do.

But neither of those things bothers me as much as the fact that when I reached out to run a finger along the familiar terra-cotta base, I had an almost painful flashback.

To a time when everything was different.

Back to a time when I proposed, not because it was Christmas Eve tradition, not because I was painfully aware of getting older, not because it was *time* . . .

But because I couldn't even wrap my head around a single day, much less a lifetime, without her.

But look how that turned out . . .

"Okay," I say, my voice clipped as I enter Katherine's bedroom, attention

still on the overflowing brims. “So I couldn’t find any cherries, but it’s just as well . . .”

I glance up at Katherine.

Sleeping Katherine.

“Shit!” I mutter, bourbon and sweet vermouth spilling all over my hands and her furniture as I hurriedly set the glasses on the nightstand. “Katherine. Wake the hell up!”

She doesn’t move a muscle, and I can feel my heart pounding in concern.

“Wake up, dummy,” I say, giving her shoulder a little shake. “Remember, that’s why we’re in this mess in the first place, you’re not allowed to sleep for twelve hours after the accident.”

She doesn’t budge, and I shake her shoulder more firmly. Katherine makes a grumpy noise and pushes my hand away.

My panic abates, even as irritation increases. Why the hell did I agree to this again?

I tap my fingers against her cheek, and though she makes a hissing noise at me, she still doesn’t open her eyes.

“God, I hate you,” I mutter, easing an arm beneath her shoulders, careful not to touch the bandage on her back as I hoist her into a sitting position so she has no choice but to wake up.

Her brown eyes open slowly, and she stares at me groggily, confused. “Tom?”

“I know,” I say, smiling in spite of myself. “I can’t believe it either.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Asking myself that exact same question,” I mutter, lifting my hand in front of her face. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

I extend just the middle one, and she laughs. A genuine laugh, the kind she lets out so rarely. I’m startled by how much I’ve missed the sound of it. By how gratified I am to learn that I can still earn it.

Before I can have a moment to contemplate this, she shoves me away and

reaches for the cocktail on the nightstand. “Come here, lover.”

“Sorry, not available,” I say. *Not interested*, I remind myself.

Katherine ignores my admittedly lame joke and takes a sip of her drink, letting out a content sigh. “Now we’re talking. This is the one thing you always did right.”

She takes another sip.

“Let’s go easy on that,” I say, reaching for the drink. “Until we can see how your concussed, medicated body can handle it.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Thinking about my body, are you?”

“Hardly.” *Maybe*. I reach for the drink again, but she pulls it out of my reach with remarkable grace, given her current condition.

“You know,” Katherine muses. “It’s strangely comforting. The way you haven’t changed from your bossy, rules-abiding self over the years. Still a goody-goody.”

“You know what’s less comforting? You drinking whiskey with a concussion. And that I’ve been tasked with taking care of you for two days, even though you won’t agree to a single one of my suggestions. Though, I guess you never did.”

“Not true.” She takes another sip and looks at me over the rim of her cocktail. “I agreed when you asked me to marry you.”

I go still. Wary. “True.”

She continues to gaze at me with eyes that have always seen just a little bit more of me than I want people to see.

“I said yes when you asked for a divorce too,” Katherine says quietly. “I’d say that makes me downright *agreeable*, wouldn’t you?”

I open my mouth, then close it. I’m not often a man short on words, but I have no idea how to respond to that.

She waves a hand and sets her drink aside. “Forget it. Let me just go grab my toiletries from the bathroom and throw some clothes in a bag so we can get you to the airport in time to sit and wait at the gate for a solid hour.”

I roll my eyes, watching as she exits the room to make sure she's steady on her feet. Not to check out her ass.

And then, because I need it, I reach for my cocktail, only to swear softly when I see the puddle of bourbon that I spilled when I set the overfilled glasses down.

I open the nightstand drawer, hoping to find a tissue or something to mop up the mess.

I freeze when I see it. Her. Us.

With a quick glance to the door to make sure she's still in the bathroom, I lift the picture of Katherine and me on vacation in St. Moritz.

As with the moment I saw Joel, I'm immediately flooded with memories long buried. Deliberately buried.

Memories not only of the moment itself, though I remember standing atop that mountain on that beautiful day with almost painful clarity. But memories of the even more poignant moments leading up to it.

I remember the months of planning, the anticipation not only of the destination but the prospect of having Katherine to myself for once, her attention on me instead of work.

I remember the champagne on the plane that made both of us a little bit giggly, a little unlike our usual buttoned-up selves.

Chicago isn't exactly known as a skiing destination, but when I was growing up, my family had taken regular trips to winter resorts in Michigan often enough that I knew my way around the slopes. Enough to teach Katherine how to ski the first winter after we got married and for her to fall in love with the sport.

Neither of us was particularly good, but we were proficient enough to enjoy the powdery perfection of the Alps. The trip wasn't about the skiing, though. Because what I remember with far greater clarity than racing Katherine down a double black diamond is the moments surrounding the skiing.

The conversations on the chairlift where we talked about nothing and everything. The way she felt curled up against my side in the lodge as we sipped cocktails by the fire.

I remember the hot tub in our room. I remember what came *after* the hot tub back in the room.

I hear her footsteps approaching from the bathroom and hurriedly put the frame back in the drawer. Partially because I don't want her to know I saw. Partially because I don't want to think about what it means that she still has it.

But putting the frame out of sight doesn't put it out of my mind, and even after I close the drawer, my brain is reluctant to set it aside. Katherine is hardly the sentimental type. It always bothered me, a little, how indifferent she was to keepsakes, how reluctant to keep anything that would trigger emotional memories. When I discovered an old box of Christmas decorations from her childhood, she practically bit my hand when I tried to drag it out of the closet.

And yet, she kept Joel. And this photo.

I'd have thought she'd have done everything possible to remove every trace of our marriage from her life. The fact that she hasn't is . . . intriguing.

And it shouldn't be.

I'm carrying around an *engagement* ring with me, for Christ's sake. I'm about to propose to another woman. A woman who is everything that Katherine is not. Everything I've ever wanted.

"What's with the face?" Katherine asks, startling me out of my reverie.

"What face?"

"That one." She points at my head. "You only look like that when you're constipated or trying to shove back thoughts that don't fit into your tidy little life plan."

The assessment is piercingly accurate, so naturally, I give her a scathing put-down. "Maybe you should be a little less worried with my face, and a

little more worried about the fact that this suitcase is still empty?”

I give it a shake, hoping to hurry her along. Hoping also to remind myself that although Katie and I had a few good times, in the end, they'd done nothing to save us.

SIXTEEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 4:12 p.m.

It doesn't take the instincts and experience of an ex-wife to know that Tom is irritated about something. He keeps shifting uncomfortably in his plane seat and has gotten up to check his bag in the overhead compartment five times already.

Maybe he really *is* constipated.

"What is wrong with you?" I ask, not looking up from the message I'm typing to my boss. It's not technically urgent enough to warrant an after-hours text. It can easily wait until tomorrow morning. Hell, it can wait until after the holidays.

But now that all the distraction of my untimely hospital visit is behind me, I'm back on track. Partner track. I missed a handful of calls due to that pesky accident, and though none were from Harry, I want to make sure my boss knows I've got my phone on me. For whenever he decides to get off his ass and *make the call already*.

"Nothing's wrong." Tom's snippy tone contradicts his words, but I know him well enough not to point this out. Here's what I know about my ex: either he'll decide he wants to talk or that he doesn't.

Poking the bear while the bear stews is futile. Because despite the

charming, if a little sarcastic, Disney prince persona that Tom puts on for the rest of the world, here's a little secret about the man:

Tom Walsh is a champion *stewer*. When something wiggles past his smiling facade and latches on to the real Tom, 100 percent of his focus goes to chewing on whatever's annoying him. He silently assesses it. Wrestles with it. Tries to banish it.

Anything to get him back to the person he wants to be.

Yes, Tom is personable. And he's funny, though, of course, I'll die before admitting it aloud. He's easy to be around, kind to strangers, and likes to take care of the people he cares about, *blah blah blah*.

But he's also *crafted* that version of himself. I don't mean to imply that he's disingenuous because, much as it pains me to admit, Tom really is a decent guy.

Exhibit A: man takes an ex-wife that he loathes home for the holidays out of the goodness of his heart.

But it's just . . . how to explain?

Tom is as charming as he is because he *works* at it. It's as though he takes time each day to deliberately weed out the bad thoughts and replace them with more pleasant ones.

And during that time? He's downright brooding.

Now, I've never minded this about him.

Actually, that brooding version of the man was always my favorite. Not because he's particularly pleasant to be around, but because if you're subjected to it, it means you're in the inner circle.

It means he trusts you. He's comfortable around you.

So yeah. The fact that after all these years, I'm still privy to Brooding Tom? It warms my shrunken Grinch heart just a little bit.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he impatiently tugs at the knot of his tie. Another tell.

I stay silent. Waiting him out.

“I still can’t believe your ticket had precheck approved, and mine didn’t,” he mutters.

“Mmm,” I say noncommittally. That’s not what’s bothering him.

“I’m the one that bought the tickets,” he continues. “On this airline’s credit card. So someone please explain to me why I’m the one who had to wait in a mile-long security line and take off my shoes?”

“Someone already did explain it to you,” I say. “You gave that same speech, verbatim, to the poor woman working the counter at our gate, and she explained that it was a systems error and apologized. Don’t worry, though, she obviously had *lots* of time to listen to your tantrum as she dealt with an overbooked, delayed flight.”

He doesn’t respond, and I glance over. “What’s this really about? Did the TSA agent not compliment your Santa socks?”

He frowns at me. “How do you know I’m wearing Santa socks?”

I lift my purse from beneath the seat in front of me and begin digging around for my sleep mask. “Because it’s December. That means your socks are going to be Santa, elves, snowmen, or gingerbread men. Unless your mom went crazy and added reindeer to the mix this year?”

Tom is visibly startled, and I know why. It’s because his mom *did* give out reindeer socks this year, and he wants to know how I know that.

Nancy Walsh has a long-standing Thanksgiving tradition. After the turkey’s put away and the pumpkin pie comes out, she gives out a pair of Christmas socks to everyone at her table.

I may not have been a guest at that table in a long time, but I still get the socks in the mail every November, along with a pumpkin-pie-scented candle. It’s the highlight of my entire holiday season, though I’m loath to admit such mawkishness.

“Speaking of reindeer,” he says, “that sweatshirt *really* brings out your eyes.”

Yes, I’m still wearing the hideous sweatshirt from the hospital. Not

because it's grown on me. It hasn't. But because I wasn't able to wiggle out of it, given the gash on my back, and Tom refused to help me change.

I ignore him and reach down to pull up his pant leg slightly. "Santas. Nailed it."

He jerks his leg away, and I sit back up, wincing when I move too fast and my back stings.

"I *still* think we should have changed the bandage back at your place," he says, noticing my discomfort.

"You were too anxious to get to the airport. I didn't want you to do a rush job. Wait." I look over at him. "You grabbed the gauze off the counter, didn't you? I asked—"

"I got it," he interrupts. "Even managed to fashion it into a nice, sturdy noose fitted just for you."

A flight attendant comes over the intercom to make the inevitable announcement that all the overhead space is full and that anyone with a roller bag will have to check it.

There's a chorus of angry groans, and for a split second, I'm almost grateful for Tom's insistence that we board early and with plenty of time to secure a spot for our bags. There aren't many things I could name that could make this horrible day any worse, but losing my luggage would be on the short list.

I put the sleep mask onto my head, staging it on my forehead as I turn my attention to the cheap inflatable neck pillow I bought in the airport. I'd much prefer the expensive one I normally use, but Tom rushed me out of my apartment before I was able to grab my usual flight accoutrements.

I lift the stand-in pillow to my face, then wince at the rubbery smell. Since it's Tom's fault I'm stuck with it, I flap it in front of his face. "Here. Blow this up for me."

He pushes my hand back toward me and pulls his phone out of his suit pocket. "Pass."

“Such a gentleman,” I mutter. “Making the invalid do it.”

I loop the floppy thing over my neck and open the little valve. I bring it to my mouth, but the process is awkward and uncomfortable.

“Why don’t you inflate it *before* you put it on, genius?” he says, not looking up from his phone.

“You sure you don’t want to do it?” I offer it to him again. “You seem to be *full* of hot air.”

“I don’t know why you even insisted on buying that damn thing. It’s meant for sleeping, and you can’t sleep. Concussion, remember?”

“No, Tom. I forgot,” I say sarcastically. “And I had to find something to keep myself busy at the airport, considering we basically arrived at the gate before our plane had even left its departure city.”

“Well, you know what, Katherine, if it weren’t for you and your stubborn insistence on cabs, I wouldn’t have missed my original flight and would already be in Chicago by now. So sue me for wanting to make sure I didn’t miss this one.”

“Sue you?” I repeat. “I would love to be the defense attorney on that ridiculous excuse for a lawsuit,” I say. “Slam dunk.”

I make a motion like I’m shooting a basketball, and Tom shakes his head. “That shot would have never gone in.”

“Would too.”

“Nope. I’m a die-hard baseball guy, and even I know that would have been an air ball.”

My eyes go very, very wide. “*No!* You played baseball? I had *no* idea! Have you ever mentioned that?!”

“Ha. Ha.” He sets his head back on the headrest and closes his eyes.

I smirk. Honestly, I’m surprised we’ve made it this far in the day without a baseball reference. Tom *loves* to talk about his baseball glory days. Hearing him talk about his RBI or whatever at a cocktail party, you’d think he started for the Yankees and not simply played “college ball,” which is a phrase he

repeats with increased frequency if you make the mistake of serving him gin.

“I forget,” I say, leaning toward him. “How many bases did you steal at that state championship game?”

It was three. And I know he’s dying to say it, but instead he opens one eye and, lifting the rubber valve dangling near my mouth, shoves it between my lips. “Here. Use your mouth for something useful.”

I waggle my eyebrows seductively at him, but his eyes are closed again, so I go about trying to blow up the pillow.

Almost immediately, the blowing causes the headache pain that I *thought* was abating to pound even harder. I rub my forehead dramatically.

“Don’t bother with the sympathy ploy,” he says, not opening his eyes. “I’m not going to blow it up for you.”

“Please? I’m concussed.”

“Nope.”

“Come on.” I lean toward him, the gauge extended. “It’s easy. Just slip it between your lips and blow.”

“Oh my,” a woman from the row in front of us murmurs, sounding scandalized.

“You’re creeping out the other passengers,” Tom says, shoving at me. “And me.”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “I guess I can just use your shoulder as a pillow . . .”

Tom heaves out a sigh of his own and reluctantly takes the pillow from me and begins inflating it.

“Blow harder,” I insist. “Puff out your cheeks. And use two hands, really get into it.”

The woman in front of us shifts around to glare at me with a prudish blue eye peeking between the crack in the seats. I give her a big smile, and Tom lifts his hands toward my neck, making a strangling motion, though he continues to inflate the pillow.

My phone buzzes repeatedly with an incoming call, and my heart stops for a moment when I see Harry's name on the screen. Without meaning to, I reach out and grip Tom's wrist.

This is it.

He gives me a curious look, though he doesn't stop with the pillow.

"Harry! Hi!" I say, picking up the phone.

There's a pause on the other end, and I can practically feel Harry's surprise at my enthusiasm. "Hey, Katherine! You sound like you're in a good mood. The holiday bug finally got you, huh?"

"Ma'am." A flight attendant is standing beside Tom's seat in the aisle, giving me a censoring look. "Please hang that up."

I hold up a finger. *In a minute.*

"What's up, Harry?"

"Ma'am." The flight attendant's tone shifts from peeved to pissed. "I'm going to have to ask you to put your phone away."

"Harry, one sec." I mute the call and turn to the flight attendant on her power trip. "Listen, I know you're just doing your job. I've been waiting my entire life for this phone call. And you can't seriously tell me that my iPhone is going to crash this plane."

"Oh my God," Tom mutters.

The flight attendant glares at me, completely unmoved by my extremely rational argument.

I give her the same smile I give juries during closing arguments. "Maybe you could just ask the pilot to wait? I just need five minutes."

"Katherine." Tom's tone is sharp. "Seriously."

"Yes, Tom, *seriously.*" I unmute my call. "Sorry about that, Harry. What's up?"

I never get the chance to find out because Tom pulls the phone out of my hand, hangs up, and tries to do damage control, but it's too late.

The flight attendant either had an axe to grind or a score to settle.

Because five minutes later, the plane takes off.
And I'm not on it.

SEVENTEEN
TOM

December 23, 4:19 p.m.

I've always thought of myself as a relatively patient man, especially as it pertains to travel and all the inevitable setbacks that go along with it.

It's a trait I learned early on in life as the oldest of four kids. No matter how strict the itinerary, or how precise my mother's packing list, family road trips and summer vacations always came with flat tires, forgotten inhalers, beestings, and lots of arguing.

Even when my part in the chaos was small, it fell to me to fix it, keep a level head, and "set a good example." I never minded the added responsibility, and the older I got, the more I actively appreciated my ability to avoid and handle a crisis.

And then Katherine Tate came into my life, a woman who operates almost entirely in crisis mode and who thus challenged everything I thought I knew about myself. Namely, that my patience has limits and that she, and only she, can turn my calm, predictable life into a goddamn war zone.

"You *had* to use the 'I'm an attorney' line," I grumble at her.

"I *am* an attorney," she says in a genuinely affronted voice. As though she is the injured party in this situation. Which, I suppose, technically she is.

But right now, I'm inclined to think my current situation is much, much

worse than any concussion or stitches.

And for that matter, I'm beginning to wonder if her concussion is contagious because I'm getting a headache.

I say I *wonder* because I'm not actually all that familiar with headaches. At least not anymore. In fact, I think my last headache dates all the way back to my first marriage. Marriage to *this* woman, who is basically a walking, talking, pontificating migraine in heels.

"Damn," she mutters. "Now Harry's not picking up."

She huffs and scowls at me, as though this is my fault, though I know her well enough to see the guilt in her eyes.

"You don't think the flight attendant overreacted a little?" Katherine asks. "Kicking us off the plane?"

"Kicking *you* off the plane," I amend quickly. "I chose to follow."

And if I'm being honest, Katherine's not wrong about the flight attendant's overreaction. Having Katherine escorted off the plane for using her cell phone *did* feel a little over the top, but then, Katherine has a way of triggering the extreme in people.

"Why did you?" she asks, frowning at me.

"Why did I what?"

"Get off the plane with me?"

I glare at her. "Is that your way of saying thank you?"

"Oh, God, we're doing this thing again, huh? The noble St. Tom sacrificing everything he holds dear to do the right thing by the hot mess? I'm *fine*, Tom. I've always been fine, I don't need you swooping in to save me."

"Give me a break, Katie," I snap, my temper near the breaking point. "Just a couple hours ago you were in the hospital, and if it weren't for me, you'd either still be there or be passed out on your bed at home, possibly never to wake up again."

"Don't sound so hopeful." She looks away, then back at me again. "Thank you," she says with clear reluctance. "For getting off the plane."

I lift an eyebrow. “That’s a start. Now how about an apology? For making us miss the flight?”

Her mouth sets in a stubborn line. “I’ll make it up to you,” she says, which is probably as close as she’ll get to an apology. They’ve never been her specialty.

I snort. “How?”

She puts a hand on her hip, nails tapping as she thinks. “Well, first I have to go pee. But when I get back, I’ll find a new way to get us to Chicago. I’m sure we can get a couple tickets on the train.”

“The *train*,” I repeat, incredulous. “What, are all the stagecoaches full?”

“Mock all you want, but train travel is making a comeback. I read it in the *New Yorker*.”

“Oh, well, if the *New Yorker* said so . . .”

Katherine throws up her hands. “Well, fine, Tom. Let’s hear your better suggestion. Maybe you can give the North Pole a call, see if you can hitch a ride with Santa since I’m sure you’ve made certain you’re on the nice list.”

“You know what? That might be an actual possibility because, at this rate, it’s looking like I won’t get home until Christmas Eve.”

I try very hard not to think about what that means for my plans for the ring in my bag. And the answer I’ll receive from its intended recipient.

“I’m not getting on a train,” I say, feeling ornery. “It’s not 1906.”

“Tell that to your haircut,” Katherine says over her shoulder, already walking to the bathroom.

I inhale through my nose. You know what? She was right to call me St. Tom. There is no way someone should have to endure the company of Katherine Tate and not be canonized.

I turn my attention back to my phone. I’m tempted to take the easy way out, to simply text Lo that I missed my flight. *Again*. And to fudge the truth on why I missed my flight. *Again*.

I’m not proud of the urge, but it’s there.

Instead I take a deep breath and tell myself to man up and tell her face-to-face, even if it has to be through a screen. She deserves that much. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with Lolo, and I'm determined to get the whole marriage thing right this time. We can't start it with lies and half truths.

I head to a different gate to make the FaceTime so Katherine doesn't come back from the bathroom midchat.

I may have mustered the courage to tell my soon-to-be fiancée about Katherine, but I'm not quite ready to tell Katherine about Lolo. Which, I know, is probably a little bit backward, but I don't have the energy to ruminate on the why right now.

Lolo answers after a couple rings, her smile bright and happy.

Behind her head are my baseball posters from high school. That she's taking this call from my room should give me some semblance of comfort. My future wife in my childhood home, getting to know my family at Christmas . . . it's the Norman Rockwell life I want for myself.

So, what's with the knee-jerk unease I feel? The inescapable feeling that something is wrong with the picture.

Of course something is wrong with the picture, I remind myself. *I'm supposed to be there.*

"Hey, babe!" Lolo says. "I didn't think I'd hear from you until after the plane landed."

Her smile slips a little. "It's not canceled, is it? The storm is all over the news."

"No. No." I scratch my cheek. "The flight took off on time."

"Then why . . . Wait, what do you mean?"

To her credit, Lolo still looks calm, even given the implication of me still being in the airport, my flight already departed.

Because Lo's always calm. It's how she is. And actually, it's that sort of serene sweetness that drew me to her in the first place. Her blond hair is never out of place; her eyes always seem patient; she rarely raises her voice.

If being in Katherine's company feels like being tossed into shark-infested waters during a hurricane, Lolo is like a placid pond in comparison, without so much as a ripple.

Even when I have to drop news such as . . .

"I missed the flight, Lo." I take a deep breath. "Actually. There's more to it than that."

"Okay," she says slowly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "What's going on?"

I wish I even knew . . .

"So, okay. You remember I told you about Katherine?"

Lolo shakes her head in confusion. "No. Katherine? Wait. Wait. Your ex-wife, Katherine?"

A little less calm now, but just a touch.

"That's the one. She was sort of in an accident."

"Oh my gosh! Is she okay?"

"Depends on your definition of okay," I mutter. "She's fine. Well, no, not really. She has a concussion and can't be left alone."

Lolo blinks. "And so . . . you're staying with her? In New York?"

"No! God, no, of course not. I'm just . . . bringing her with me. To Chicago."

Lolo is silent for several seconds. "Wait, so . . . you're bringing your ex-wife . . . here? For Christmas?"

It's apparently too much for even the serene Lolo to bear completely stoically because her eyes have gone wide.

"She's pretty banged up, Lo," I say, trying to appeal to my girlfriend's empathy, even as out of the corner of my eye, I see Katherine prowling around, talking on her cell phone.

Katherine looks more like a ticked-off dictator than a fragile butterfly, and for an uncharitable moment, I wonder if my St. Tom agenda is going too far . . . if Katherine would be just fine spending Christmas alone in New

York, where she belongs. So that I can get to Lolo in Chicago, where *I* belong.

Katherine spots me across the terminal, points at her phone, then gives me a thumbs-up, followed by some motion that I'm pretty sure is supposed to resemble riding on a train, but mostly looks like she's being humped. Or rather, doing the humping.

A laugh slips out, and I quickly stifle it and shift my attention back to Lolo.

"I'll explain everything when I get there," I say. "And I *will* get there. And when I do, I can foist Katherine off on Meredith," I say, referring to my sister. "She and Katherine always hit it off."

I say it to reassure Lolo. To let her know that she'll have my full attention from the moment I arrive at my parents', but as soon as the words are out, I realize I've made a misstep and inadvertently reminded her that Katherine knew my family first. That Lolo's not the only woman I've brought to meet the Walsh clan.

Something flickers in Lolo's gaze that confirms my fear. "You okay?"

She gives me a wry smile. "Well, considering that my boyfriend's just told me he's bringing his ex-wife home for the holidays . . ."

"Right." I let out a laugh. "So, not okay."

"No, I'm . . ." She bites her lip. "I'll have to think on that one. But it's just . . . Has your family said anything about me? Since I've been here?"

"Well . . . no," I admit. "But I hadn't heard much from you either. I figured you guys were all busy getting to know each other."

"We are," she says in a rush. "I've been making a point to try to get to know each of them individually, as well as observe how they are in a group so that I can figure out how to fit in, but . . . I'm just not sure they like me?"

"Babe. They like you. They love you."

She smiles, though it seems a little forced. "You're right. I'm sure I'm just overthinking it. I'm just really excited for you to get here."

“Believe me. Not as excited as I am.”

“Yeah, you’ve had quite a day.” Lolo fiddles with her earlobe. “Tom, I love that you’re helping someone who needs it. But doesn’t she have family who can help her? Or friends? I mean, why did you even get notified? You haven’t talked to her in years. Right?”

“Right, absolutely not,” I reassure her. “As far as why they called me, the accident happened right outside her office. I guess she forgot to update her emergency contact info at work.”

“She *forgot*,” Lolo repeats. She doesn’t add air quotes around *forgot*, but the emphasis is clear.

“Yeah, well, you’ve never met Katherine. Let’s just say managing her interpersonal life has never been high up on her to-do list.”

“I still don’t get why she can’t call a friend.”

“All of her friends are gone for the holidays. Lucky bastards managed to get out of town before the accident.”

“What about her family?”

My gaze shifts to Katherine. She’s ended her call and sat down. I watch as she pulls out two pill bottles, scowling down at the labels before taking one of each with a swig from her water bottle. Her eyes close, and she presses a clenched fist to her forehead. She looks a lot less like a dictator now and more like a woman whose cab was T-boned a few hours ago.

“No family,” I say, my voice quieter now. “Look, Lo, I know this sucks. I’ll make it up to you, I promise, but I’ve got to get going if I’m going to catch the train.”

“The *train*? How long will that take?”

Too long. Forever.

“The rest of the flights are all canceled due to the weather,” I explain.

Katherine looks my way, tapping impatiently on her watch and looking like, well, *Katherine* again.

“I’ve gotta run, babe. I’m really sorry. I know this sucks.” *Shit. I’m*

repeating myself now. “But come Christmas Eve, I promise, I’ll make it up to you.”

She perks up like I knew she would. “Christmas Eve, huh? Got something special planned?”

“I think you’re going to like it,” I say, a little bit on autopilot, as I think of the ring in my bag. “Actually, I know you will.”

“I’m excited. I can’t wait to see you,” Lolo adds, clearly mollified. “And by the way, not every man would do what you’re doing. Katherine’s really lucky to have you.”

Katherine catches my eye and mouths, *Wrap it up, dumbass, or I’m leaving without you.*

“Be sure and tell that to Katherine when you meet her,” I tell Lolo. “I think she needs the reminder.”

EIGHTEEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 4:31 p.m.

Things *not* on my agenda for the holidays:

Sitting on a hard, sticky chair in a New Jersey train station . . .

In the middle of a freaking blizzard . . .

On my way to Chicago . . .

With my ex-husband in tow.

Now, to be totally fair, I suppose *I'm* technically the one in tow since I'm crashing his plans. But that's just semantics. The end result is the same for both of us: misery.

That's not to say I don't feel a little guilty about our current situation.

Okay, fine.

A lot guilty. Especially when Tom shifts in his seat, lifts his loafer, and finds a huge wad of pink gum stuck to the sole.

He must be too beaten down by our whole journey, though, because instead of freaking out, he merely lets out a tired sigh and attempts to scrape it off on a cleaner part of the floor.

I feel for him, but I also can't stop a little smile from sneaking onto my face. This is a fitting addition to our day, given that our first meeting involved gum on a shoe, though not Tom's. Not mine either.

I'd just finished taking a big client to a celebratory dinner when I stepped out of the restaurant and saw *him*. My perfect man. Blond, a decade or so older than me. Not terribly tall, but tall enough. Attractive, but not handsome. Tweed elbows on his blazer—I love that. Everything about him screamed biddable, pleasant companion. The sort of man who would happily sit in silence and read the newspaper by your side over Grape-Nuts and blueberries every morning for the rest of your life.

I was just about to manufacture a way to approach when the universe helped me out in the form of a fat wad of pink gum on the sidewalk, which the man's tasseled loafer made direct contact with.

Luckily for all, I'm great in a crisis. I whipped out my business card, lifted his foot before he even knew what had happened, and started scraping. But gum is serious business, one that my dad taught me is best handled with peanut butter.

Which, clearly, should not be called *peanut* anything. A point I made to a man passing by as I cradled my dream guy's foot in my crotch.

The other man—the passerby—he was too tall. Too handsome. Who did not find my explanation of legumes endearing. And who, upon first impression, didn't strike me as being biddable at all.

I was right about that. Something I learned when I married him.

And divorced him.

Well, he divorced me. Again, semantics.

Tom glances my way. "You got one of your business cards in your purse?"

"Always," I say. "Why? You need a lawyer?"

He nods toward the gum on his foot.

Right. That. I hand over a card. "That gum's not going anywhere without some legume butter, but have at it."

He smiles to himself. "Hot legumes."

I blink. "What?"

Tom shakes his head. “Nothing.”

Hmm. Maybe it was endearing after all.

He studies my card for a moment, then looks over. “Kaplan, Gosset, *Tate & Associates*. Feeling pretty confident, are we?”

I bite my lip and avoid his gaze. I almost forgot about that. Irene had the new business cards printed as an early Christmas gift. She’s been big into manifestation lately, and she insisted that the best way to ensure something happened was to act as though it was a foregone conclusion.

“Hey.” Tom nudges my shoulder with his. “Harry will call. But it’s not Christmas yet.”

Now I do look over. “You remember? That stupid thing?”

“That Harry always makes a big deal of calling at Christmas to announce partner? Sure.” He begins scraping at the gum.

“He’s tweaked the routine a bit,” I explain. “A few years ago, he randomly made the call a few days before Christmas. Last year it was on the twenty-third.”

“Ah.” Tom has better luck with the gum than I expected and tosses my business card, now topped with a glob of pink gum, into the nearby trash. “Hence the extra-intense obsession with your phone today.”

I shrug.

“For what it’s worth, I think you should have gotten that call many Christmases ago.”

I give him a sidelong glance. “Is that . . . a compliment?”

“More like a gripe at the universe. If they’d hurried this whole thing along, things would be different right now.”

Meaning . . . we’d still be married? I can’t help but wonder.

“For example,” he continues, extending his legs out in front of him, crossing his hands over his flat stomach. “If you hadn’t been so damn obsessed with your phone, I’d probably be approaching my descent into Chicago right now.”

“I’m not obsessed with my phone,” I say, though my heart’s not in the ancient argument.

He snorts. “Please. It’s always been like an extra limb, but getting kicked off a plane rather than put the damn thing away? That’s next level, Katie.”

“Okay, you *know* the phones don’t actually crash planes, right? I’m ninety percent sure that’s an urban legend,” I inform him.

“Oh, well, if you’re ninety percent sure, we should definitely let the FAA know.”

I try to muster up a comeback, but I feel distracted. He glances over. “You think this is the year? You get the call?”

“Yes, though . . .” I swallow. “I think that every year. I just . . . I don’t know what I’ve done wrong.”

“Nothing,” Tom says with a lack of hesitation that makes me feel a little warm that he has such faith in me. “You’re a good lawyer.”

I arch a brow. “Compliments?”

He shrugs. “You’re a good lawyer. You know that. But I meant more that you should be partner because I’ve never seen anyone want *anything* as badly as you wanted that.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I say, meeting his gaze. “You had things you wanted.”

“Not as single-mindedly as that.”

Really? I want to argue. *Because the divorce papers you served me said otherwise.*

Because, despite his protests, I wasn’t the only one who was hyperfocused on personal goals during our marriage. And at least I was upfront about mine. Tom knew when he married me that I wanted to make partner.

And he knew why. Knew how much it meant to me to check off that achievement for my dad.

But Tom’s dreams and goals? Those snuck up on me. Maybe on both of

us. I don't think Tom even realized how badly he wanted to be married to a sweet-natured wife who would make roast chicken every Sunday, bear babies, and move to the burbs until it became clear that I was not that wife.

At least not *then*. I had things to do first.

But damn it. I do like roast chicken. I wanted babies. I maybe even could have gotten on board with the whole house-and-yard thing.

If only he could have just *waited* . . .

Whatever. Bygones, water under the bridge, etc.

Or maybe not, because this little detour down memory lane has me curious about how things have been working out for Tom. If his goals have eluded him like mine have me.

I shift a little so I can study him. "Speaking of things we want. How's your spreadsheet?"

He grimaces and doesn't pretend not to know *which* spreadsheet. "I never should have shown you that."

"Correction. You should have shown it to me sooner. Like, *before* I said my vows?"

Tom sucks in his cheeks. "You're probably right." He looks over. "Would it have changed things?"

"You mean, would I not have married you if I'd known before the wedding that you had your entire life planned out in rows and columns?"

He holds my gaze, as though my response matters. "Would you have?"

I think on this a minute, then lift a shoulder. "I never minded the spreadsheet. I admired it, actually. I like a good action plan as much as the next person. I guess I just wish . . ."

"Yeah?" He's watching me carefully, and I try not to squirm.

"I wish I'd have seen the details of your dream life earlier. To know that I didn't belong on the spreadsheet."

Tom sighs. "Katherine . . ."

"Come on, Tom." I keep my voice as light as I can. "We both know I was

never what you were looking for.”

He looks straight ahead and is silent for a moment. “No,” he replies finally. “I guess you weren’t.”

I try not to let it hurt, but the pain seeps in anyway. I know I’m not the most lovable person on the planet, but it still stings to hear so clearly that I was somebody’s *whoops*.

Despite what Tom thinks, I had desires beyond just making partner. Divorce wasn’t one of them.

“So, are you back on track?” I ask, even as I hate myself for asking.

“What do you mean?”

“With your spreadsheet,” I explain. “Have you put a down payment on a home with a tree house in the backyard, getting ready to plant babies in a woman who makes your favorite blueberry muffins rather than merely picks them up from Levain?”

He looks back at me. “I used to love when you picked up muffins from Levain.”

“That’s not an answer,” I say, even as I sort of hate myself for pushing the topic. If Tom has found what—*who*—he’s looking for, do I really want to know?

He sighs tiredly. “I hate when you do that thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing where you try to spin our history. Where you let yourself pretend I’m a *Mad Men*–era chauvinist who wanted you to quit your job. All to distract yourself from your own emotional deficiencies.”

“*Ouch*,” I say, meaning it a little. It’s harsh, even for him.

“Sorry,” he mutters, checking his watch. “This whole day is just . . .”

“Not on the spreadsheet?” I smile, both to hide my pain as well as to ease at least some of the tension between us before we have to sit side by side on a train for a billion hours.

“Right. Not on the spreadsheet,” he says with a smile, though it doesn’t

reach his eyes.

The rumble of the approaching train captures his attention, and I exhale in relief that my darkest secret remains safely hidden:

That I *want* a place on his spreadsheet. I always did.

NINETEEN
TOM

December 23, 4:39 p.m.

The train smells like a deli. I give the cuff of my suit jacket a little sniff. Damn it. It's me. *I* smell like a deli.

"What's going on with you?" Katherine asks, not looking up from her phone. Always with that damn phone.

"I got ham juice on my suit. I love this suit." I try not to flinch at the churlish note in my voice, but *God*. Everything about this day is grating on my last nerve.

She's grating on my last nerve.

"Ham doesn't have juice," Katherine says calmly.

"Wanna bet?" I shove my wrist beneath her nose. "Sniff. Ham juice."

The passenger beside us is watching our interaction, half-disgusted, half-annoyed. I can't blame him. My maturity seems to be in an ever-downward spiral the more time I spend with my ex.

Though, for once, it's not entirely on Katherine. It's my own guilt eating at me. Our conversation on the platform was the perfect opportunity to tell her about Lolo, and I just . . . couldn't.

I'm not even sure why I didn't. To protect Katherine's feelings? She barely has those.

And she's going to find out about Lolo when we get to Chicago anyway. You know. When they *meet*.

For the first time, it's dawning on me the magnitude of the mess I'm in. With one crisis after another, I haven't really let myself think of what happens when we get to my parents' house. I told Lo I can foist Katherine off on my sister, and that's true.

I also would not be the least bit surprised if my mother insisted on making Katherine some homemade soup and then set up a schedule to ensure one of the Walshes stays with her every second. And she'll do it as much for my sake as she will Katherine's. To give me time with Lolo.

To ensure Katherine can't interfere with my proposal.

Which is the real thorn in this whole mess. It's not just that Katherine will be at my family's place for Christmas. I'm enough of an adult to be able to handle that.

It's that my ex-wife will be in the same house where I'm proposing to my new wife.

It's horrifying and wrong. On every level. From every person's perspective.

I could warn her. I *should* warn her.

But I can't stop seeing the hurt she tried to hide when we talked about her not being on the spreadsheet. That damn spreadsheet. A stupid thing I put together when I graduated from college and thought I could approach adult life the same way I had my econ major. As though life was something that could be aced with the proper study schedule.

One does not ace life. Or at least I'm not acing it. Case in point . . . I sniff my sleeve again. Still hammy.

Katherine shakes her head. "It's your own fault. I told you not to risk it with a premade sandwich at the station. The refrigeration unit at that place wasn't up to snuff."

"Oh, so now, in addition to knowing how planes work, you're a

refrigeration expert?” My mention of planes makes me even grumpier. “You know, if it weren’t for you, I’d have had a first-class meal at thirty thousand, not a sketchy sandwich doing flips in my large intestine.”

Katherine scoffs. “Looking forward to that sweet, sweet airline food, were you?”

“At least they wouldn’t have served ham.”

“Oh my God. Still with the ham?”

Yes. Still with the ham because I’d rather obsess over that than risk a trip down memory lane that seems to beckon a little bit more every moment I spend in Katherine’s company.

And you know? The more I think about it? I think Katherine was right. The refrigeration unit in the train station *didn’t* feel all that cold. And I was hungry enough that it tasted fine at the time, but now I’ve got a distinctly tangy taste in my mouth. I make a slight smacking noise. Yep. Definite funk.

“Okay,” Katherine mutters, beginning to dig in her purse. “We are not doing *that* the whole way.”

She comes up with a little container of mints, dumps a few in her hand, and shoves three in my mouth. I scowl at her, appreciating the thought but not the execution.

The mint helps with the hammy aftertaste but not my mood. I know what I *should* be doing. Returning Lolo’s fleet of messages. The fact that I haven’t makes me feel like a coward, but it has less to do with lack of courage and more . . .

Lack of anything to say.

I’ve never had a problem talking with my girlfriend in the past. She’s easy to talk to, mostly because we talk about the easy stuff. She doesn’t like to talk about politics, so we don’t. She likes to separate work life and home life, so we don’t talk about our careers, which, believe me, is a welcome change from my marriage. Actually, the only thing Lolo is ever adamant about is that she doesn’t like to fight.

If there's ever a girlfriend who will be understanding about the current situation, it's her, and yet the more time I spend with the termagant beside me, the harder it is to focus on anyone or anything but her.

Katherine's always been like that, drawing all my energy toward her without even trying. She *never* tried. In fact, times like now, I'm pretty sure she'd like nothing more than to have me never think about her again.

And yet.

Here we are.

I glance over at her. "So, before you decided to play it fast and loose with your seat belt in the back of a cab, what were your Christmas plans?"

The man to our left is clearly annoyed at me now, and Katherine is, for once, perceptive enough to notice this because she leans over and whispers, "This is the quiet car. Don't you have something to read?"

"Nothing consuming enough to keep my mind off the musty ham currently on the express train through my colon. Only bickering with you can do that."

The man can't take it anymore, and he leans across the aisle. "Sir. It's as the lady said, this is the quiet car."

He points to the sign above my head to punctuate his point.

I do my best to summon Charming Tom and paste a conciliatory smile on my face. "Sorry," I mouth silently.

He nods stiffly, appeased.

I close my eyes and lean my head back, trying to tame my racing thoughts. Though they're the only thing that's racing. The train still hasn't moved, though nobody's bothered to explain why.

I try to focus my thoughts on the upcoming Christmas Eve, on my proposal. Just this morning, the script of how I was going to pop the question was perfectly clear in my head, but now I can't seem to remember a single word of it.

I open my eyes again and look at Katherine. "Can I have another mint?"

This time it's the lady in front of us who turns around, disapproving frown firmly in place, and lifts a finger to her lips, librarian style. "*Shhhhhh!*"

Katherine is smirking, clearly pleased not to be the object of society's ire for once. She hands me the entire box of mints, and I try to tap a few into my hand.

They don't come out, and I shake it harder, rattling all the mints, the noise earning me a new set of glares from my fellow passengers.

I give up on the mints and instead pull my bag out from under the seat in front of me. I reach inside, feeling around in the zipped interior pocket. I hope feeling the sturdy yet delicate ring box will center me. Focus me.

It doesn't.

I flip the top open, careful not to let Katherine see the contents. The enormous diamond winks at me. That, too, fails to settle my nerves. I shut the box with a silent click, then fold over the flap of my messenger-style briefcase back into place.

I slide the buckle into the clasp, and it snaps with what I think is the tiniest of tiny clicks.

At least a half-dozen heads whip toward me, and there's a chorus of irritated *shhhhs*.

Katherine is watching this with an all-out grin on her face now, delighted at my atypical lack of popularity. "Actually," she leans toward me. "Now that I think about it. You *do* smell like ham."

She says this in her normal voice, not even an attempt at a whisper. But nobody on the damn train says a word.

I feel like I'm in an episode of *The Twilight Zone* where everyone has it out for me. Or one of those hidden-camera, practical-joke shows. Actually . . . I lean into the aisle and look for a camera toward the back, just in case.

My timing is horrendous, and instead of finding a hidden camera, I come face-to-face with a woman's crotch as she makes her way down the aisle at

the exact time I turn.

She makes a horrified noise, and I immediately apologize profusely. You can imagine how well that goes over with the crowd.

I turn back to Katherine, expecting to see her gloating. She's asleep.

Nope. Can't have that. Not letting her sleep is half the reason I got into this mess in the first place. I nudge her shoulder. Nothing. Setting a hand on her arm, I give her a little shake, and she waves me off.

"Katherine," I whisper. "Wake up."

"Go away," she mutters in her usual voice, but again, nobody even looks at her, much less scolds her. Clearly, this train is operating in an alternate universe in which everything is backward.

I'm the likable one.

She's . . . Katherine.

I am not enjoying this role reversal.

I give her cheek a tiny flick gentle enough not to hurt, sharp enough to have her eyes flying open in outrage.

"I know you're tired," I say because I feel exhausted myself. "But we've got a few more hours before you can go to sleep."

"Right," she says wearily, lifting a hand toward her head and flinching when her fingers brush over the spot that clearly still hurts.

"You can sleep soon," I whisper, feeling an unavoidable surge of sympathy. "I promise."

She makes a quiet grumbling sound but nods.

I close my eyes for a second, then give her a sheepish smile. "I don't suppose it would be fair if *I* slept?"

She spares me only a brief, withering glare, but a moment later I hear a weird puffing noise and look over to see Katherine blowing up that stupid inflatable pillow from the airplane.

She hands it over with a smile. "Here. I'll wake you when we get to our stop."

“Thanks,” I say in genuine surprise, and I kid you not, everyone on the train turns to glare at me.

I shake my head in bemusement and tuck the pillow around my neck. In what universe does everyone seem to prefer spiky Katherine to likable Tom?

An even more vexing realization is quick to follow:

I like Katherine’s spikes.

A lot.

I always did.

TWENTY
KATHERINE

December 23, 9:39 p.m.

“Hey, Flo-Jo. You think you could slow down a bit?” I call to Tom, who is hurtling himself through the Buffalo train station at what feels like a near run.

He gives me an incredulous look over his shoulder. “Flo-Jo? Did you seriously just compare me to a female track star from the eighties? And I told you not to wear your stupid high heels for once.”

“Okay, you *know* stilettos are an essential part of my personal brand. And it’s not the Jimmy Choos making it hard to keep up with you so much as the *concussion*.”

Tom slows his pace immediately.

“Thank you,” I say, shoving away the guilt at my teeny-tiny fib. The headache isn’t all that bad right now. The blister on my heel, on the other hand . . .

He grunts in response to my gratitude.

I look up at him as I fall into step beside his more manageable pace. “I don’t know why you’re so grumpy. Those nice people on the train could just not have *been* any more pleasant.”

“You don’t know why I’m grumpy?” he asks as we descend an escalator to the platform where we’ll catch our connecting train. “Really?”

“Can you believe that man on the train recognized me from the news?” I say, smiling at the memory. “I *told* you that Jacobsen case would put me on the map. Do you remember when I told you that?”

“Yeah, Katherine,” Tom says, his tone sharp as we step off the escalator again. “I remember. I remember that we were at dinner at Boulud. I was trying to tell you that we hadn’t seen each other for more than five minutes in two weeks because you were always working, but couldn’t fit it in around your brush-with-fame story. When I finally *did* manage to tell you what I was feeling, you asked the server for a box of tissues. For me.”

My smile falls off my face. I’ve been in a surprisingly good mood given the day I’ve had, but it definitely falters as I hear Tom’s version of that long-ago night.

I don’t remember it *quite* like that, but I also can’t claim that he’s wrong.

I’m sure I owe him an apology. Not just for that night. For a million nights, and that’s the crux of the problem. Not any one mistake, but the sheer quantity of them. If I open that can of worms, if I go looking into the well of wrongs on *both* our sides, I’m not sure either of us will ever climb out.

Instead, I force a smile back on my face. “I still can’t believe that guy asked for my autograph. I think that’s a first.”

Tom squints. “Is *that* what happened? Because the way I remember it, you pulled a wadded-up Starbucks napkin out of your purse, scribbled your name on it, and shoved it at him. He seemed visibly startled and a little grossed out.”

Usually Tom’s zippy little retorts fill me with a puzzling combination of annoyance and delight. This time, however, his mention of my purse causes a rush of soul-shattering panic.

An icy blast that has nothing to do with the blizzard rushes through my veins as I stop in my tracks.

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” I futilely run my hands over my person as though it will magically conjure up the handbag I already know isn’t there.

How could this happen? I, like most women, consider my purse an extension of my person. One does not forget it any more than one forgets their own arm.

And yet . . . I have forgotten it.

Tom is staring up at the screen, oblivious to my panic. “They switched our platform. We’ve got to get all the way over to eleven. Let’s get a move on, Tate.”

I will get a move on, but not in the direction he wants.

“I forgot my purse,” I say, and the panic in my voice finally cuts through because his head whips toward me.

“I’ve got to go back,” I say, already moving in the direction we came from.

Tom’s mouth drops open. “Go *back*? Don’t be ridiculous. That train is long gone. This one will be too if we don’t get to platform eleven now.”

I shake my head, still moving backward.

“Katherine.” His exasperation is clear. “I’ll buy you a new purse. Five of them.”

“It’s not about the purse,” I call back. “My *phone* is in that bag.”

Tom’s jaw clenches, and I can read his every thought.

Well, just the one thought, really: *Katherine and her damned phone*.

If there was such a thing as, say, a symbol of our divorce? It would be my phone. Nearly every argument we had in that final year of our doomed marriage had to do with my phone.

Specifically, my attachment to it.

I’m embarrassed by how many nights I had to be asked to put it away at the restaurant so that he and I could actually have a conversation.

I’m downright horrified to remember how many times I failed the challenge.

“This is different,” I say, a plea in my voice. “It’s truly important this time.”

Tom's expression doesn't soften. He's heard it before. He's heard it all before.

But this time is different. I know in my gut that this is the year I've been waiting for, that the call I'm waiting for will come.

I need that call. I need that call so that I can check off "making partner." So that I can finally, finally close that chapter.

"Just . . . hold the train for me. Please."

I start to run as best I can with my injuries, but I stop when Tom calls out, "Katherine! Don't."

I swallow, surprised to realize that I feel genuinely torn, as though there's more at stake here than a phone.

I start to run. Away from Tom.

"Katherine!" he calls again, clearly furious. "I *will* leave without you."

The words don't land the punch he probably intends.

Tom already left me.

Years ago.

TWENTY-ONE
TOM

December 23, 9:44 p.m.

Hold it for her.

Only Katherine Tate and long-dead monarchs would be self-deluded enough to think they warrant holding up an entire train because they forgot their phone.

“Excuse me, Mr. Conductor?” I mutter under my breath as I hover in the train’s doorway, waiting for my infuriating ex-wife to come to her senses and make it to the platform in time. “Can we hold the train while a crazy, concussed woman looks for her long-departed purse? No problem? Thanks so much, we knew you’d say that . . .”

A woman trying to board gives me a wary look, and I smile, shifting to the side so she can get on the train. “Happy holidays.”

“Okay,” she says stiffly, and I start to ask myself who the hell responds to “happy holidays” like that until I remember that Katherine responds that way.

Katherine, who I will strangle if she ever shows up . . .

My phone buzzes, and in my haste to see if it’s from Katherine, I almost drop it.

Not Katherine. Lo.

Hey Babe! Elbow-deep in flour making Christmas cookies with the fam!

Wish you were here!

She sends me a selfie of her and my sister. Lo's hair is pulled into a high, perfect ponytail, and sure enough, there's flour everywhere. Her smile is bright, Meredith's just slightly less so, which tells me whose idea the selfie was.

I can't . . . I can't deal with any of that right now. Right now, my focus needs to be on getting to Lolo.

To end this nightmare.

I slip my phone back in my pocket and start to reclaim my post with one foot on the train, one off, when an Amtrak employee beats me to it. "You need a hand with your bag? We're about to depart."

"No, I'm good. It's just . . . can you give me two minutes? My friend . . ."

He walks away before I can finish the asinine request, and I sigh. Yeah, that's fair.

"Damn it, Katherine," I mutter as I scan the platform once more, but there is, of course, no sign of an aggravating tall brunette, either with a purse or without.

The conductor's voice comes on over the intercom. "Next stop, Cleveland."

The picture of Lolo's face in my messages looms brightly, like a beacon calling me home.

Sorry, Katherine. I did my best, but this is as far as we go.

With one last backward glance, I board the train. Alone.

TWENTY-TWO
KATHERINE

December 23, 9:48 p.m.

You know in cheesy action movies, where they do something fancy with the sound so all you can hear is the sound of the hero's heavy breathing during a vital plot moment?

It's like that.

All I can hear is my panting breath and the pounding of my heart as I hurl myself toward platform eleven as fast as my stilettos will carry me.

Oh yeah, and purse flaps at my side, my phone clasped where it belongs, firmly in my palm. Because apparently, Christmas miracles happen even to the Grinch, and the departing train was held up, and my new friends on the quiet car obligingly dangled my bag out the window for me.

Tom was wrong. I can't *wait* to tell him.

Finally, I make it to my destination, and for a second, I think I'm still in the movie sound warp because I hear nothing but my thudding heart.

After a moment, I realize I'm not hearing anything because . . .

There's nothing to hear.

No people. No trains. The platform is completely deserted.

I suck in gasping breaths, trying to get my breathing under control. When I do, I finally register another sound. A soft, brushing swish. I follow the

noise to the other side of a large concrete pillar, where a bored-looking janitor is sweeping up crumbs at the base of a trash can.

“Hello,” I say. “Where’s the train?”

He pauses his sweeping but only stares at me.

“Um . . .” I fish a wrinkled ticket out of my pocket. “Cleveland. Train eighty-one. Did they change the platform?”

The janitor resumes his sweeping. “Left.”

I point to my left. “That way?”

He shakes his head. “The train left.”

“*Left?* It can’t have left!”

Yeah, yeah. I hear the diva, but after the day I’ve had, I really thought there was a decent chance of the universe throwing me a bone.

He shrugs and goes back to his sweeping.

I have an almost uncontrollable urge to burst into tears, something I didn’t do even as a child.

But then, as a child, I didn’t have to endure a day like this one, where I’ve had my head bashed, my bra cut off, my back stitched up, all of which forced me to reunite with my ex-husband due to faulty paperwork.

Oh yeah, and as a child, I wasn’t kicked off a plane or ditched in a Buffalo train station in the middle of a blizzard.

The real kicker? It’s all my fault. Every last drop of *horrible* that’s happened today? All on me.

I glance down at the phone in my hand, and for the first time in my life, I really, truly ask myself:

Is it worth it?

This obsessive fixation on making partner . . . where has it gotten me, exactly?

And can I even still claim I’m doing it for Dad? Yes, the goal started as a way of honoring his last wish, but somewhere along the way, I’m afraid I crossed a line into far, far more selfish territory.

“You haven’t by chance seen a man lurking around, have you?” I ask the janitor in last-ditch desperation as I slip my phone into the outer pocket of my purse. “Tall, dark-haired? Good-looking, though not as much as he imagines himself to be? Smells a bit like ego and ham?”

The janitor shakes his head, then walks away, clearly having reached his limit with my nonsense.

Just like Tom, apparently.

I feel . . . I don’t know what I feel.

I can’t blame Tom. I *don’t* blame him. He told me he would leave without me, and he had every right to. I’ve already made him miss a plane; to think he’d give up his last chance of getting home for me a second time is, well . . . unfathomable.

And unfair that I’d even expect it of him.

But knowing all of this, understanding the situation from the logical, rational place that is usually my sweet spot . . .

It doesn’t stop the pain from rolling over me. Pain that has nothing to do with my concussion or the stitches on my back, which I’m pretty sure I ripped loose in my futile attempt to catch the train to Cleveland.

But my aching head and the searing pain in my back don’t hold a candle to the ache in my chest.

With an agonized sigh, I drop heavily onto a hard bench. My purse slips off my shoulder and drops to the ground, my phone slipping out of the exterior pocket and skidding a good foot across the concrete.

I don’t move a muscle to retrieve it. I’ve just risked *everything* for that damn thing, and yet somehow, now I can’t seem to muster the motivation to pick it up.

Instead I sit there. Aching from the inside out. Glaring at my phone.

Hating it.

Hating myself.

I lift my chin upward, wishing I could see the sky instead of concrete.

Wishing I could see my dad. Talk to him. Have him remind me that it'll all be worth it once I make partner.

It's what I always do when I get discouraged with the course of my life, when loneliness nips at my heels. I remember Dad and how proud he'd be—will be, from wherever he is—once I fulfill that deathbed vision.

But now, whether it's because I can't see the heavens or because of all that's happened today, I find myself wondering:

Would Dad have wanted *this*?

Would he want me to be sitting here alone on a bench in a blizzard? Would he want me to be thirty-six and divorced? Would he want me to dread every moment of the Christmas season?

I wish I could ask him if it will be worth it. All the hard work. The sacrifices and losses.

Just the one loss, mostly.

I feel an unfamiliar burning sensation in my eyes, a tingling, prickling feeling I *hate*. I quickly slam them shut before the tears can escape.

"It would serve you right, you know," a low voice says from behind me. "If you were to fall asleep here, with no one to wake you up."

My eyes pop back open again, and though my vision is blurry with the unshed tears, I know the voice. That horrible, *wonderful* voice.

I lift my face toward Tom as he comes around the bench to glare down at me. His expression is frustrated and stormy, understandingly so. Though when my eyes make it all the way to his, he blinks in surprise at what he sees.

I know he knows how close I've just come to crying, and that he doesn't mention it is the kindest thing he's done all day. Considering what he's sacrificed, that's saying something.

"I thought you'd left," I whisper.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Thought about it. Changed my mind, for some unfounded reason. Then damn near broke my neck jumping off a moving train."

For me. He doesn't add it, but I feel it. Know it. Tom jumped off a train. For me. Just like he came to the hospital for me. Got off a plane. For me.

Because he's St. Tom?

Or because of something else?

I so desperately want to ask, but I quickly wipe away my tears and say the expected thing instead.

"It's a bummer you bungled it. The neck breaking, I mean." I frown. "Wait. I'm not your emergency contact, am I?"

He lets out a genuine laugh. "No. God, no."

I smile. "Yeah. Then bummer you bungled it."

Tom lets out a defeated sigh and drops down onto the bench beside me. His shoulder presses against mine, but he makes no effort to move away.

Neither do I.

"Katherine?"

"Yeah."

"I hate you," he says without heat.

I smile a little and can't resist saying, "And yet, you jumped out of a train for me."

I await his comeback, but when he gives none, I glance over at him, surprised to see his expression serious, though no longer angry.

"Well, here's the thing, Kates," he says after a moment, still not looking at me.

I quickly turn my head away and face forward, the old nickname leaving me a little vulnerable. A bit yearning. "Katie" he uses because he knows I don't like it. "Kates" is a different thing entirely. A name only he ever called me, a name that I'm not even sure he's fully aware of, but that simply slips out when his guard is down.

"What's the thing?" I nudge when he doesn't continue.

This time it's him who turns toward me. He waits patiently until I turn to look back at him. When I do, when our eyes meet, something shifts, the

moment suddenly filled with memories, but something else too. Something trickier.

“The thing is,” he says softly, “I wanted to leave you. I *meant* to leave you. But then I realized how well I know you. And I know that if I left you here to die of your stubbornness, you’d commit yourself fully to haunting me for the rest of my days.”

He smiles, and there’s something wistful about it as his gaze roams my face. “Hell, sometimes I think that fully alive, you’ve found a way to haunt me anyway.”

My lips part in surprise at the comment, about what it reveals, and I look quickly away, not wanting him to see how much his words affect me. How much *he* affects me.

“See, I don’t know about that,” I say, pursing my lips, considering. “Purgatory has always seemed a little wishy-washy for my personality. I think I’ll just take the express straight to heaven, thank you very much.”

“That’s cute. That you think you’ll be headed up north when it’s your time.”

“Though,” I continue thoughtfully, ignoring him, “if I *did* decide to stick around, make your life miserable as a specter, I would make a pretty hot ghost.”

Tom snorts. “You forget I’ve seen you before your coffee and date with your hair straightener. I don’t think they have those *or* your phone in the afterlife.”

A fresh flood of memories rushes back to me uninvited. I never really thought about it during our marriage, but in hindsight, mornings were always our time. We’re both early risers by nature, and that precious hour before my phone started exploding, and before his did too—though he likes to pretend that it didn’t—that hour was always just about us. Connecting.

“So. Now what?” I ask.

“I guess . . .” He checks his watch. “We see about getting a rental car.

Hopefully something with four-wheel drive to handle the snow.”

My eyes go wide. “You want to drive to Chicago? From here? In this weather?”

Fine, yes. I was wrong about the weather, and the meteorologists were right. Winter Storm Barry is, in fact, a total monster.

Tom tiredly runs a hand through his hair. “If you have a better plan, I can’t wait to hear it.”

“I do,” I snap. “Way better, thanks for asking. How about we get a couple of hotel rooms, book a flight first thing tomorrow, which will get us there before a car can . . .”

“Oh, brilliant! I’m so glad you’re here with these bright ideas, Katherine!”

My shoulders slump in defeat at the sarcastic bite of his words and what it means. “You already checked for flights, didn’t you?”

“I did. Last-minute tickets on Christmas Eve would have been a long shot even without all the canceled flights from the storm.”

“Well.” I bite my lip. “Well, what about first thing Christmas morning? The storm will have passed, and your family will understand—”

“No.” His voice is as harsh as I’ve heard it this entire trip. “I have to be there Christmas Eve.”

Tom stands abruptly, reaching for his suitcase. “That’s nonnegotiable.”

I stare after him, baffled. What in the *world* was that about? Tom likes Christmas Eve as much as normal people, but he’s never been a *weirdo* about it.

I narrow my gaze, suddenly very sure I’m missing something. Something that explains why he’s a little off, for reasons that have nothing to do with me.

Or at least not *just* me.

“Grab your precious phone and hurry the hell up,” Tom yells back at me. “I’m not waiting for you this time.”

Puzzled and a little disappointed at his sudden change in mood, I start to follow him. He pulls out his cell phone, his expression pensive as he reads whatever's there.

And then some of my smugness fades as it hits me:

Tom's been on his phone almost as much as I have during our little adventure.

Suddenly, my brain is desperate to know why.

Even as I'm pretty sure my heart won't like the answer.

TWENTY-THREE
TOM

December 23, 10:02 p.m.

For a long minute, Katherine and I stand side by side staring at the sign on the rental car counter.

Sorry, no more cars available.

She's silent for a moment, sharing in my shock. Then she opens her mouth, and before she can speak, I lift a warning finger. "Not. One. Word."

I need a moment. Need a moment to process the reality that I'm standing in Buffalo with my ex-wife instead of curled up on a couch in Chicago, stuffed full of Mom's pasta Bolognese with my soon-to-be future wife.

And that we're increasingly running out of transportation options to *get* to Chicago.

As usual, Katherine ignores my request for silence.

"At least this one doesn't say 'Happy holidays' at the bottom," she says in a voice that sounds way too chipper, given the situation. She gestures around at the neighboring rental car counters that all have variations of the same bad news. "I mean, that's just savage."

For once, I agree with her. It does seem cruel to deliver a blow to beleaguered travelers just before Christmas while simultaneously using the word *happy*.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and for a second, I fantasize about letting it go to voicemail because there are only two likely options of an incoming call at 10:00 p.m. on December 23: Lolo or my family.

Neither is going to be happy to hear this particular update.

With a sigh, I pull out my phone to face the music. I glance at the screen. Lolo. I swallow an unfounded surge of annoyance that it's a FaceTime. She and I have always been text message people, but I suppose it's fair that, given the circumstances, she'd want a more personal connection.

My phone continues its persistent buzz, and Katherine glances down at the screen. As has been the case all day, my instinct is to hide Lolo from Katherine—an instinct I still don't understand. But my reflexes are dulled by sheer weariness, and I don't move quickly enough.

Katherine sees Lolo's name. The smiling face. She has to.

But instead of asking the question I don't want to answer, my ex simply says, "Hold on. You need this."

I watch as she digs around in the outer pocket of her bag, pulling out her phone charger and dangling the cord in front of me.

"Oh." I'm surprised. "Thanks."

"Aren't you glad I went back for my purse now?" she says gleefully.

I give her a dark, well-deserved glare. Her smile only grows.

I grab the charger because she's right. I do need it. Other than a few minutes on the train that we actually managed to get on, I haven't charged my phone since this morning, and the battery's down to 12 percent.

Katherine points in the direction of uncomfortable-looking chairs along a wall. "Outlet on the left."

I give her a suspicious look. "Why are you being so helpful?"

"*Slightly* guilty conscience," she says, holding up her fingers to indicate a minuscule amount. "Don't worry. It'll pass soon."

"Uh-huh." By the time I sit in the chair and then scoot awkwardly down in the seat to accommodate the short length of the cord, I've missed the call. I

hit redial, and for a split second, I hope Lolo won't pick up.

She does, of course. First ring.

"Hey, you!" she says in her comforting, mellow voice. "How goes the journey?"

"Um." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "It doesn't?"

Her smile slips. "Oh no. What's going on?"

"Well . . . that's a long story."

"One you'll be able to tell me in person shortly though, right?" she asks teasingly, her smile back, if not as bright.

"Lo. I'm so sorry. I'm still in Buffalo, and I missed the last train of the night."

"Tom." It's more exhale than anything else.

"I know."

"But you'll still be here. For Christmas Eve?"

"I'll be there," I say with more confidence than I feel. "I swear to you. It may be the actual eve, but I'll be there."

I rest my hand atop the ring in my bag. *To propose.*

Why does that word feel so brittle?

Lolo tucks her hair behind her ear. "Okay. Okay. But . . . how?"

My gaze cuts across the room to Katherine, who's going from vacant rental car counter to rental car counter, rummaging around where she should absolutely not be, as though hoping to find a spare set of keys that the employees left behind.

For a moment, I'm glad that it's Katherine I'm stuck with. Not only is she quick-thinking in a crisis, but she has a blatant disregard for rules, social norms, and anything that stands in her way.

If anyone can find a solution, it's her.

Ironic, considering she's also the problem.

"I'm working on it," I tell Lolo, careful not to bring undue attention to my traveling partner. Easygoing as Lo is, I doubt she needs the reminder.

“So . . . what happened?” Lolo asks, and I think I hear an unspoken *this time* tacked on to the end.

Katherine happened.

“We missed the connecting train,” I say instead.

Lolo’s eyes narrow for a fraction of a second, although I don’t know if it’s my use of the word *we* or suspicion that I’m leaving out crucial details.

Then her features smooth out as though she’s deliberately decided to let it go, and I try to remember that this is what I like about her. *Love* about her, I quickly amend. Unlike Katherine, who has to make a federal case every time she has an opinion about something—which is always—Lolo opts to let things go if they’ll cause friction.

“Okay, so no train. Are there any planes getting out of Buffalo? Given the storm.”

“We’re not that lucky. But we’re looking into getting a rental car!” Somehow I manage to say this with absolute optimism as though I’m not omitting the rather important detail that there are no rental cars.

“A *rental car*? Won’t that take even longer than the train?”

Yes.

“I don’t have a lot of options, sweetheart,” I say gently. “This huge storm has wreaked havoc on an already busy travel time.”

She lets out a little laugh and runs her fingers through her blond hair. “And to think, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* was one of my favorite movies growing up. I’ll never watch it the same way now.”

I laugh because, until this moment, I haven’t really had a spare moment to think about the similarities between my journey and Steve Martin’s. Obviously I’m Neal Page in this situation, the part of the duo that’s *stuck* with an unwanted someone.

I glance around at Katherine, who’s talking to a twentysomething couple with enormous backpacks. One of them has a neck tattoo; the other’s winter jacket has a spiderweb pattern. I hope to God she’s not asking them for

advice.

Katherine looks my way and, much the same way she did at the airport when I was talking to Lolo, taps on her watch impatiently, as though I'm the one holding us back.

On second thought, I realize I'm wrong about the *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* comparison because Katherine is about as much the opposite of the jovial John Candy as it's possible to be.

"Tom?" Lolo asks.

I look back to my phone screen.

She bites her lip. "You'll be here, right?"

"I'll be there," I say.

"You already said that." She closes her eyes for a moment and then opens them with a gentle smile. "I'll be honest. This is weird for me, and I'm not above needing some reassurance here."

"I swear I'll get there by—"

"Not about that," she cuts in. "About . . ." She exhales. "You're traveling with your ex-wife, Tom. Can you just . . . you know. Tell me she's covered in warts? Remind me of all the reasons you hate her guts?"

Lolo says all of this in a joking tone, but the last question is still a jolt.

Hate Katherine?

Have I ever said that?

My stomach clenches a little as I realize I probably have. It's the sort of thing one says to one's new girlfriend after breaking the news that he tried and failed at the marriage thing once before. I wanted to reassure Lolo that I was, in fact, marriage material and that it was Katherine who was impossible.

Because damn it. Katherine was impossible. *Is impossible.*

But hate her? I glance over to where she's standing with her arms crossed, glaring at me. Her eyes bug out with another impatient *Come on!*

I almost smile because if I *did* hate her, nobody could blame me.

"Katherine and I are divorced," I tell Lolo gently. "That obviously hasn't

changed. And believe me, this entire nightmare has been a painful reminder of all the *reasons* we're divorced. Okay?"

Lolo hesitates, then nods. Mollified.

With a last reassurance that I will be there—on Christmas Eve—I end the call and gather Katherine's charger, which she's already holding out her hand for.

"You owe me," she says, shoving the cord into her bag.

"That's doubtful," I say, looking pointedly at the injury on her head that started us down this whole path. "But if you're about to tell me you found me a car or, better yet, a flight, I'll happily reconsider the point."

"No car," she says. "I did some reconnaissance and learned that after all the flights were canceled, all of the cars were gone within half an hour, the employees not long after."

"And the part where I owe you . . . ?"

Katherine holds up a hand, flashes two . . .

"*Bus tickets?*" I say incredulously, bending down to read them.

"Just try to be quiet this time," she says, already wheeling her suitcase in the direction of the exit. "I'd hate for your chattiness to delay us. Again."

I stare after her for a moment.

The bus?

"Come on. It'll be an adventure," Katherine says over her shoulder.

"I think I've had enough adventure," I call after her, even as I start to follow.

I'm a little surprised to find I'm actually smiling. Even more surprised to realize . . . there's nobody else I'd rather be on this *adventure* with.

TWENTY-FOUR
KATHERINE

December 23, 10:37 p.m.

“So,” I say, struggling to get comfortable on the bus seat. It’s not *quite* as bad as I imagined, but I think all the rushing around has aggravated the gash on my back because everything hurts. “Do we want to talk about it?”

Tom glances over. “Talk about what?”

I roll my eyes because he knows I saw a pretty blond woman on his phone screen. I just hope he *doesn’t* know that it felt like a kick to the stomach.

“Come on, Tom,” I say, a little tired. “You don’t have to be squirrely about it. I know you’re not a virgin.”

He sighs. “Fine. You want to do this? Yes, okay? I’m seeing someone.”

“For how long?” I can’t help but ask.

Tom fiddles with his watchband. “A year or so.”

I turn my head quickly to look out the window, hoping to hide my surprise, but no luck because he nudges my side with his elbow. “Hey. It’s not *that* much of a shock, some women actually find me quite likable.”

He’s trying to lighten the mood, and I try to let him.

“It’s not so much that I’m surprised that you found yourself a nice, docile companion.” I frown. “I confess I am a little surprised I haven’t heard about

it by now.”

“Really?” His eyebrow lifts. “You think I’d call you after years of no contact? *Hey, by the way . . .*”

“No. And let’s be clear, if you had, I wouldn’t have taken your call,” I say, lifting a finger to emphasize my point. “It’s just . . . I don’t know. I’d have thought Nancy or Bob. Or your sisters. Even Luke. One of them could have mentioned it.”

I try to keep the hurt out of my voice, but I’m not sure I’m successful. *A little warning would have been nice, guys.*

Tom is staring at me. “When the *hell* would they have mentioned this?”

I begin to enumerate on my fingers. “My Saturday night talks with your mom while she makes her famous poppyseed muffins for her church choir. Or your dad in our Sunday text threads back and forth while we do the *Times* crossword. Or Kayla when she calls to ask my opinion on New York neighborhoods—”

“Stop.” Tom holds up a hand, looking so off-balance I almost feel bad for him. “I don’t even know where to start. You have weekly talks with my mother? My father *texts*? And wait, why does Kay want to know about New York neighborhoods?”

I start with the easiest of the questions.

“I can’t say Bob was a quick study on the whole texting thing. And I’m thinking about implementing an emoji limit because he’s dangerously close to abuse levels. But yeah. He texts.”

“Unbelievable,” he mutters. “Isn’t there some sort of commandment to prevent this sort of thing? Thou shalt not remain besties with thy ex’s family?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yuck. Don’t say besties. So. What’s her name?”

He looks like he wants to play dumb and then sighs and answers, “Lolo.”

“Huh.” I look at my manicure, which is paying the price for today’s mishaps. “Maybe that’s why your parents didn’t mention it. They didn’t

know how to tell me she was a stripper.”

“She’s a teacher,” Tom replies, rubbing his forehead as though he’s the one with the concussion. “I still can’t believe you’ve been in touch with my family. If anyone should be mad about omissions, it should be me. They’ve never once mentioned your name.”

I look back over at him. “Maybe they knew you wouldn’t want to hear it.”

“Maybe,” he mutters, though he still looks completely nonplussed at the thought of me keeping in touch with his family.

“Does it bother you?” I ask. “That they talk to me?”

“I guess it shouldn’t. It’s just . . . odd.” He runs a hand over his face. “And damn. I still can’t get over the fact that Dad texts. I didn’t even know he knew what an emoji *was*.”

Oops.

I should have known better than to mention my relationship with Bob. I was close with all of Tom’s family—I still am, as much as I’ll let myself be.

But I’ve always clicked *especially* with Tom’s father. And though Tom’s never admitted it, I know it bothered him, even before things went sour in our relationship. It’s not so much that Tom and his father don’t have a good relationship. It’s always just had a touch of awkward distance.

It was hard, I think, for Tom—the golden boy—to see someone else come in and achieve so easily what he never quite mastered: an easy relationship with his father.

I change the subject. “So, exactly how pissed is *Lolo* that I’m your traveling companion?”

“Not at all.”

I make a snorting noise. “Come on.”

“She’s really not,” he says with a shrug. “*Lolo* doesn’t really *get* pissed.”

I pretend to be asleep. *Boring.*

“What?” He looks annoyed at my reaction. “Believe it or not, that’s a nice

quality to have.”

“Sure, sure.” I shift again, increasingly uncomfortable as the medical tape on my back tugs at my skin. “It’s just not what you need.”

“You have no idea what I need,” he snaps. “If you did, we’d still be together. And I’m not talking about this with you.”

I lift a noncommittal shoulder and let him lapse into brooding silence. Which lasts maybe a minute.

“What do you mean, it’s not what I need?” he asks.

“Well. Don’t take this the wrong way, but sometimes you do this thing where you’re sort of . . . insufferable.”

He blinks. “Sure, nope. Won’t take *that* the wrong way.”

“You can just be a little set in your ways, and to combat that, you need someone to, you know. Ruffle your feathers. Push your buttons.”

“Until I met you, I didn’t even *have* buttons,” Tom says.

“Which is why you’re so much more interesting now than when we met,” I say, batting my eyelashes.

He sighs.

I inspect my nails for a moment, then look up at him. “Do they like her? Your family?”

He shrugs. “I’m assuming so.”

“What do you mean? Can’t you tell when they’re with her?”

“Well, since you’re so close to them, maybe you can let me know their feelings after we get to Chicago,” he snaps.

I narrow my eyes. “Wait. Is this the first time they’re meeting her? And why is she there without you in the first place?”

“She had a baby shower thing for a college friend out-of-state, so we were going to fly in separately. I was supposed to get there just a couple hours after her.” He gives me a meaningful look.

“Oh?” I ask, all innocence. “What happened?”

“I picked up a phone call I shouldn’t have,” he says, closing his eyes

tiredly. “You can read all about it in my obituary because I’m increasingly unsure if I’ll survive this night.”

“Now, now, don’t think like that,” I say, giving his knee a little pat. “The best part of our string of disasters? It can’t possibly get any worse.”

TWENTY-FIVE
TOM

December 23, 11:04 p.m.

Not long after, I glance over at my ex-wife. “You were saying? About this not getting any worse?”

“Yeah,” Katherine admits with uncharacteristic agreeability. “It’s worse.”

When we boarded the bus, it was crowded. Five excruciating stops later, it’s beyond crowded. Every single seat is full, and I never thought I’d say this, but I actually miss the “quiet police” from our train ride. They’d never allow what I’m currently being forced to endure.

It’s a toss-up between what’s more miserable: the noise or the smells.

The guy directly across the aisle from me has been eating onion rings since the moment he sat down. And not *fresh* onion rings, though that would be bad enough. The scents of stale batter and reused cooking oil hang like a fog through the entire back of the bus.

The woman in front of him is clipping her toenails, and the “big one won’t cooperate.” I know this because she’s announced it loudly. Several times.

There are four babies aboard. I like babies. A lot. I’m that guy who purposely never lets his smile waver when a stressed-out parent holding a crying newborn stops in the airplane aisle and points to the open seat beside

me with an apologetic grin. It would suck to be that parent, and it would suck to be that gassy, hungry baby, so I try to be patient.

But you know what? Right now, it sucks more to be *me*. Because not *one* of these babies has stopped wailing, even though all four of them have had their diapers changed while on board, resulting in a smell that is almost, but not quite, worse than the onion rings.

Right on cue, someone lets out a long, noisy fart.

“Jesus, Tom.” Katherine pulls her coat collar over her face. “That one sounded wet. The ham is really doing a number on you, huh?”

“Not. Me,” I manage to say around my deliberate mouth-breathing. “This is all your fault.”

“Okay, I’ll grant you that *some* of this mess is on me,” Katherine says.

“You think?”

“But some of it’s on you too,” she shoots back.

“How the hell do you figure that?” I ask, genuinely affronted. Without Katherine, I’d be home right now, reassuring Lolo that she doesn’t have to actually wear the flannel snowman nightgown that my mother bought on Etsy, my stomach happily full of eggnog and a homemade meal.

Instead, my appetite has been entirely shot to hell by farts, stale onion rings, and the aftermath of funky ham, and I’m sitting beside a woman who, I’m just now discovering, *has kept in touch with my family*.

I can’t decide what bothers me more: that Katherine has been cozy with my family, or that they’ve been hiding it from me for years.

“Well,” Katherine answers my question in a deliberately patient tone, as though preparing to explain something very basic to a recalcitrant child, “the fact that we’ve been delayed—”

“Multiple times,” I cut in.

“The fact that we’ve been delayed *multiple times* is my fault,” she continues. “But the fact that we’re on your tight, arbitrary schedule? That’s on you.”

“Arbitrary—” I have to shut my mouth a moment to keep myself from sputtering. “I’m sorry, but do you think I’ve somehow exerted influence over the date of *Christmas*?”

“Ah, but it’s not just Christmas, is it?” she says, wagging an annoying finger at me. “It’s Christmas *Eve*. I mean, honestly, Tom, you’ve never been this weird about the twenty-fourth before. Do you have a hot date with the reindeer or something?”

My jaw works in a mixture of vexation, anger, and guilt. The first two—obvious, right? The last one, though . . .

I could tell her. I *should* tell her.

But here’s the situation. Not only am I faced with the discomfort of telling my ex-wife—even one who hates my guts—that I’m getting married again, but I also have to explain that I want to propose to Wife Number Two on Christmas Eve because it’s a long-standing family tradition. A family tradition that I didn’t adhere to, or even really consider, when proposing to Wife Number One.

I don’t know how I can possibly deliver that news without hurting her, and as much as I’ve thought I could happily strangle Katherine today, I don’t want to cause her pain.

And even if I could get around that hang-up by simply reminding myself that Katherine’s the type who appreciates straightforwardness, the truth is . . .

I don’t know how to explain.

Not to her.

Not even to myself.

As the infernal woman’s been reminding me every chance she gets, I’m a planner. Not because I’m uptight—okay, perhaps a bit—but because I love life. I knew even in my college days that I didn’t want to be that guy that woke up at forty, alone in his messy bachelor pad, and think, *Damn, I better get a move on it!*

I’ve known, more or less, how I want my life to go since I was a kid.

And in none of those daydreaming sessions did I imagine someone as difficult as Katherine by my side.

To this day, I have no idea why I couldn't take my eyes off the loud brunette on the street ordering me to go find some *legume butter*. And I have no idea why, after the poor guy with the gum on his shoe escaped her clutches, I asked her out for a drink and held my breath to hear the answer.

And most especially, I don't know why six months after that, while sitting beside her on the couch, listening to her tirade on why *Star Wars: A New Hope* is actually a fantasy, not a science-fiction movie, I looked over at her shoveling chow mein into her mouth with cheap chopsticks and knew . . .

That she was mine. And I was hers. In the forever kind of way.

Marry me.

I blurted it out. With no ring. With no plan. It wasn't even posed as a question so much as a command mingled with a plea.

It was the middle of a swampy, miserable New York summer, and my family's Christmas Eve tradition was the farthest thing from my mind. Even if it *had* crossed my mind, I wouldn't have waited. Couldn't have. As it was, the only reason we didn't tie the knot at city hall as soon as humanly possible was because my mother threatened to disown me if she wasn't present at the ceremony.

Katherine and I flew my entire family, as well as Irene and her husband, to Las Vegas. There wasn't Elvis, but there was a tiny chapel, a lot of champagne, and some damn good memories.

That's where I finally gave Katherine a proper ring. My maternal grandmother's, left to the firstborn child in a tradition even older than the Christmas Eve proposal.

A ring that, in a surprisingly generous gesture, she insisted on returning to me after the divorce. "*For your do-over,*" she said.

My do-over didn't want it. Funny how up until as recently as this morning, that fact had bothered me.

Sitting here now on this bus, I'm relieved I trusted my gut and got Lolo a new ring. The other one seems to belong to Katherine somehow. Even now. Especially now?

"Did I stump you?" she asks, interrupting my long silence. "Why do we have to be there tomorrow? Why not Christmas?"

I take a deep breath and turn my head to face her. To tell her . . . everything. To explain why Christmas Eve is important and that Lolo isn't just a passing phase.

The words get caught in my throat because Katherine's attention is on her damned phone.

Of course it is. My temper snaps.

"How about you give it a rest with that thing?" I say through gritted teeth. "I hardly think Harry's going to call at ten o'clock at night."

It comes out even harsher than I intend, and Katherine's head whips up in surprise. "What's your problem?"

"No, no," I say snidely. "Not *my* problem. Yours. It's the same thing that's always been your problem. That damn phone that's practically an appendage."

"Ah." Her voice is deceptively light. "Now, where have I heard *this* particular rampage? Oh, yeah! Only every single night for the last year of our marriage."

"The last year of our marriage was hardly a marriage at all."

I don't say it to wound her. Or maybe I do. I don't know. But her eyes go wide with unmistakable hurt before she quickly turns her attention back to her phone.

I suck in a deep breath of regret. "Hey. I didn't mean . . ."

"It's fine," she interrupts, still looking down at her screen, even though it's locked. "It's hardly breaking news that you couldn't stand me that last year because I wouldn't drop everything I wanted to fall in line with everything you wanted."

There's another loud fart from the back row, and though we both lift our coat collars to cover our noses, we don't pause the argument.

"I never asked you to drop everything," I say. "I just wanted some sign that you even *saw* me. That I mattered at least as much as making partner."

"You mattered," Katherine says. "Of course you *mattered*, I just didn't realize you needed to hear it every second of every day!"

"I would have settled for once a week. Hell, once a month. *A quarter*. Anything so that I knew that you were even there."

Her laugh is soft and bitter. "You needed to know if *I* was there? I wasn't the one that left, Tom. You bailed the *second* that marriage didn't look like your perfect picture of it. By the time I realized you had a foot out the door, you were already gone."

"That's . . . not true."

Is it? It doesn't feel true, at least not how I remember it, but it's also as much vulnerability as Katherine's ever shown about the divorce, and it has me doubting . . . everything.

"Fine. Okay," she says flatly.

I feel something hollow in my stomach, sensing that she's shutting down and pulling away again just as I was finally making some progress in understanding the mystery that is this woman's heart.

"Kates . . ." The old nickname slips out, even though I don't know how to finish the sentence.

"I'm fine, Tom." She closes her eyes. "I got over it. Over you. I'm better than ever. You've got yourself a new perfect girlfriend to fit into your perfect life. I'm going to make partner. Everybody gets what they want. Everybody wins."

I feel an almost uncontrollable urge to argue with her, even though I don't know what about.

Katherine opens her eyes again. "Let's call a truce and change the subject."

“This has to be a first. You calling a truce?”

She looks tired. “Take the olive branch, Tom.”

“Fine. Subject change it is. Hit me.”

Katherine taps a finger on her chin, considering topics, then her eyes light up. “Do you think Lolo will pump?”

“Pump what?”

“Breast milk.”

I think I choke on my own tongue.

“Sorry.” She gives me a mischievous smile. “Am I rushing you? Have you not thought about occupying her womb with your seed?”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“Sore subject? Does your seed not work? Or I mean . . .” she whispers. “Does it not . . . grow?”

“I am not talking to my ex-wife about my girlfriend’s womb. Or her . . . breast milk.”

“I bet they’re smaller than mine. I’ve got great cans.” She looks down at her chest and shimmies her shoulders.

My gaze drifts downward, because human nature.

She catches me looking and smirks.

“So.” She turns all the way toward me now, exuding a friendliness that makes me think I imagined our heated words just a second ago. “How’d you and Lolo meet?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” *Not here. Not now. Not ever. Not with you.*

“No problem.” She starts humming loudly. I wouldn’t mind because it at least distracts from the relentless fussing babies, but it’s very loud and very off-key. She starts using her bag as a drum.

I give in. “At a bar.”

“A bar? Oh, swoon!” Katherine fans herself, flutters her eyelashes. “Did you ask her if it hurt when she fell from heaven?”

“Not exactly my move.”

“You don’t have *any* moves.”

“I do so.”

Katherine shakes her head. “No.”

“I picked you up, didn’t I?”

“And then dropped me.”

Before I can figure out how to reply to that, or if I even want to, there’s a violent lurch that would have thrown me into the aisle had I not braced a hand against the seat in front of me just in time.

Instinctively, I wrap my free arm around Katherine, holding her to me. There’s a horrible screeching noise of bus against guardrail, and then it swerves again.

Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me. Only Katherine Tate would be involved in two accidents in a single day.

The screeching metal on metal continues, accompanied by a squeal of tires and the never-ending sensation of sliding, and I can only close my eyes and pray we don’t slide into anything.

Or off anything.

Please don’t let these be my last moments.

Katherine curls into me, her fingers clenching my shirt, holding me close.

On the other hand, maybe these wouldn’t be the *worst* last moments.

It feels like it takes an eternity (but probably mere seconds), but the bus finally comes to a grinding halt. I open my eyes, and even though it smells like gasoline and burned rubber, through the smoky haze, the bus seems to be both upright and structurally intact.

“You okay?” I ask, smoothing a hand over Katherine’s hair without meaning to, even as I look around the bus to take inventory of all the babies. I find all four, all screaming, all looking unscathed. Thank God.

I hear a muffled sound below my chin and feel Katherine wriggle furiously against me. Looking down, I realize I’m still holding her protectively to my chest.

“Sorry,” I say, ordering my arms to release her. It takes a few seconds longer than it should have.

“You okay?” I ask again, my eyes scanning her, checking for serious injury.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I’m *fantastic*. Two accidents in, what, a single day? Am I being punished for something?” She looks me over. “What about you? You good? You always got very fluttery in a crisis. Should we see if anyone has smelling salts?”

“Yeah, you’re fine,” I mutter. Though I notice she keeps reaching around to the injury on her back, which must be hurting her more than ever. Once we get out of here, I’m done with her stubbornness. I’m checking that damn wound.

She lifts a hand, gingerly patting her mussed hair. “Do I look pretty?”

I let out a little laugh as my gaze drifts upward. Her hair is tangled. Matted. A little greasy, except for the hairs at her temples, which are starting to frizz.

She is a complete mess, and maybe it’s just the recent near-death experience, but she looks absolutely perfect.

Her eyes widen, and I realize I’ve said it aloud.

“Perfectly wretched,” I amend as I intentionally shift my thoughts over to Lolo. It seems to require superhuman effort because she suddenly seems very far away, and I don’t just mean in a different state.

“Back at you,” Katherine says. “Lolo would *never* accept your seed if she could see you now.”

I can’t help it; I smile.

Katherine blinks in surprise.

“That was a real one.”

“A real what?” I say.

“A real smile,” she says, pushing her finger into my cheek. “I got you.”

I bat her hand away. “You didn’t *get* me. I smile all the time.”

“Not like that. Not for real.”

Before I can respond, I’m interrupted by grumbling from the front of the bus. The bus driver curses as he angrily tosses the neck of the microphone aside. Apparently he tried to make an announcement, but the PA system isn’t working.

He slams it back down and then shouts over the whining and moaning, “Anyone hurt?”

A man in his late fifties or early sixties raises his hand. “My foot hurts.”

“I don’t got time to hear about your damn gout right now, Jim. Anyone else have a gripe?”

Three-quarters of the passengers lift their hands.

“Anyone *seriously* injured?” the driver amends impatiently.

Everyone’s hands drop, albeit reluctantly.

“Excellent. Well, at least there’s a little bit of good news to balance out the bad.”

A man in the front raises his hand like a kid in school. “What’s the bad news?”

The driver lights a cigarette and uses it to gesture at the hazy bus. “This totaled hunk of metal isn’t going anywhere tonight. We’re stuck.”

Katherine leans toward me and opens her mouth, but I put a hand over her mouth. “Don’t say it.”

For once, she listens to me, but I still know what she was going to say.

Everything up until this moment was child’s play because right now in the middle of nowhere, in a totaled bus, amid a blizzard?

Now it can’t get any worse.

TWENTY-SIX
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:29 p.m.

“There is no way this is the right way. Check your phone,” Tom orders me.

“Oh sure. *Now* you want me to check it. You’re always hollering at me to be more present in the moment.”

Tom gives me an incredulous look over his shoulder. “*Now* you’re choosing to have principles? When we’re lost on a deserted road that hasn’t been traversed since Grover Cleveland was in office?”

I’m too exhausted and in too much pain to retort, even to drop the fascinating tidbit that Cleveland is the only president to have served two nonconsecutive terms in office. Tom *hates* when I drop random trivia, and the fact that I skip an opportunity to annoy him says plenty about my current condition.

Tom stops in his tracks when he sees me struggling with my suitcase. If this street has seen a snowplow, it hasn’t been today, and rapidly accumulating snow makes the spinner wheels on my expensive suitcase irrelevant. Tom picked his up within seconds of leaving the bus. I’d have done the same, but the gash in my back has added “oozing” alongside “excruciatingly painful” on its list of characteristics.

Tom stalks back toward me, looking like an angry warrior trudging

through the snow, and without a word, he takes my bag. Grateful, I let him. This is no time to play my favorite game of *anything you can do, I can do better*.

A half hour ago, the thought of spending another second on a totaled bus with thirty adults and four babies was too horrendous to even consider. Especially given the surplus of foul odors, the lack of heat, and the nonstop crying, which by the way, wasn't even from the babies.

Estimated time until the tow truck could get to us? Three hours. "Give or take."

Needless to say, Tom and I decided to take our chances with the blizzard. A decision that may very well be the end of us, because our current status?

Slowly trudging down a dark, deserted country road.

And lost. Very lost.

"Katherine." Tom's voice is sharp. "I thought you said the motel was a ten-minute walk. We've been walking for twice that. How much further?"

"I don't know!" I exclaim. "Okay? I have no idea."

"Well, then check your damn phone!" he yells again.

I swipe snowflakes off my eyelashes—not one of my favorite things. "I don't have any service."

"What do you mean?" He stops again. Turns. "We had full bars on the bus."

"Well, gee, Tom." I gesture around at the pitch-black night and whipping snow. "We're not on the bus, are we?"

It would have had more bite if my teeth weren't chattering, but Tom rises to the bait even through the softball delivery.

"Oh, we're not on the bus?" he repeats sarcastically. "And whose fault is that?"

"No way." I jab a finger in his face. "You do not get to put this one on me. You agreed to this plan wholeheartedly. And be real. As bad as this is, it's not worse than the bus."

Not yet, I silently add because this day has had a way of one-upping itself on the horror scale.

“That’s weird,” Tom says, getting in my face. “The ‘plan’ I remember agreeing to was, ‘Hey, Tom, there’s a motel just up the way.’” He swipes snow out of his face. “Now, I know you have a concussion. But in no universe does ‘just up the way’ entail a thirty-minute walk in the snow. Are we even going the right direction?”

I wrap my arms around myself and, because I’m too tired to put up a fight, tell the simple truth. “I don’t know.”

I must look and sound as awful as I *feel* because after looking at me for a long moment, Tom swears quietly under his breath instead of loudly in my face like I’m pretty sure he wants to.

Tom drops both of our suitcases into the snow and reaches out, pulling at my forearms until I uncross them.

Muttering to himself, he pulls off his gloves and roughly shoves one over my right hand, then my left.

I let out a little whimper of gratitude. As far as gloves go, these aren’t great. They’re meant for his five-minute commute to work in a brisk chill, not traipsing through the snow. Still, they’re such a welcome respite from the brutal cold that I nearly cry.

Before I can summon up a proper thank-you, Tom jerks me toward him.

I collide against his chest with a startled gasp as I feel him unzip his jacket, still muttering. Then he opens the coat, wrapping both sides around me so I’m cuddled against his chest.

“I told you to pack gloves,” he grumbles. “And what did you say?”

“Gloves are for babies,” I say, burrowing into his wonderful warmth.

“That’s right,” he says. “Don’t suppose you want to revise that opinion?”

My teeth are chattering too much to respond.

I feel movement against my cheek as Tom pulls his cell phone from his suit breast pocket. He holds it up behind my head so he can hold me close

with one arm and check his phone with the other.

“You remember when you wanted to switch cell phone carriers?” he asks. “Because you were convinced that a different one would give you cell service in the elevators?”

I nod.

“You switched, didn’t you? After we split.”

I nod again. The new carrier cuts out in the elevator too, but I don’t tell him this, for obvious reasons.

“Well, I win,” he says, more tired than victorious. “I kept the old carrier, and I’ve got two bars, even all the way out here.”

“Well, la-di-da,” I manage.

He tucks his phone back in his pocket and eases me away from him. I bite back a whine at the loss of warmth.

“Come on,” Tom says, giving my upper arms a quick rub before nodding in the opposite direction. “It’s just ahead, and I’m using it the proper way, as in a two-minute walk, not your way, which is a thirty-minute walk. We’d probably be able to see it if not for all the snow.”

I nod and start to pull off his gloves.

“Don’t. Keep them.” And then, he reaches out, taking my laptop bag from me and hoisting it over his shoulder along with his own laptop bag.

He picks up the suitcases and resumes walking. Slower this time, which I know is more for my sake than it is because the bags slow him down.

And for the first time in a long time, I let myself admit the truth.

I may have been a fool to let this one slip away.

TWENTY-SEVEN
KATHERINE

December 23, 11:36 p.m.

True to Tom's Boy Scout of a phone carrier's claims, the motel really is two minutes ahead, and considering how awful I felt just a moment ago, I can't believe I'm even thinking this, but . . .

"Damn," Tom says from beside me. "We should have taken our chances on the bus."

Yeah. Tom's voiced my thought exactly. The motel is . . .

Hell. Literally.

On the map, it was called the Blue Shell Motel.

In real life, most of the blue neon lights are out, so it reads:

The Blue hell Mote

And it looks exactly like a "blue hell mote" should. It's one of those two-story deals, with all the doors facing outward and open to the outside. It was probably painted blue once upon a time, but now it's a dingy gray. The doors are a darker gray, so the whole structure resembles a skull with mostly missing teeth.

Also, if the roof survives this snowstorm, it'll be a Christmas miracle.

"Hey. You remember the day we met?" Tom asks over the wind, looking over at me.

“You want to rehash that *now*?” I ask, incredulous as I force myself to push toward the front door. “Is that hypothermia at work?”

“I just want to say, for the record, Katherine,” he says, trudging along beside me, “if I could go back and do things differently, I would. I’d have let that man with the gum on his shoe have you.”

“*Have me?*” I repeat. “Would he have gotten my dowry too, if my Pa would have consented? Also, *I* just want to say, for the record, Thomas: it was I who had you.”

“Really.” His skepticism is plain. “So, when you ordered me to go get peanut butter, that was your idea of seduction? I don’t think so. *I* came onto *you*.”

“And how’d that work out for you back then?” I snap, a little surprised at how painful this trip down memory lane suddenly feels. “Also, when you find that time machine, let me know because I want a ride on it. There are a few things I’d do differently too.”

“Like what?” he asks, doubtful. As though he’s the only one who gets to play the game of *if only*.

“We are not doing this now,” I mutter as we finally make it to the motel’s front door. The awning provides a bit of relief from the dumping snow, but that’s got nothing on the moment when I push open the rickety door, and we’re greeted by a blast of warmth and the jingle of a bell.

The bell is the old-fashioned kind I thought only existed on the sets of small-town romantic comedies. It’s also adorned with a sprig of holly, a big red bow, and a little sign that says “Jingle All the Way,” but I’m so happy to be out of the storm that I can’t even find the Grinch version of myself.

I always thought the point of a bell tied to a door was to alert people that someone had entered a room, but the motel clerk must not have gotten that memo because he doesn’t look up from the video he’s watching on his phone.

“Hi,” Tom says to the employee as we approach the counter. His tone is about as lacking in charm as I’ve ever heard. Apparently it only takes one ex-

wife, one blizzard, a missed flight, jumping off a train, getting in a bus accident, and a *blue hell mote* to break him.

Good to know.

The employee still doesn't look up, and Tom and I exchange a puzzled glance.

I reach out and, with a single finger, tap the old-fashioned bell on the counter.

That does the trick. The clerk doesn't look away from his phone, but he does reach out to his right and pull a key off a hook.

He sets it on the counter. "Hundred bucks for the room."

"Yeah, we're going to need another one of those," I say, pointing at the key. "Because I had the good sense to divorce this guy."

"Actually," Tom says. "I divorced her."

The kid shrugs. "Only got the one room."

Oh, hell no.

I elbow Tom. "Do something. Give him some money."

"That's the plan," Tom says, already pulling out his wallet. "A hundred bucks for the room."

"No," I huff. "I mean, do that cool-guy thing. Give him a twenty."

The clerk glances up, interested in us for the first time.

Tom sighs. "If I give you a twenty, will you magically have another room?"

"We're all booked up 'cept that one." The skinny kid nods at the key. "But I'll still take the twenty."

Tom drops some cash on the counter. "Here's five twenties. For the room."

The clerk looks disappointed but not surprised. "Fine."

I've never stayed in a hotel that didn't require a credit card for incidentals, and I'm trying not to think about what it means for the state of the last remaining room that this place doesn't expect one. I'm also trying

very hard not to think about the logistics of our sleeping arrangement.

If there are two beds, fine.

If there's *one* bed, Tom will be sleeping in the tub.

Tom reaches for the key, but the clerk snatches it first with a swiftness I didn't see coming.

"Gonna need you to put a key chain on that." The kid reaches for a paper cup and spits a sunflower seed into it.

"Sorry. What," Tom says. Not a question.

"Motel policy. We've only got the one key. Don't want you to lose it."

Tom takes a deep breath. "What's your name, son?"

"*Son?*" I stifle a laugh. "Settle down, Grandpa."

"Dean," the kid says, tucking a strand of greasy blond hair behind his ear.

"Well, Dean. Here's a suggestion for management. Why doesn't the motel put their own key chains on all of the keys. Something big and branded. A blue shell, perhaps?"

The clerk looks affronted at the suggestion. "That would be tacky."

"Tacky," I agree with a somber nod.

Tom glances my way with a growl.

"We want our customers to feel at home," Dean explains with a solemn sincerity that is puzzling, given his complete lack of greeting at our arrival.

"He wants you to feel at home," I say, nudging Tom, enjoying myself a bit despite the fact that I'm cold, wet, and hurting in just about every direction. "Just put it on a key chain."

"Look. I'm not going to lose the key," Tom said, reaching for it. "If I do, you can charge me for it. Hell, charge me double."

Dean is *delightfully* stubborn because he pulls it out of Tom's reach yet again. "If you don't have a key chain of your own, you can buy one at our gift shop."

Tom and I both look around at the tiny space, which is big enough for the reception desk, us, and a crooked Christmas tree. That's about it.

“The . . . gift shop?” I ask.

Dean gestures to a spinning rack atop the reception desk, so small and barren I hadn’t noticed it until now, even with the Post-it Note proclaiming “Gift Shoppe.”

“Ah!” I smile widely. “There it is.”

Blue hell mote’s gift shop has what looks to be a used fidget spinner, a couple of ballpoint pens, a lone pack of gum, and eureka! Key chains!

“How will we decide?” I muse, reaching out to touch a felt pickle with googly eyes. “Ooh, this one is nice. Is this meant to look like dentures?”

Dean leans forward. “Could actually be dentures. Some people get this confused with the lost and found.”

I snatch my hand back just in time.

“Look, I’m not buying one of those,” Tom snaps.

Uh-oh. I know that voice. Tom’s about to dig in his heels. For a minute there, I was enjoying this whole thing, but it’s time to wrap it up.

There’s a jolly jingling noise from behind us, and Dean stands to look over our heads at the newcomers. “Be right with you folks.”

“And *them*, you greet,” Tom says with a sigh.

“Tom, let’s just buy the pickle,” I say. “It can’t be more than a few dollars. How much is this little gem, Dean?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen *dollars*?” Tom says, his voice going up a full octave.

“No, Tom, I’m sure he meant rubles. Fourteen rubles. Yes, dollars.”

Dean nods. “Plus tax.”

“Are you kidding me?” Tom says, really getting worked up now. “Not only is it unethical, but it’s bad business. I’m sure the Better Business Bureau would love to hear about your felt pickle.”

I open my mouth, and Tom holds up a hand to me. “Don’t.”

With great pain, I let the dirty joke opportunity pass.

“Sir, if you don’t want the key chain, you don’t want the room. I’m sure

this lovely couple behind you—”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Tom says, reaching into his pocket.

“Easy now,” Dean says, stepping back. “Nice and slow. Let me see your hands.”

Tom is incredulous. “What? Is this a hostage situation?”

“How I know you’re not getting a gun.”

“I’m not,” Tom snaps. “I was getting a fucking key chain.”

He pulls it out and dangles it at Dean.

I let out a little gasp when I see the key chain he’s holding out. It’s a pair of small blue dice. I recognize it because I have a red version of the same key chain, though mine’s tucked away in a keepsake box in my apartment.

“You kept it,” I say softly.

“Don’t make it a thing,” Tom says as he irritably adds the motel key to the dice chain. “It’s just a sturdy key chain is all.”

“It is not,” I say, though I know I’m on dangerous ground to push the issue. “Our marriage was more sturdy than that keychain, and look how that turned up. That *pickle* is stronger than that key chain, which broke before we even checked out of the hotel, and you whined until I glued it back together for you.”

“What hotel?” Dean asks.

The woman behind us makes an impatient noise.

“Nowhere,” Tom snaps. “Focus on your hote—motel . . . nope, not even that. *Structure*.”

“The Bellagio,” I tell Dean as we both ignore Tom. “Vegas. It’s where we got married.

“But now you’re divorced,” Dean says.

“Yes, we are. Which is why it’s so interesting that he kept this key chain,” I say with a grin.

Tom hooks a hand around my arm and drags me toward the door. “Thanks so much, Dean. It’s been an absolute pleasure.”

“You’re welcome!” Dean says, lifting a hand with complete sincerity.

“Tell me the truth. Do you sleep with the key chain under your pillow?” I ask gleefully.

“What key chain?” He shoves it into his pocket. “There’s no key chain. Maybe you have a fever. Go make a snow devil outside to cool down, and don’t come back into the room until you’re ready to drop the whole key chain thing.”

Tom’s hands are full with the bags once more, so I open the door as he maneuvers both suitcases back out into the storm.

I’m about to follow him when I hear Dean greet the couple who were waiting behind us with a smile. “You’re just in time, I’ve only got a couple rooms left.”

I whip my head in his direction. “A *couple*? You said you only had the one?”

He shrugs and winks. “What can I say. I’m a bit of a romantic.”

Tom pokes his head back in the front door, clearly impatient. “You coming, or what?”

I want to reply: *Or what.*

I want to tell him that Dean *does* have another room. That we’ve lucked out, and that if we spend fourteen dollars on a felt pickle key chain, we won’t have to sleep in the same room.

Instead I find myself nodding. “Yeah. I’m coming.”

TWENTY-EIGHT
TOM

December 23, 11:44 p.m.

“Oh, now this is *very* nice,” Katherine says with a thick layer of sarcasm, turning in a slow circle and surveying our motel room. “Spacious. New. Not at all frigid in here! And what does that smell remind me of . . . Oh yeah. *The bus.*”

I manage only a grunt in response to her sarcasm and drop our suitcases and bags into an unceremonious pile in the middle of the floor.

“What do you suppose they call this paint color,” Katherine says, reaching out a gloved hand to touch a wall and then wisely thinking better of it. “Dirty diaper?”

“It’s definitely dirty something,” I say, gingerly pushing aside the ugly floral curtains until I can find the old-fashioned thermostat in the window. I turn the heat to high. I hold my freezing hands over the vent hoping for some warmth but get only a mildewy draft.

“You know what I always wonder about these kinds of places?” she says, sounding in remarkably good spirits.

“Have you been in these kinds of places often enough to warrant an ‘always’ in that sentence?” I ask, shrugging out of my wet coat since it’s only adding to the persistent chill.

She ignores my rhetorical question. “I always wonder if that paint color was as hideous when they first slapped it onto the wall, or if interior design standards have changed over the past hundred years. Or take this carpet, for example . . .”

“I will not,” I say, purposefully not looking down. “I’d prefer not to think about it.”

But Katherine is persistent, the way she always is when a particular topic captures her fancy, and continues the badgering. “Do you think they thought, *Let’s go with the ugliest combination of brown and green that we can find*, or was brown-and-green carpet the height of interior design style back then?”

“Fine, I’ll play.” I face her, hands on my hips. “Third option. The carpet was only brown to begin with, and the green is some sort of growth that’s taken over. Or the other way around. The carpet was originally green, and those brown parts you’re seeing are actually—”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” Katherine says, waving her hands wildly in a stop gesture. “It’s best not to think about it.”

“Thank you,” I say tiredly as I drop onto the edge of the bed. One of *two* beds. Gross as this place is, there’s at least that going for it.

At least now when I explain my current predicament to Lolo, I won’t have to find a way to drop “one bed” into the conversation. Lolo is as trusting and rational as they come, but even she has limits.

Not that I’d have shared a bed with Katherine. For . . . a lot of reasons. I’d have slept in the dubious chair in the corner. The floor. Even the snow, which probably would have actually been warmer than Kates—

I frown at the thought, which feels knee-jerk and almost defensive. Just yesterday, if I had thought about Katherine at all, I wouldn’t have hesitated to describe her as cold.

But these past several hours, being in her chaotic orbit once again, I’m forced to admit that she is a lot of things, but cold isn’t one of them. Not when you wiggle your way beneath the surface to a woman who is funny,

loyal, and complicated.

She keeps in touch with my family.

Now that the shock of that has worn off and the irritation that my family kept it from me has faded slightly, I feel . . . confused. Katherine always got along with my family, but I guess I figured it was out of duty or something. That she still maintained a relationship with them after our divorce doesn't exactly gel with the impossible, unfeeling woman I've tried to remember her as.

"I think I've figured it out," Katherine says thoughtfully as she struggles to peel off her wet coat. "It's not so much that they thought, *What decor will look nice?* but more, *What will best camouflage the bloodstains and black mold?*"

I sigh. "I thought we weren't going to think or talk about it?"

"Right." She opens the rickety closet door to hang her coat but finds no hangers. "You have to admit, though. A black light would be illuminating in more ways than one."

I'm looking at my phone and don't respond. I have a flurry of messages from Lo, each more panicked than the last at my lack of updates. And my family has now joined in on the concern.

My mom thinks I've been kidnapped, my brother wants me to know that Mom held out until 9:00 p.m. before finally letting the family eat the Bolognese without me. Kayla wants to know if I need to talk. Meredith thinks I've killed Katherine and wants to know if I need help burying the body.

And my dad—what do you know, he *does* text—wants to know if I need money or a lawyer.

"Everything okay?" Katherine asks, studying me.

I look up. "I missed Bolognese."

Out loud, the thought sounds childish. And though Katherine would have every right to mock me, she instead comes to sit beside me on the bed.

There are several inches between her hip and mine. But I'm still aware of

the proximity anyway, and maybe a little grateful for it. Hellish as this day has been, at least I haven't been in it alone.

"I'm tempted to tell you that it always tastes better the second day, as leftovers. After the flavors meld together in the fridge." Her voice is quiet. "However, I know that it's more about the moment than the dish itself. I'm sorry you missed it."

"Thanks." I lean forward slightly and stare at the floor. Sure enough. Brown and green.

"How'd Lolo like pasta night?"

"She's a vegetarian."

"Ah. I was going to guess no carbs," Katherine says.

I wince because Lolo is that too. Katherine must have caught my reaction because she lets out a light laugh but, once again, opts not to mock. "How's she getting along with your family? First meetings can feel . . . *big*."

"I have no idea, Katherine. I'm not there." I hate myself a little for snapping at her when she's clearly trying to be nice, but it feels crucial, somehow, that I don't let her too close.

I hear her swallow. "Right." She gives a single nod and starts to stand.

Damn it.

"Wait." I reach out, my palm instinctively landing on her knee. We both go still, and I'm thrown a little off-balance at how reluctant I am to remove my hand. How long it seems to take me to pull it back.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Pointing out the obvious isn't going to make the situation any better."

"Probably not. But you know what does improve the situation?" She pats the too-soft mattress. "Two beds."

"That's the understatement of the century," I say. "I was *not* looking forward to the chair."

"I sort of envisioned you curled up in the tub, but I'm glad you weren't actually thinking we might share. I still have night terrors about your

pawing.”

I can't resist looking over with a sly smirk. “As I remember, you *liked* my pawing.”

Her eyes narrow in warning, but she doesn't reply. Probably for the best. That is one trip down memory lane I should absolutely not be traveling.

Katherine stands and nods in the direction of the bathroom. “You want first shower?”

“Nah. Go for it.” I lie back on the bed and close my eyes. The mattress is even more horrible than I expected, but I'm too grateful to be out of the snow and to finally be done with this day to care.

“Take your time,” I tell her sleepily. “Perhaps if you stay in there long enough, it'll rinse away the rough edges of your personality.”

“One can hope.” She unzips her suitcase. “And if I'm *really* lucky, maybe the shower can also wash away the memories of our marriage.”

I start to smile until I remember that she's the enemy. When we were married, the never-ending supply of quips this woman had at the ready thrilled me, even when they were a little razor-sharp. It's uncomfortable to realize they still do. Uncomfortable, mainly, because they summon an almost choking sense of guilt, because she isn't the one I'll be proposing to tomorrow night.

I wait until I hear the bathroom door shut before I force myself out of the sinkhole of a mattress and into a sitting position. Needing to adjust my thinking, to refocus my attention on my *future* wife, I grab my briefcase and set it on the edge of the bed.

With a quick glance toward the closed bathroom door, I pull out the ring box and flip it open. It feels incomprehensible that I purchased it just this morning; it feels like ages ago. Strange, too, that this ring, which should be so recent in my memory, looks foreign. Whereas I can remember every detail of my grandmother's ring that once was on Katherine's finger.

I tilt the box to the side so the diamond catches the muted light of the

lamp on the nightstand. The twinkle of it is supposed to reassure me. To serve as a beacon toward the love of my life, a symbol of hope for a better marriage ahead of me than I left behind me.

And the ring does indeed seem to wink back at me. But instead of feeling like a promise, it feels more like . . . a threat?

I frown and focus harder. Try to imagine that the lamplight is the light from my family's Christmas tree. Try to envision the ring on Lolo's finger. When I can't, I try to get even more specific, trying to visualize the moment when I'll slip it on her finger . . .

The bathroom door opens, and Katherine's head pops out. "Tom?"

"What's up?" I say, my voice too loud as I fumble a bit in my haste to close the box.

I hurriedly shove it deep into my bag and give Katherine a grin that must be as Jokeresque as it feels because she blinks in consternation.

"You okay?" she asks. "Still upset about missing Bolognese?"

"Yeah. No. Yes. I'm good. What's up?" I say again.

She gives me a slightly alarmed look at my babbling. "You know that I know you, right? Know when you've got something you want to say, but don't know how?"

I look away.

"And you know that you can tell me anything? It's not like I can hate you more than I already do." She smiles, and I know she doesn't hate me any more than I hate her.

We just didn't . . . work.

So why can't I just tell her?

Hey, Katherine. I think I may have forgotten to mention. I'm actually getting married again.

The words don't come out. Because I don't want to hurt her, but also because I don't want to face the fact that I have the power to hurt her. If I face that, I'd have to address the fact that she can hurt me too, that maybe I

never quite . . .

Katherine steps partially out of the bathroom, and my throat is suddenly very dry. She is wrapped in a towel. Only a towel. A not very large towel.

“Um. You needed something?”

“Yeah, I need help,” she says, and the way she pairs the words with a scowl tells me just what they’ve cost her.

“With the shower?” I ask.

“Settle down, Don Juan.” She adjusts the towel, and I keep my gaze locked firmly on the middle of her forehead. “It’s the bandage. On my back. I think it’s kind of a mess back there.”

“You always did have the best sexy talk,” I say, relieved to be bantering again. Much safer ground.

“You’ve been fussing at me all day to let you have a look. You want your chance or not?”

“Boy, when you put it that way . . .” I mutter. “Where’d you put the gauze and stuff?”

“My suitcase. Right side.” She points. “I’d get it, but considering this towel is more like a scrap of a bathmat . . .”

“I’ll get it.” I go to her open suitcase and begin rummaging around. With a single finger, I lift a very large, very unbecoming undergarment. “Why are all of your underwear beige?”

“Well, Tom, this may hurt your ego, but concussion plus car accident plus gauze plus heinous ex-husband didn’t exactly put me in the sexiest frame of mind while packing. Now, when you’re done playing with my panties, get in here.”

“Jesus. Don’t say panties. Also, why did you bring so many?” I mutter. Eventually, I find the plastic bag with the supplies buried under the blanket of beige underwear.

I walk to the bathroom, where she’s left the door open, and find her leaning toward the mirror, one hand holding the towel in place, the other

fumbling around in her hair.

“I think the bump on my head is growing.”

“Maybe because you keep poking it,” I say, approaching and dumping the contents of the makeshift first aid kit onto the beige countertop, which, thankfully, at least gives the appearance of being mostly clean. “So. How do we do this?”

“Aww.” She gives me a nostalgic look in the mirror. “That’s what you asked me on our wedding night!”

I meet her eyes in the reflection. “I remember it differently. Not a lot of talking.”

That shuts her up.

For a moment.

“You want to go in from the top or the bottom?” she asks.

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“The gash is right between my shoulder blades. I can drop the towel and show you the front goods, or lift the towel and show you the back goods.”

I rub my forehead. “Were you always like this?”

“Enchanting?”

“I was going to say difficult,” I reply.

“Oh. Yes. Probably. So what’s it to be?”

I give her barely covered back a wary look. “Bottom. I guess. Are you wearing . . . you know . . .”

Katherine waggles her eyebrows. “Panties? And yes, the cotton and comfy variety, so your virtue is safe.”

“So, translation, big and beige?” I ask. “Also, is there any reason you didn’t keep your pants on before calling me in here?”

“Of course there’s a reason. I wanted to seduce you. Isn’t it obvious? I planned this whole thing.”

I can’t take any more of this, and with gritted teeth I grab the towel and yank it upward. I let out a low whistle. “Hot. Exactly how high-rise are these?”

Did your grandmother will these to you?”

“Take your time, why don’t you. Get a *real* good look. Of course, if you’re not up to this, I bet Dean—”

I rip off the first strip of medical tape.

“Ow!”

“Sorry,” I say.

“No, you aren’t,” Katherine grumbles.

I am, actually, when I get a glimpse of what we’re dealing with. “Kates. This doesn’t look good.”

“Well, probably because I had to go sprinting through a train station, got into a bus accident, trudged through a blizzard . . .”

I gingerly remove the rest of the gauze and tape, revealing the entirety of the wound. I knew it was good-sized and required stitches, but hearing the doctor describe it and seeing it . . .

I feel a little queasy.

A reaction from the blood, I tell myself, and not because I remember the perfection of this back, all smooth skin, firm muscles, and stubbornness.

Katherine, for once, remains blissfully silent, letting out only a small hiss when I dab some of the antibacterial ointment on with a cotton swab.

“Sorry,” I murmur as I begin to clean around the wound. “This hurt?”

“Obviously,” she says, sounding tired.

Eight cotton balls later, I lean back to admire my handiwork. “Okay, I don’t think it’s as bad as I thought at first. The gash still looks a little angry, but the stitches all seem fine, and there’s none of the signs of infection the nurse told me to watch for.”

“Great. A Christmas miracle.” Her head is dipped forward, so her long hair frames her face, shielding me from seeing her expression.

“You okay?” I ask softly, touching a finger to the part on her back that the medical tape’s left pink and irritated.

I swallow.

I should not be here.

Doing this.

With her.

But right now, I don't want to be anywhere else, doing anything else, with anyone else.

Slowly, Katherine lifts her head again, her dark eyes wide and questioning in the mirror. When our gazes finally meet, the silent exchange lacks the acidity of the past several hours. And for a tiny moment in time, it feels like the old days.

Back when Katherine was my wife, and also my best friend. My everything.

We both look away.

Katherine looks at her watch and smiles. "Merry Christmas Eve."

"Merry Christmas Eve," I say as I reach for the clean cotton pad and begin to re-cover her wound the way the doctor showed me. "You know you'll have to keep your back out of the spray of the shower, right? Otherwise we'll have to do this all over again."

She makes a jaunty little saluting motion to acknowledge my orders.

I roll my eyes, but neither of us moves.

"Tom?"

"Yeah." My voice is rough.

She swallows. "Do you think he'll call?"

It takes me a second to realize what she's talking about, and when comprehension dawns, it's the blast of metaphorical cold water that I need.

"Harry," I say, my voice flat as I say her boss's name. I'm thinking about her. Us. She's thinking about making partner. Of course she is.

She nods, and my flare of resentment abates almost immediately when I see that her eyes are a little too shiny.

"Hey. Kates." I reach out to touch her but let my hand drop. "Whatever happens, whether or not Harry calls this Christmas or next. He's proud of

you. Your dad, I mean.”

Her head snaps up, her surprised gaze meeting mine in the reflection of the bathroom mirror.

I keep my eyes on hers and tell her what I should have told her years ago, what she needs to hear even if she doesn’t want to. “But I also know . . . your dad, he cared about your happiness more than *anything*. He wouldn’t want you to sacrifice it chasing a dream of his.”

There’s a flash of vulnerability in her brown eyes, which she replaces almost immediately with a spark of anger. Her go-to defense mechanism. “What makes you think I’ve sacrificed anything?”

“Right.” A touch of bite returns to my voice because anger is my defense mechanism too. “Because our marriage was *nothing*.”

“Our marriage *was* something,” she says with so much raw emotion in her voice that it’s my turn to be surprised. “Of course it was something. But I guess we just skipped that part in the vows where I was going to have to choose: you or my dad.”

I go still and stop my awkward attempts at bandaging up her wound. “*What?* That’s how you thought it went down?”

She lifts a bare shoulder.

“No, you aren’t shrugging that off,” I say, moving around to her side, forcing her to look at me directly instead of through the reflection. “Explain that.”

She swallows. “I don’t know, maybe that’s a melodramatic way of looking at it, but . . . you knew what I wanted when we got together. You know how important making partner was, you knew *why*. You knew it’s what my dad wanted, what I’d promised him. I thought you *understood* that. That you were there for me. I loved you for it. And instead you just . . . walked away.”

“I did understand all that, Kates, and damn it, I *fought*,” I say because defensiveness feels easier than the raw pain that threatens. “It’s not like I just

up and walked out the door one day out of nowhere.”

“It sure felt like it,” she says quietly. “One day I was trying to learn how to juggle a demanding job and a demanding husband. The next, you told me you were done, and I was . . . reeling. I wasn’t doing a good job at being a wife—I know that. But I was *trying*. I thought *we* were trying. I thought that’s what couples did—figured out how to be married. Together.”

I drag a hand over my face, and for perhaps the first time, I try to look at the demise of our marriage through her eyes. I knew we were never on the same page, but hearing her side of it now, I realize we weren’t even reading the same book.

Hell, I’m not sure we were even using the same *language*.

In that last year, I remember more of a ghost of a wife than an actual wife. She was in the office more often than she was at home. She postponed countless date nights and never followed through on her promises to reschedule. Everything was on her agenda, from sex to vacations, and I swear even in the midst of both those things, her mind was on work. There were times sitting beside her at our tiny dining room table eating breakfast when I wasn’t sure she’d even notice if I wasn’t there.

That’s why divorce seemed, not the easy option, exactly, but the logical one. She didn’t seem to care one way or another if I were around.

I wanted her to care.

But looking at her now, hearing her version, I realize . . .

She cared. She cared a hell of a lot.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of that,” I say, unable to keep the frustration out of my voice.

Her grip on the towel tightens, and the way she shuffles her feet tells me this conversation is uncomfortable for her.

I brace for her to say something snarky and shove me out of the bathroom, but she surprises me by standing her ground with only minimal snark.

“What was I supposed to say?” she asks with a sigh. “Hey, Tom, by the way, please don’t divorce me?”

“Yes!”

Katherine shakes her head. “Nobody wants to be married to someone who doesn’t want to be married back.”

Of course I wanted to be married back.

“That day when I told you I wanted a divorce . . . Kates, I wasn’t even sure you heard me. You barely looked up from your phone.”

“Because I couldn’t! I didn’t know how—I couldn’t believe—” She sucks in a breath and looks up toward the ceiling with a furious look on her face, and I’m stunned to see unshed tears.

On instinct, I reach out a hand to console her but let it drop. Touching her to help out with an injury is one thing. Touching her to comfort her takes us too close to a line I can’t cross.

She gathers herself and looks back at me calmly. “Would it have mattered? You’d already made up your mind.”

I want to argue otherwise, but she’s being candid, so I force myself to do the same. “No,” I admit quietly. “It probably wouldn’t have mattered. Communication issues aside, we both had different expectations of what a marriage should look like.”

She nods and I can see impenetrable Katherine returning, and I don’t know if I’m relieved or disappointed. “Yes. Exactly. Crossed wires, water under the bridge, and all that nonsense.” She arches an eyebrow. “Now, did you want to watch me shower, or did you get your fill from ogling my ass?”

I cup a hand behind my ear. “Thank you, Tom, for helping me with the nasty wound on my back.”

“Does Lolo know how needy you are?” Katherine says, shooing me backward with one hand.

Lolo. It’s the reminder I need to get the hell out of this bathroom, to get the hell away from Katherine. To end this thing.

I'm barely out of the bathroom before she shuts the door all but in my face. I hear the click of the lock and roll my eyes. "Is that really necessary? You think I just can't help myself and am going to come barging in for another look at your granny panties?"

"It's you barging in to see me without my granny panties that I'm worried about," she calls back.

She turns on the water before I can reply. I walk back to my briefcase and pull out the ring once more. Instead of opening it, I sit on the bed and look down at the box, trying to shift my attention toward this ring, toward this relationship.

But my mind is still on my conversation with Katherine.

I cared! Of course I cared!

I close my eyes. I wish . . . I wish I'd known. I wish she'd done things differently. That I had.

My thumb flicks open the ring box, and I stare down at the perfect diamond.

I shut the box again. Shutting out the intrusive thought that it's the wrong ring.

For the wrong woman.

TWENTY-NINE
KATHERINE

December 24, 12:19 a.m.

It's apparently a myth that you have to stay awake for a full twenty-four hours after a concussion. That's old news. The new recommendation is "it depends."

In my case, since I lost consciousness, I was supposed to stay awake until bedtime and then be awoken throughout the night.

And while I'm not looking forward to the being-woken-up part—especially since that particular requirement resulted in this whole adventure in the first place—I've still been looking forward to this moment all day.

An hour ago, I was exhausted down to my bones.

Now that I'm actually in bed? Sleep eludes me entirely.

The mattress is lumpy. The sheets are scratchy. The comforter . . . I try not to think about it. Also, I like to sleep on my back, and the injury makes that impossible.

I gingerly roll to the other side and force my eyes closed. They pop open immediately.

I forgot my retainer.

I *never* skip my dental straightjacket, though I suppose that if there was ever an excuse to do so, it would be tonight. And I almost do exactly that

until I realize . . .

Retainers are decidedly unsexy.

I open my eyes and let them flick over Tom's bed. Where he will be sleeping. Just a few feet from me. After his shower. Which has been going on for a good twenty minutes already because his preference for long showers hasn't changed over the years. His showers were always more marathon than sprint.

Don't think about it, don't think about it . . .

Nope. Too late. I'm thinking about it. Naked Tom. In the shower.

Does he still sleep naked? He better not. He *really* better not.

Wearing my unsexy retainer has suddenly never felt so critical.

I force myself out of bed and shuffle over to my suitcase, which Tom lifted onto a rickety luggage rack while I was in the shower. I dig around until I come up with the purple case and shove both top and bottom retainers in my mouth.

I turn back around, and the combination of the stress of the day, the late hour, and the pain meds I've just taken *should* be kicking in full blast. I *should* be beelining toward the bed.

Instead, I find myself staring at Tom's bed. Where his briefcase beckons me. The briefcase that he's been weirdly fondling whenever he thinks I'm not looking.

I shouldn't. I absolutely shouldn't.

I do.

I walk over to it, and with a quick glance toward the still-shut bathroom door, where his endless shower continues, I unlatch the clasp.

Something I learned about Tom early on: he is never *less* cool than when he's trying to be sneaky. You've never met an individual as painfully awkward and obvious as Tom the year he tried to plan a surprise birthday party for me.

And every year on our anniversary, he made a big show of not having

planned anything or having time to get me a gift. Which, of course, meant that he'd gone over the top on both fronts.

The more he wants to hide something, the more obvious he becomes. And apparently that hasn't changed at all in the intervening years since we split because the man's antics around this briefcase over the course of today would give a clown a run for its money.

Whatever's in here, he doesn't want me to know about it. I'm doing the man a favor, really, by getting the whole charade out in the open so he can relax. He should be thanking me . . .

Okay, fine. This isn't about Tom.

It's about me. And my almost painful curiosity.

I open the bag. It has all the usual suspects. His laptop. A little tech pouch, where he keeps all his cords organized. A book about some historic baseball season. Snore.

An outdated issue of the *New Yorker*. I shake my head. The man was always behind on his *New Yorker* reading.

An iPad that I'm guessing has a dead battery because he's always liked the *idea* of an iPad but never actually had a use for it.

And . . .

A little turquoise box that I'd know anywhere. It comes from a jewelry store I walk by every single day. The same store that plays the horrendous version of "Silver Bells."

But the knot in my stomach has nothing to do with the song. I don't care for that little knot. I don't care for it at all.

Please be earrings, I beg any deity who will listen. Or better yet, cuff links for his dad . . .

I flip open the box and don't realize I'm holding my breath until it comes out with an agonized whoosh.

Not earrings. Not cuff links.

A ring. An engagement ring.

It's . . . well, it's beautiful.

And *huge*.

Apparently, Tom has decided to upgrade this time around.

Bigger diamond.

Oh yeah, and a wife who isn't emotionally stunted.

I bite my lip as I ease the ring out of the box to get a better look. It really is beautiful. I don't know much about diamonds, but I know this one is shiny, enormous, and expensive.

And yet . . .

I like *my* ring better. Well, not mine anymore. But when it *was* mine, I loved it with its smaller stone and intricate setting that had been popular in Tom's great-great-grandparents' day.

Giving that ring back *hurt*, even though I knew it was the right thing to do. It's a family heirloom that belongs in the Walsh family, not on the fourth finger of the woman who was kicked out of the family.

Still, that ring had meant something to me, something more than just a symbol of a ceremony. That ring had let me know that someone had my back. Its subtle twinkle had made late nights in the office easier because I knew there would be someone at home waiting for me.

That ring had let me know I had a partner. The kind of partner that matters so much more than my name on the door of my law firm.

But as painful as returning the ring was, I've sometimes thought that keeping it might have hurt more. A reminder that nobody is at home waiting for me anymore. That I no longer have a partner.

So, I returned it, and I know Tom got it because his mother confirmed it was back in the family safe.

I frown. So why isn't he giving *that* ring to Lolo? Walsh family tradition willed it to the oldest son, to be given to his wife. Which Lolo is clearly destined to be because there's no way the rock in front of me isn't an engagement ring.

But why a shiny new one? Why not *the* ring?

Honestly, though, I'm as relieved as I am confused.

As much as it hurts to know that things with Lolo and Tom are far more serious than I've ever let myself contemplate, it would hurt even more knowing she would be getting *that* ring.

Because it still feels like *mine*.

He still feels like mine.

I swallow, surprised by the strength of possessiveness that makes my throat ache. Did I feel this way yesterday? Before Tom burst back into my life in that infuriating, all-consuming way of his?

Before I was reminded how much he drives me nuts.

And before I was forced to relive just how *good* we are together.

For all that went wrong between us, there's something that crackles inside me when I'm near him. As though I'm finally coming back online after a long outage.

Damn it. I miss Tom.

And there have been moments when I could have sworn he missed me too. He kept that silly key chain, for Christ's sake. That has to mean something.

But that's merely a token. A memory.

This ring in front of me? It's a hell of a lot more than a token, and the woman it's meant for will eventually replace any and all memories of me.

I hear the squeak of the tub's faucet as Tom turns off the water and jump so hard at the sudden silence that I drop the ring.

"Shit," I mutter as the ring bounces onto the disgusting carpet. I pick it up and give it a quick blow before setting it back into its box and shoving the whole thing back in Tom's bag.

I hurriedly refasten the briefcase clip and dive into bed, only to hiss out a string of four-letter words when the cut on my back screams in pain.

Right along with my heart.

My teeth are still clenched when, a few moments later, Tom opens the bathroom door. “Katherine. You awake?” he whispers.

I say nothing. I’m too afraid of what might spill out.

I hear the rustle of him pulling the sheets back on his bed. “I have to wake you every few hours. Doctor’s orders. Try to remember that when you want to kill me.”

Again, I say nothing. It’s cowardly, I know, feigning sleep to avoid a hard conversation. But right now, the only alternative is Tom knowing I’m about to cry myself to sleep.

And that is not—has never been—an option.

THIRTY
TOM

December 24, 7:04 a.m.

The following morning, I flip up the collar of my coat to block out the worst of the frigid wind and then do what I do best:

Glare at my ex-wife.

Five minutes ago, we were perfectly comfortable inside a blue Ford Fiesta.

Now, here we are on the side of the road. Again.

“Explain to me again,” I say. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Not wrong with *me*,” Katherine says. “The car was the problem. And the driver.”

“Yes, but he was driving us *to the airport*.”

She tilts her head and stares at me. “Why are you so grumpy? It’s Christmas Eve, I got us a way to get you home by lunch, and the storm’s rolled out. Shouldn’t you be, like, caroling or something?”

I don’t feel like caroling. I feel like sleeping. Something I did not do much of last night because I had to set my alarm to go off every hour on the hour to make sure Katherine wasn’t dead. And every hour, on the hour, I was almost punched in the balls.

At 5:00 a.m., when one of her punches actually landed, I wanted to kill

her myself.

“I was acting in your best interest too,” Katherine says as she pulls her phone out of her purse. “Getting us out of that car.”

“How the hell do you figure that?” I ask, incredulous.

“Tom, I say this without an ounce of hyperbole. That driver was a serial killer.”

I tilt my head to the sky. “Just smite me now. Actually, better yet—smite *her* and her delusions.”

“I am a lot of things, but delusional is not one of them. Did you notice that when we got into the car, he didn’t say a single word? I said, ‘Hi, are you Ed?’ Him: *nothing*. Also, the car was suspiciously clean.”

“I’ve gotta tell you, Kates. After that motel room, clean looked pretty darn good to me.”

She refuses to be persuaded. Of course. “Yes, but did you notice the *smell*? That antiseptic bleachy smell? Straight-up alarming, Thomas. And what kind of car has no seat belts? Hmm? Explain *that* to me.”

I rub my forehead. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the reason I had to wake you up every hour last night a concussion you got while *not* wearing a seat belt?”

She sniffs and touches the healing bump on her head. “Yes. Which is why I’m especially qualified to discuss this.”

“Is this . . . humility I’m witnessing?” I lay a hand over my chest. “But now I’m confused. Are we standing out here because he’s a serial killer? Or because he didn’t have seat belts? Wouldn’t the no-seat-belt thing make it easier for his victims to escape?”

I don’t know why I’m even having this conversation. I definitely don’t know why I’m borderline enjoying it. But. Here we are.

Katherine has to think about this one. “Maybe he doesn’t want his victims to use the seat belt against him. You know, loop it around his neck.”

She mimes the action, and I stare at her. “Maybe *you’re* the serial killer.”

“*And*. Another thing!” She lifts her finger. “He turned on the child lock so we couldn’t get out. He only released it after I threatened to call the Feds.”

“Yeah, about that. Why Feds? Not threaten the generic *cops*, like normal people would?”

“Because the FBI handles serial killers. Honestly, Tom.” She shakes her head, disappointed in me. “I thought you would know this.”

“Why on earth would I know this?”

She flips her wrist at me. “Settle down. You’re getting all riled up.”

“Oh, am I? Why do you think that might be?”

She waves her hand at our general surroundings. “Just be quiet and enjoy the Norman Rockwell winter wonderland vibes of our current setting while I get us a new car with seat belts.”

I point at the nearby, apparently long-deserted construction site. “I didn’t see that in a Norman Rockwell painting.”

“The barn, Tom. Look at the barn.”

Reluctantly I look in the direction she’s pointing. I’m mollified slightly. A shiny red barn, complete with an enormous wreath, is covered in perfect white fluffy snow. It’s so perfectly December Hallmark movie that I wouldn’t be surprised if a reindeer ambled by.

As far as our adventures go—the last of our adventures—it’s not bad.

I frown then because, puzzlingly, the thought of all this ending doesn’t fill me with the relief it should.

My phone buzzes.

“Lolo?” Katherine asks without looking up.

I glance at it. “Yup.”

“You can answer it if you want.”

“Oh, *can* I? I don’t need your permission to take a call from my girlfriend, thank you very much.”

I slide my phone back into my pocket without answering, and Katherine glances up at me.

“You should *really* get that,” she says.

“Romantic advice? From you, really? Besides. I texted Lo this morning. Let her know we got held up.”

There’s a lot I didn’t let her know, though. Like the fact that Katherine and I shared a hotel room. And a bathroom. And that the towels were very small. And that her underwear are somewhere between light taupe and mocha. And ugly.

And yet somehow, I can’t stop thinking about her in said towel. And underwear.

“You’re an idiot,” Katherine mutters.

I blow on my hands and study her. The words are typical Katherine, but something seems slightly off about her tone.

Actually, for that matter, she’s seemed off ever since we got up this morning. She’s been prickly as ever, but her spikes seem dulled somehow.

“How’s your head?” I ask.

“Fine. A little headache, but I’ve had worse from tequila.”

“And your back?” The gash seemed better this morning when I changed the bandage, but I’m sure it still hurts like hell.

She shoots me an impatient look. “If you’re asking if I feel like I was in a car accident yesterday—two of them—yes. Okay? Interrogation over?”

“Not yet,” I say, crossing my arms. “Something is up with you. Is it our flight? Was it canceled again?”

Katherine booked us a little puddle jumper from a nearby regional airport that’ll take us to a regional airport in Gary, Indiana. It’s not exactly the first-class ticket of my original flight cruising into the C concourse at O’Hare yesterday, but after everything, I’m grateful.

“Nope, flight’s still on time,” she says, not looking up from her phone.

I’m more convinced than ever that something’s amiss. I feel like I’m getting a reflection version of Katherine instead of the real version. She’s distanced herself.

“Ah. Here we go,” she says, thumbs moving over her screen. “Got a car. You’ll still be at your parents’ by lunch.”

“We’ll be at my parents’ by lunch,” I correct.

“Nope.” She drops her phone back into her bag. “I’ll be on a plane to Boston. Out of O’Hare, so go ahead and get jealous.”

I stare at her. “Wait. What. Is this one of the concussion warning signs? Delusions?”

That earns me a little smile. “Nope. Dead serious.”

“What the hell is in Boston? And you’re supposed to have someone with you for at least another twenty-four hours to monitor that gash on your back.”

She pats me on the arm, dismissive and distant, and it bothers me.

“You’re off the hook, Walsh,” she says. “Irene repeated her offer for me to spend the holiday with her family, and I decided to take her up on it. *And* her daughter’s a nurse so she’s more qualified than you to be on infection patrol. Not that I didn’t appreciate your efforts. I’m thrilled to look like a mummy.”

That, at least, sounds a bit like the usual Katherine, but instead of being relieved, I feel . . . empty?

“So, you’re just . . . leaving?” I ask. “Just like that?”

“What. Mad I’m stealing your move?”

I swallow. That one landed. “C’mon,” I say quietly. “That’s not fair.”

I feel . . . wounded. I actually thought we were getting somewhere. Not that I know where. And it’s not like we could go anywhere *together*. But at the very least I thought we were coming to an understanding. Maybe even creeping toward that hard-to-find place of forgiving each other rather than just forgetting each other.

Though, the more time I spend with her, I realize I never did forget. Not really.

“Where the hell is our new Uber?” Katherine lifts a hand to shield her eyes from the bright sun and squints down the road. She’s obviously

deliberately avoiding looking my way, and I finally decide I've had enough.

"Hey, Kates. Talk to me."

"About what?"

"About whatever you're thinking! Feeling! I thought we were . . . you know."

"No, I don't know. You thought we were *what*, Tom?" she says, finally facing me, but her eyes are distant. "Two exes who can barely tolerate each other? Well spotted."

I shake my head. "You're retreating. Why?"

Instead of answering, she points off in the distance.

"Extreme urgency demands I go investigate that construction area and see exactly how disgusting the porta-potty is. If our Uber gets here, don't let the car leave without me."

"No promises," I mutter.

Katherine trudges toward the porta-potty, holding her arms out to the sides for balance as she slip-walks away from me.

I pivot back toward the road. Annoyed. At her. Myself. The situation. Mostly, that I can't even identify why I feel so angry at her. Yesterday, I would have jumped at the chance to off-load her onto Irene.

But yesterday, I didn't know that I'd hurt her. Or that I missed her.

Katherine getting on that plane to Boston is the end of the line for us, and we both know it.

If we were both single, or even both happily married, there's a chance, a very small chance, that we could be friendly-ish in the future.

But a newly engaged man does not keep in touch with his single, attractive ex-wife . . .

Attractive? When had *that* description for Katherine come back into play?

I dig my phone out of my pocket and call Lolo back. She picks up on the first ring. "Hey, finally! Merry Christmas Eve."

"Merry Christmas Eve. How are things there?"

“Good. Wonderful. Will be better when you get here.” A pause. “Please tell me you’ll still get here.”

“Absolutely, back on track. The bad weather’s passed, we’ve got a flight. I’ll be there for dinner.”

“I?” she says. “No ‘we’?”

“Nope.” I force a cheerful tone. “Change of plans. Katherine’s headed to Boston.”

“Oh, fantastic!” Lolo’s voice sounds the most genuinely happy it has since the start of this nightmare. “Does she have family there who can take her on?”

Take her on?

I pause. “No. No family. Just . . . she figured something out.”

“Well, this is incredible.” Lo is gushing. “Now we can celebrate Christmas properly, the way we planned.”

“Absolutely.” My voice is flat now. “My Good Samaritan duties are officially behind me.” I hear a thump as Katherine spills out of the porta-potty. “I got to go. I’ll call you as soon as I land.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too,” I say automatically, ending the call. I put the phone in my bag instead of its usual spot in my pocket to avoid what I expect will be a nonstop barrage of messages from my family as they start to wake up.

Katherine shuffles back toward me through the snow. “Tom! Look!”

She gestures at the road, and I turn to see a black sedan crawling toward us.

Katherine waves wildly and needlessly at the car until it slows to a stop beside us. Its tinted windows keep me from seeing the driver’s face, and I hope Katherine’s not going to have another one of her serial killer freak-outs, but she simply grabs her suitcase and walks back toward the trunk. I do the same.

We both stand there, but the trunk stays shut.

“Um,” Katherine says. “Hello?”

“Maybe it’s his first day?” I say quietly.

“Hello!” Katherine calls. Much less quietly.

The trunk pops open, and Katherine immediately leans forward to give it a careful inspection.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

“Body bag. Bleach.”

“Oh, God, not this again.” I grab both of our suitcases and hoist them into the trunk before she can think of some reason why we should stay out in the freezing cold instead of get into the warm car.

The sky is starting to cloud over, and a few snowflakes have started to fall. If there’s another storm on the way, I have every intention of beating it.

“See, now, if this were a cab, the driver would have gotten out of the car to help us,” Katherine says, dropping her bag atop the suitcases.

“If he were a cab, we’d have to get you a helmet,” I say, slamming the trunk shut.

The second I do, the front wheels make a grinding, slipping noise on the ice before continuing down the road. Without us.

Shock renders us speechless for a moment, and Katherine recovers first. “Hey! Moron! You forgot the passengers!”

She starts to run after it but slips on the snow. I grab her arm to steady her. “Katherine.” My voice is steadier than I feel. “Please tell me that you checked the license plate of that car. To make sure it matched the one in the app?”

It’s a rhetorical question because I’d bet my luggage she didn’t check. Oh, wait. *I don’t have any luggage.*

Katherine takes a long, deep breath. “Okay. It’s okay. It’s going to be fine. The roads are still icy, he’s not going to get anywhere fast. Call the cops, tell them what happened.”

It’s my turn for a long, deep breath. “I don’t have my phone, Katherine.

Or my wallet. They were both in my briefcase.”

Along with an engagement ring.

I can't think about that right now. “Give me your phone. I'll call. You'll just start to yell.”

She doesn't move.

“Katherine. Don't tell me—”

“My phone's in my purse.”

“Why the hell would you put your purse in the trunk!”

“I was trying to make a point!” she yells back. “That I could go without my phone!”

I—

I can't with that right now. So I ignore it.

I tilt my head back to the sky. “Damn it. This is so you.”

“What exactly is *so me*? Putting my luggage into a strange car?” She hunches her shoulders and shivers. “Believe it or not, this is a first.”

“Not that,” I say, looking back at her. “You make everything about you. You never stop, not once, to see who you might be affecting. It's always what you want to do, a point *you* were trying to make. Your career. Your goals. Your agenda.”

“You seriously want to talk about agenda right now? Tell me, Tom, where were we headed? Oh yeah, *Chicago*, which I can assure you hasn't been on my holiday agenda for a long time. And why were we going to Chicago again?”

I cross my arms. “Because my family lives there, and it's Christmas. I shouldn't have to defend wanting to spend the holidays with my family.”

“Ah. But that's not why we have to get there by Christmas Eve. Is it, Tom?” Her voice is quiet, her gaze equally calm.

It's the perfect opening to tell her the truth.

An opening I do not take.

THIRTY-ONE
KATHERINE

December 24, 7:32 a.m.

At some point, it becomes painfully clear that walking is our only option.

We make it five minutes.

Maybe ten.

My pace starts to slow.

The snowplow that came through earlier apparently decided to call it a day because the road ahead has snow up to my knees. And though I at least heeded Tom's suggestion to wear booted heels instead of my stiletto heels, they're suede, and my feet feel like ice.

Tom's pace slows as well until we silently come to a stop. Without a word of smugness, Tom gently takes my arm and guides me toward the side of the road.

It's started to snow, but it's a gentle, pretty sort of snow. Of course, it won't be so pretty the longer we're out here. But I can't think about that. Or how hopeless our situation feels right now.

Instead, I take a deep breath and hoist myself up awkwardly onto the guardrail. The metal is freezing cold, even through the fabric of my black pants, but at least it gets my feet out of the snow.

Tom sits beside me. I can't quite bring myself to look at him.

Our situation is . . . not great.

And it's my fault.

Even assuming that a car comes around in a minute or two and the driver is a Good Samaritan, we have nothing but the clothes on our bodies. Which doesn't even include gloves because I tucked the pair I borrowed from Tom inside my purse while using my phone because they didn't work on the touch screen.

I cross my arms and hug myself, breaking the silence. "I don't suppose that someday we'll look back at this and laugh?"

I wish I could bite back the question the second it slips out.

Even if we *do* look back and laugh someday in the distant future, Tom and I won't be laughing *together*.

He'll probably be telling his cute grandchildren about his fraught, frozen adventure on his way to propose to Grandma, and I'll be . . . alone.

Instead of answering my lame question, he glances over at me. "Why are you not more upset about losing your phone?"

"I am. You just can't tell because my face is frozen in place." I try to smile, and it feels stiff. "Do I look like one of those plastic-surgery-gone-wrong pictures from Page Seven?"

"Six," he says, dropping his chin and smiling. "Page Six. And frozen features aside, the Katherine I know would be vibrating with horror at not having her most precious possession. You're not. Why?"

He's right. I hate that he's right, but I can't deny that old me would have been losing her mind at being without her phone for even five minutes. And as much as I know people don't change in the span of a single day, I can't deny the fact that something *has* shifted over the course of the past twenty-four hours.

That my phone no longer feels like my most precious possession.

Tom doesn't let me off the hook. "You're not worried that Harry's going to call with *the* call?"

I open my mouth with the knee-jerk instinct to tell him that of *course* I'm freaking out about missing the partner call that I've been waiting my entire adult life for.

But the truth? I haven't even thought about how losing my phone means missing Harry's phone call. Not until just now when Tom mentioned it.

The realization leaves me with an unsettled, untethered feeling. Who is Katherine Tate, Esquire, aspiring partner?

What does she stand for? What does she want?

I'm too afraid I know the answer to that last one. And that the correct question isn't so much *what* does she want, but *who*?

Who do I want?

I already know. Just like I know I won't get him.

I missed my chance with Tom. I've always known that. But until yesterday, I didn't realize how much I wanted a do-over. A second chance.

I lift my frozen hands to my mouth and try to blow some warmth back into them. I half expect Tom to give me grief about losing his gloves along with everything else.

Instead, he slides off the guardrail and pivots to stand in front of me. Wordlessly, he reaches for my hands, bringing them between his much bigger palms, which somehow seem so much warmer than my own.

Tom begins rubbing my hands briskly, and though his gaze is locked on our joined hands rather than making eye contact, there's a surprising intimacy to the action. And a kindness, too, that I'm not entirely sure I deserve.

"You hate me," I say quietly. "Because I lost our bags."

"Yes. And no."

"Yes, you hate me. But not because I lost the bags?" I ask, studying his features.

His eyes flick up, meet mine. He winks, and before I can register just what that does to my insides, his gaze lowers back to our hands.

I don't push it further because I know what that wink means. He doesn't

hate me. He just thinks that he should.

And then, because I think he should as well, I push it a little bit further.

“We might miss the flight.”

Tom nods, then lifts my hands to his lips, blowing warmth onto them. If the wink unsettled me, the brief brush of his mouth against my fingers nearly knocks me sideways.

“We probably will. Which seems about right, though, doesn’t it? Why would things start going right for us now?”

I study him for a moment. “Why aren’t *you* freaking out?”

“Oh, I am,” he says with a small smile. “I’m very much freaking out that we’re going to die here, buried in the snow, your butt frozen to that guardrail in your ugly underwear. That’d be a nice bit of karma, wouldn’t it? Us buried side by side after all?”

I know he’s trying to lighten the mood for my sake, and yesterday, I might have let him. But that was before I saw the ring.

“Tom. Why aren’t you freaking out?” I ask softly. “Your briefcase is in that truck.”

His lips part in surprise, and I see his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. I know he hears what I’m not saying.

Your ring was in that trunk. Soon to be Lolo’s ring.

His eyes close. “How long have you known?”

“Not long. Last night. When you showered, I snooped. Saw the ring.”

His eyes open again, and there are about a dozen emotions swirling in his gaze, but I can’t seem to identify a single one of them.

My hands are still pressed between his palms, and I slowly pull them away, then shove my hands in my pockets. The relative warmth is a poor substitute for Tom’s palms.

“Can I ask you something?”

There’s a wary beat of silence. “Sure.”

“Why isn’t it Evelyn’s ring?” I ask.

Tom inhales, then crosses his arms, putting his hands in his armpits. He leans forward, staring at his shoes.

“Never mind,” I say quickly. “Not my business—”

Don't want to know.

“It didn't feel right,” he says, his toe tapping against the wood stake of the guardrail.

“Really?” I ask softly. “Because I always thought it was a family tradition. One that was sort of important to you.”

He exhales. “Right. Well. Actually, on the note of family traditions, there's something—”

The crunch of tires on snow captures my attention, and before Tom can finish his sentence, I tap his shoulder repeatedly in excitement. “Oh my God, shut up before you jinx the one good thing to happen to us. Tom. It's a *car*.”

THIRTY-TWO
TOM

December 24, 9:15 a.m.

We miss our flight.

And let's just say, this airport is not equipped with options. If a tumbleweed came cruising down the runway, I suspect it would qualify as a traffic jam at Eugene Terrien Regional Airport.

And you know what? I can't even muster the energy to be surprised by the turn of events.

Katherine, on the other hand, digs deep and finds not only surprise but outrage, which she directs at the elderly airport employee.

"You don't understand," Katherine explains to the sweet, if befuddled, woman. "We have to get to Chicago. This is life or death."

The woman's eyes go wide, and she shoots me an alarmed look. I shake my head to reassure her. *No.*

The older woman relaxes slightly and then turns to Katherine with an admirably patient smile. "I understand this is difficult, dear. It being Christmas Eve and all. But we've only got the one to Chicago each day, and it left thirty minutes ago."

Katherine bangs her fist on the counter. "Unacceptable."

"Alright," I murmur, touching Katherine's arm. "Let's not take out our

troubles on . . .” My gaze drops to the name tag. “June.”

“Well, *June* isn’t being solution oriented,” Katherine says with a mutinous scowl.

“What do you want her to do?” I ask. “Arrange for a hot-air balloon?”

“Yes! See, now *there’s* some solid problem-solving!” Katherine looks at June. “You have a hot-air balloon?”

“Katherine,” I say, keeping my tone mild. “You’ve got to get a grip.”

“But we were so close,” she says, her voice sounding as desperate and frustrated as I feel.

Were we, though? We have no passports, no driver’s licenses, no credit cards. Even if we’d made it to the airport in time, being allowed on the plane would have been a long shot.

Katherine rubs her forehead as Nat King Cole croons in the background about being home for Christmas. He’s basically mocking us at this point.

June is not unsympathetic to our plight because she leans across the counter, nudging a bowl of peppermints our way with a kind expression. “Listen, loves. I know it’s hard to be away from family at Christmas, but at least you have each other, and that’s something.”

“No, actually, we don’t,” Katherine says, never ceasing her forehead rubbing, which seems to have more to do with weary resignation than the concussion. “Not anymore.”

There it is again. That tight feeling in my chest has been present more often than not in the past twenty-four hours.

“Hey,” I tell Katherine quietly. “Listen. We’ll figure something out.”

“Like what, Tom?” Her head snaps up, her eyes blazing with temper and something else. “*What* will we figure out? In case you haven’t noticed, there’s not a whole lot going on at this hopscotch course they call an airport.”

I shoot June a silent apology, but the older lady bats it away. “Holidays are stressful. You know, if you two have nowhere to go, I’m due over at my son and daughter-in-law’s. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind squeezing in two

extra spots at the table . . .”

“We appreciate that,” I say before Katherine’s Grinch side comes back out. “But we couldn’t possibly intrude on your family. And if you need to get going, we’ll understand completely.”

Katherine makes a grumbling noise but thankfully keeps her mouth shut.

“Well, I do need to be heading out. I have to stop by home and pick up my famous cheese ball.” She pulls on her coat and hoists a huge poinsettia into her arms as she frowns at us. “You’re sure you won’t come?”

“Positive. But thank you.”

She shakes her head. “Well. Okay. The airport stays open twenty-four seven. There’s a vending machine, and the security guard if you need anything.”

“Yes, we need something. An *airplane*—”

I put a hand over Katherine’s mouth and smile at June. “You’ve been very helpful.” Katherine bites my finger, and I push my palm more firmly. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you as well, dears. I know it seems like the pits now, but trust me, it’s always the things that don’t go according to plan that you end up remembering!”

Isn’t that the truth, I think with a sideways look at Katherine.

“Hey, June?” Katherine calls after the departing woman. “Is it okay if we use the phone?”

“Of course! Just be sure to set it back to voicemail after. Big blue button.”

“Will do. Merry Christmas,” Katherine says.

I nudge her with my shoulder. “Look at you, Scrooge! Showing some personal growth and Christmas spirit.”

“Yeah, I’m practically Mrs. Claus,” she grumbles, pulling the phone off the desk and up onto the counter.

“Who are you calling?”

“Nobody.” She holds out the receiver to me. “*You’re* calling Lolo.”

I jolt a little, wondering what it says about my situation that my ex-wife thought about calling my girlfriend and I did not.

And still, I hesitate.

Katherine makes an impatient noise and grabs my wrist, slapping the receiver in my palm. “Man up, Walsh.”

I take a deep breath and dial.

Lolo doesn’t pick up until the third ring. “Hello?” Her voice is hesitant, likely braced for spam or bad news, given the unfamiliar number. On the second one, I can deliver.

“Hey. Lo. It’s me.”

“Tom? Where are you calling from?”

“The airport. An airport,” I amend with a look around at the tiny space.

“Is your cell phone dead?”

“It’s . . . lost?”

“Lost,” she repeats, her voice flat. “And let me guess. You’re delayed.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t have to.

“Tom, this whole thing—”

“I know. Believe me. I know.” I drop my chin toward my chest and close my eyes.

“I’ve been patient,” Lolo says in a voice I haven’t heard from her often, one I imagine she uses with the kids in her class. “I’ve been understanding. But with all that’s happened, I can’t help but wonder if the universe is trying to tell us something.”

Of course not. Or if it is, it’s only that we can weather anything.

But the reassuring words don’t come out.

Because the truth is, I’ve been doing some wondering of my own.

Like why I haven’t minded being without my phone the past couple hours, forcefully untethered from the woman I’m supposed to love. Or why I wasn’t that disappointed that we missed the one and only plane.

Or, most alarmingly of all, why I’m not gutted to have lost the ring.

“Tom.” Katherine pokes my arm. “You’re zoning out,” she says in a loud whisper.

“Is that Katherine?” Lolo asks with the slightest bite.

“Yeah,” I say tiredly.

Lolo exhales. “See, Tom, this is exactly what I mean. How am I supposed to believe—”

Katherine holds out her hand. “Give me the phone.”

I shove her hand away. “Pass.”

“Okay.” She lets her hand drop, and I should have known better than to docilely agree because the second I turn away, she pounces, grabbing the receiver right out of my hand.

“Hi, Lolo? Okay, first, I’ve been dying to know. Is that your real name?”

Oh, Jesus. I make a grab for the phone, but Katherine moves with surprising grace for a woman who’s been in two recent car accidents.

“Anyway, doesn’t matter,” Katherine is saying. “So, this is Katherine. Or, as you perhaps know me, The One Who Came Before?”

“Give. Me. The. Phone,” I say, enunciating every word.

Katherine ignores me and continues. “Listen. Lo. Can I call you that? Woman to woman? I *get* it. I can’t even fathom how much this sucks. Actually, you know what? I can. I can because I was married to Tom, and I know that’s not what you want to be reminded of right now, but trust me, that’s actually a positive. Because I know what he’s like as a partner, and Lolo? He’s one of the good ones.”

I start to reach for the phone again, but I go still at her words, my heartbeat thrumming a little too fast when she turns toward me. “No, scratch that,” Katherine says, her tone softening along with her expression. “He’s one of the *great* ones. You would not believe the hell he’s put himself through to get back to you. And you’d be a fool to let him get away.”

Katherine sharply pivots away from me. “Don’t make the same mistake I made.”

She lowers her voice even further, but I hear it anyway. And I'm not at all sure how I feel about it.

"Nope, absolutely not," Katherine continues after whatever Lolo's just said. "I was a perfect lady and kept my hands to myself. Yup, him too. If we had rubber gloves, we'd wear them around each other, and if we had noise-canceling headphones, we'd have worn those too. And if I had a gun . . ."

"Okay, that's enough of that—" I say, but once again Katherine dances away, pulling the phone cord as far as it will go, though now she faces me as she continues to speak into the phone.

"Lo, if you give up on him, I will be *very* angry because he's been waiting a long time for you. You've seen his spreadsheet, right? Where he marks all his life's bucket list items? Total dork—or yeah, sure, 'cute' works too. Anyway, my point is, you fit right into that spreadsheet, you align perfectly with his timeline. That's what he wants, Lolo. You're the *one* that he wants."

Katherine and I stare at each other, and for an agonizing moment, I can see her entire heart in her gaze. Fear my own heart is in mine.

Katherine whirls back around. "So. Lo? You go put on the Christmas sweater I know Nancy bought for you and bake some gingerbread and get flour on your nose, or something adorable like that. Because I promise. I'm bringing Tom home to you."

She hangs up without another word and punches a button, presumably to honor June's request to send the line back to voicemail.

When she turns back, the soft emotion is tucked away once again, replaced with intense determination.

"Sorry I didn't let you say goodbye," she says with a wave of her hand that says she's not sorry at all. "You always take forever to hang up the phone, and we don't have time for that crap."

"Really?" I ask skeptically. "Seems to me we have nothing *but* time. I appreciate your trying to give Lolo hope, but . . . it's time to call it, Kates. We

did our best, but Christmas Eve at my family's is not happening.”

The Christmas *proposal* is not happening.

Katherine reaches out a hand, sets it on my shoulder, and meets my eyes. Reassuring. Comfortable. Warm. Right. Then she gives me a little shake like a coach giving a pep talk.

“Tom. Do you want to get married again?”

Staring into her brown eyes, I nod. “I do.”

“Okay then.” She squeezes my shoulder in reassurance. “Then let's get you home.”

THIRTY-THREE
TOM

December 24, 10:20 a.m.

“You know . . . this is really not what I had in mind.” I lean down to Katherine to whisper into her ear.

Katherine leans toward me to reply. “Really?” she whispers back. “What part of this trip *has* been what you had in mind?”

“Fair point.”

I glance to my left just as the long-haul truck driver, who’s currently serving as our chauffeur, takes a huge bite of his hoagie. I wince as I watch a mayo-slickened piece of lettuce slip out of the bread and onto his flannel-covered chest.

Gorby—yes, that’s his real name—looks down at the rogue lettuce, causing him to swerve just enough that the rumble strip on the shoulder vibrates the cab. He overcorrects, sending me careening into Katherine, who called “dibs” on the window seat mere seconds after securing us our “sweet ride.” Her actual words.

“Gosh golly dang,” Gorby mutters in consternation before picking up the piece of lettuce and eating it. He glances over at us apologetically. “Sorry ’bout my language there.”

Yeah. Because *that’s* the problem with this situation.

“Alrighty,” Gorby says, polishing off the last bite of hoagie and licking his thumb. “Main course time. Ready for my burger.”

“How was your hoagie appetizer?” Katherine asks politely.

“Hit the spot. Portable charcuterie, I call it.”

Gorby hands me a cold burger he’s stashed in a cupholder, and reluctantly, I unwrap it and place it into his “burger” hand, just as he instructed me to do before we even left the airport.

“That’s right,” Gorby says in an approving tone. “Nice and easy now. I gotcha, Big Carl.”

“Big Carl?” I can’t help but ask. Hoping he’s not referring to me.

He lifts the burger. “I name all my chows. Seems right to honor the animal that gave up its life.”

Katherine purses her lips and nods as though this makes complete sense.

Gorby burps.

Did I mention I’m seated in the middle?

Still. A ride is a ride, even if it is atypical.

I don’t know how Katherine managed to find the number of a long-haul trucking company. Or convince their dispatcher to send a truck to swing by the airport and pick up a couple of hitchhikers. Or how she even thought of a semitruck as an option in the first place. But then, I suppose after the twenty-four hours we’ve had, it might quite literally be our last option.

I’m grateful, if not exactly comfortable.

“I really can’t express enough, Gorby, how much we appreciate you giving us a lift to Chicago,” I say, accepting the half-eaten burger he hands me so he can fiddle with his navigation system.

“Ain’t nothing,” he says as he chews. “Your pretty little lady here caught my dispatcher just in time. Didn’t hurt me none to swing by the airport.”

Katherine sighs but doesn’t correct his assumption that she’s my pretty little lady. It’s not like her to hold her tongue, and I glance over, but her face is turned toward the window, hiding whatever she’s thinking or feeling from

me. Though, I'm never sure I'm reading her right, even when she's staring right at me.

Yet another piece of lettuce falls onto Gorby's rather good-sized belly as he takes the burger back.

"Dang nabbit, and I just had this one dry-cleaned!" He picks the lettuce off his shirt with surprising dexterity, given his enormous fingers. "Though, better I take the brunt of the mess than Rebecca."

I'm preoccupied with the fact that he gets his flannel dry-cleaned, so it takes me a moment to respond. "Rebecca?"

"Didn't I mention? This here's Rebecca," he says, taking his hand off the wheel and patting the dash. He leaves it there for a moment longer than I feel comfortable, and I resist the urge to grab the wheel. "I love each and every one of her eighteen wheels as if they were my own." He sighs. "We've been through thick and thin. Through thicker and thinner. Through thickest and—"

"And thinnest?" Katherine asks.

I shoot her a warning look, not wanting to offend what feels like our literal last option to get to Chicago. But Gorby either doesn't notice or doesn't mind her sarcasm.

"That's right, ma'am!" Gorby takes another bite and glances down at his shirt. He sees it's all clear and, chewing, continues, "Becky and I been together for eight beautiful years. Coming up on a million miles together . . . Boy, isn't that something? We're gonna have to find something to do to celebrate! How about you two? How long you been together?"

"Not a million miles, right, Tom?" Katherine says, batting her eyelashes up at me.

"No, indeed," I play right along. I glance at Gorby but not toward Katherine. "My girl here is no Rebecca."

"Please tell me I was not just compared to a car," Katherine says.

"No!" Gorby exclaims, affronted by the suggestion. "Rebecca here's a big rig!"

I look back to Katherine. “She’s a big rig. You were just a big—”

I break off and grin when she narrows her eyes.

“So, what happened?” Gorby asks. “Why didn’t you two go the distance?”

He looks almost sad at our failed romance, though the effect is tempered a bit when he takes an enormous bite of burger.

“’Cuz, I gotta say,” he continues when neither of us replies. “The two of you together. You’ve got a real . . . what’s the word I’m lookin’ for?”

“Hostility? Animosity? Mutual loathing?” Katherine provides.

“Energy!” Gorby proclaims. “That’s the word I was thinkin’. Or was it synergy? You two kind of crackle. You know?”

I do know. I know all too well.

“Crackling’s not always a good thing,” I say quietly.

“On that, we agree,” Katherine says. “Left unchecked, a crackle can sometimes . . .” She makes a combustion motion with her hands.

Gorby takes his hand off the wheel, picks something out of his tooth, and frowns. “So, you ain’t romantic anymore. But you’re traveling together for Christmas? That makes about as much sense as a jar of little, tiny pickled onions.”

Katherine leans forward to look around me at Gorby. “Cocktail onions? You’re not a fan? They’re great in a Gibson.”

“Unnatural.” He shakes his head. “What happened to ’em to make them so small? They just ain’t right. But *you* two. You two seem right as—”

Katherine cuts in. “Tom’s with somebody else. Someone who suits him far better than I ever did.”

“Sheesh golly.” Gorby taps his fist on the steering wheel lightly, disappointed. “That just doesn’t seem right to me.”

Me neither, Gorby. Me neither.

The thought causes an immediate wave of guilt as I think of Lolo, who’s been a perfectly pleasant companion the past year, who’s patiently waited

while I sort out the mess that is Katherine.

I just need to get back to her. See *her* face so I can forget all about Katherine's.

Probably.

"So. You ain't together. So, what's in Chicago that you're in such a rush to get to by Christmas?" Gorby asks thoughtfully as he crumples the burger wrapper into a ball and hands it to me. I accept it and give it to Katherine.

"Lolo," Katherine says matter-of-factly as she leans forward to tuck the wrapper into the little trash bag Gorby has strapped to the passenger side glove compartment.

"That a truck?" Gorby asks.

Katherine lets out a laugh, and even I can't hide my smile.

"Gorby, you are a treasure," Katherine says. "No, Lolo is Tom's fiancée. Almost fiancée."

"Thomas!" Gorby leans back to give me an appraising look. "You getting married?"

"That's the plan." My voice sounds flat, even to my ears.

"What are we talking, Christmas morning proposal?" Gorby asks.

"Christmas Eve. Midnight."

Shock has me whipping my head toward Katherine. "You know about . . ."

"The Walsh Christmas Eve tradition? *Please*. Of course I know."

"How?"

Katherine shrugs. "I helped your mom digitize all of her photos last year. They went back like a billion generations. It was sort of hard to miss."

"Now, hold on." Gorby puts a fist to his mouth and attempts to hold in a burp. He fails. "Why you so surprised that she knows, Tom? You kids were hitched, right? Didn't she get the whole Christmas Eve rigmarole?"

"Thank you, Gorby," Katherine says, leaning forward to peer around me and offer him a beaming smile. "Thank you for asking. Tom? You want to

take this one?"

Shit. This conversation is long overdue, and yet right now, I'd rather be anywhere else.

"Don't clam up now, Tom. This is great stuff," Gorby says as he takes a long sip of soda. "We're making good progress."

"Progress?" *Progress in what, the world's weirdest couple's therapy?*

"Yeah, don't clam up now, Tom!" Katherine gives me an encouraging pat on the shoulder and grins.

"Okay, fine. You really want to do this?" I ask her, raising a challenging eyebrow.

Her grin slips slightly because she knows as well as I do that we're entering uncharted territory. But she must know too that it needs to be done.

"Rebecca and I are great listeners," Gorby urges. "We have that Dr. Phil on all the time, and his rule number five for talking and listening is to be an active listener. Or was it rule number six?"

"Alright, Gorb. You asked for it." I shift a little, putting my attention on him because it's easier than looking at Katherine as I say this. "No. I did not propose to Katherine here on Christmas Eve, as is my family tradition."

"I see." Gorby nods. "And Katherine? How did that make you feel?"

He and I both look over at her.

She sniffs. "Indifferent. Once I learned about it."

"Now, Katherine." Gorby's voice is slightly chiding. "We're not going to get anywhere if we don't get comfy with our feelings."

"I don't have those. Ask anyone."

"Don't," I tell her quietly before I can think better of it. "Don't do that. Don't pretend you don't feel. Not with me. Katherine, you want to know why I didn't propose on—"

"Wait. Stop."

There's a desperation in her command that I don't understand. That I need to understand. "Why—"

“*Please*, Tom.” Her voice is calmer now but just as firm. “Let’s focus on the future. So we can both just . . . move on.”

“I thought we were supposed to get comfy with our feelings?” I say with a smile, trying to coax her to smile back.

She doesn’t. “Listen. I didn’t bust my ass to get you home by Christmas Eve so you could wallow down memory lane. Okay?”

I say nothing.

“Gorby? Don’t you agree? That Tom needs to focus on moving on?” It’s more command than question, and a tense silence follows, interrupted only by Gorby giving his soda one final mega sip.

The cab remains quiet except for his blissed-out *ahhhhhh* before he speaks. “Well now, see, I hate to disagree with such a pretty lady, but . . .”

Katherine leans forward again, shoots the driver a murderous glare. “Gorby!”

I smile in spite of myself because it’s the same voice she uses with stubborn witnesses, recalcitrant clients, and opposing counsels. It works in the courtroom, and it works here too because Gorby clears his throat and nods.

“Now, Tom,” Gorby says. “Confronting our ghosts is good, but we can’t live in the past. You see the difference?”

“I wasn’t—”

“You got your proposal planned?” Gorby continues. “Let’s do some exercises in that area.”

“Oooh, yes, *let’s*,” Katherine exclaims gleefully in an abrupt role reversal now that I’m in the hot seat and she gets to dodge the sticky emotional stuff completely.

“I’m good,” I say a little desperately. “I’ve done the proposal plenty of times in my head.”

Gorby is giving a rueful shake of his head. “Won’t work. Comes out different when you say it out loud.”

“Does it?” I snap, getting a little fed up with Gorby and his unsolicited advice that is digging into places I don’t want to go. “Says who? Dr. Phil again?”

“Don’t be grumpy, Tom,” Katherine says. “And he’s right. You know I always practice my closing statements aloud.”

“That’s different.” I look at the clock. Three hours to go. And no exit route.

“Not really that different,” she presses. “Doesn’t Lolo deserve better than some shoddy, off-the-cuff ramble?”

She doesn’t add *like the one you gave me*, but I wonder if she’s thinking it. Hope desperately that she isn’t. Hope that she understands . . .

“Go on now, Tom,” Gorby says. “You just pretend we’re not right here, and you’re down on one knee in front of Lulu.”

Neither Katherine nor I correct him.

I close my eyes. “If I do this practice proposal nonsense, I want something in return. An hour of no talking.”

Gorby slurps his empty cup. “Hmm. I suppose that’d be fine. Katherine?”

“Sure, I can handle that.” She makes a gesturing motion with her hand. “Proceed, Tom. Propose away.”

I can’t believe I’m considering doing this, but the prospect of silence at the end is too tempting.

I clear my throat. “Okay, um. Well, Lolo. We’ve been dating almost a year now. We’ve had some good times. We’re well suited . . .”

Katherine pretends to fall asleep. “Good God, Tom. Do you *want* her to say no?”

Before I can reply, Gorby chimes in, because of course he does.

“It’s got to be *romantic*, Tom.”

I shove my thumbs into my eye sockets. “Does it, Gorby?”

“Here.” He fiddles with the knob of the radio until he finds a song he likes. “This will help. Get you in the amorous mood.”

Katherine nods. “Amorous,” she repeats.

Gloria Estefan’s balladesque “Christmas through Your Eyes” fills the tiny cab. I almost wish for another car accident.

“Come on now, Tom. Don’t be shy.”

I take a deep breath. The sooner I appease them, the sooner I get my hour of silence. “Okay, um. Lolo. My family has a very important Christmas Eve tradition . . .”

Katherine looks quickly down at her hands, and I glance over. “Hey, if this—”

“No, no.” She looks up, smiling again. “I’m totally good. This proposal, on the other hand. You want me to google proposal ideas? Just as a backup script?”

“Good idea. Never be too proud to ask for help, Tom,” Gorby says. “Speaking of . . .” He hands me a bag of nacho-cheese Doritos, which I open for him with a sigh and hand back.

“You know,” Gorby says around the crunch of a chip. “I think the problem here is that you’re just talking to air. Not a real person. Why don’t you practice on Katherine there.”

“Yeah, we did that once. Ended *really* well,” I mutter.

“No, no, he’s right!” Katherine says excitedly, pulling at my earlobe until I’m forced to face her.

She fluffs her hair and bats her lashes. “Here. Pretend I’m Lolo. No, no, wait . . . I bet my cans are better than hers.”

Katherine tries to flatten her breasts with her palms. “Okay, now go.”

Gloria belts out the final notes of her song, and the station rolls right into another holiday song, and not something safe and grating like “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” but the haunting opening notes of Dan Fogelberg’s “Same Old Lang Syne.”

Damn it. The bittersweet nostalgia of this song always gets to me, and it does exactly what Gorby intended, putting me in a different frame of mind,

where it's just me and a woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.

I take a deep breath, and though I wasn't lying when I said I'd practiced my proposal to Lolo dozens of times in my head, when I open my mouth, something else entirely comes out.

"I didn't mean to fall in love with you," I say slowly, my eyes locked on the taillights of the truck in front of us, which look blurry through the wet snow coating the windshield.

"I sure as hell didn't intend to stay in love with you," I continue. "But I've learned . . . lately, that the best things in life aren't the ones you plan. The best things in life aren't *easy*."

I take a deep breath, then press on. "The best things are the ones you hold on to for all your worth, and if you're stupid enough to let go, then you fight like hell to get back."

I swallow, still staring straight ahead. "There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that I'll make mistakes and that I don't deserve you. But I also promise to never stop trying to make you smile, to make you happy. I promise that I'll never give up. If you'll only give me a chance."

When I finish, I very deliberately don't look at Katherine. Gorby reaches a beefy arm across my chest and dangles a tissue in Katherine's face. "There you are, hun."

"Thanks," Katherine says, her voice a little raspy, and I'm surprised when she takes it and dabs her eyes.

"That bad, huh?" I tease, struggling to keep my voice light as I glance over.

"Awful." She blows her nose loudly. "Terrible. Just . . . complete shit. She's going to hate it."

She. Lolo. Right.

Gorby blows his nose as well, an even louder honk than Katherine's. "Pretty good, Tom. Just one little tweak. You said, 'the ones you fight to get back.' Since you're hauling ass across the country, you should say, 'the one

you're trying to get back to.'”

I'm silent for a long moment, then I nod. “Right. Sure. Thanks, Gorby. Good note.”

True to their promise, Katherine and Gorby reward my faux proposal with silence, and the next minute is filled only with the remainder of “Same Old Lang Syne” and Fogelberg singing about lost loves and snow turning into rain.

Katherine reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Hey. She's going to say yes. She'd be an idiot not to. And once I get my phone back, Harry's going to call. And we'll both be back on track, everything going according to plan. Yeah?”

I squeeze her hand back. “Yeah.” *I'll make sure of it.*

And then I begin hatching a new plan.

THIRTY-FOUR
KATHERINE

December 24, 1:30 p.m.

A few hours later, we pull up in front of Tom's childhood home, where the entire Walsh clan stands on the snow-covered front lawn, waving wildly from beside a blow-up sleigh that I know is the bane of Bob's existence and the joy of Nancy's.

I tell myself not to look. Not to care. But I can't help it. My gaze seeks out a shiny blond head in a sea of dark-haired Walshes.

I don't see her. Yet. But it does nothing to ease the sudden tidal wave of pain that seems to swallow me at the inevitability of coming face-to-face with the woman Tom loves.

I don't think I can do this.

In the past twenty-four hours, I've survived a car accident, a concussion, a dozen stitches, *another* car accident, trudging through the snow, a dirty motel room, having all of my belongings stolen, and a two-hour sing-along session with a jovial truck driver.

I've handled it all.

But this? Meeting Lolo? I can't.

And of course, I have to.

The truck—sorry, *Rebecca*—lumbers to a stop outside the modest, well-

kept suburban home. And the Walshes, who Tom texted from Gorby's phone about our impending arrival a couple minutes ago, descend upon the truck, all talking over one another.

The favorite son is, of course, cause for celebration. His ex, though?

I take a deep breath and reach for the door handle. Which gets stuck. An omen? Probably. For a moment, the coward in me considers begging Gorby to take me straight to the airport. But the temptation to hug my ex-in-laws is even stronger than my desire to avoid Lolo.

Still, the handle stays stuck. "Gorby, what the—"

"Ol' Rebecca's playing coy with you, hun," Gorby says, taking a final bite of his third burger in as many hours. "Just pull it back nice and slow, and give her a little shove with your shoulder."

Tom adds, "Carefully. We don't want to reopen your wound."

"Which looked right as rain to me," Gorby says happily. "Got a good look when Tom checked the bandage a bit ago."

"Fantastic. Glad you got a good look," I mutter, leaning into the door per Gorby's instructions just as Tom's dad opens the door from the other side.

I practically tumble into him, and unfazed, Bob Walsh wraps me in a big warm hug. "Damn, Katie. It's been too long. I always did like your face."

For a long moment, I let him hug me. Let myself pretend that things are different, then and now. That this is still my family, that Tom—

"My turn, my turn, my turn," Nancy says, batting at her husband's arm and wrapping me in a warm hug of her own. "Katherine, my darling. What a day you've had."

"What about me? My day?" Tom says good-naturedly as he hugs all his siblings.

His mom releases me and reaches out to pat his cheek fondly, her eyes watery. "You too, Tommy. You too."

Bob clamps his hand on his son's shoulder. "Glad you made it, son."

"Thanks, Dad." Tom reaches out and pulls his father in for a hug, and my

eyes prick a bit when I see the delighted pleasure on Bob's face before he hugs Tom back.

"Now," Bob says, pulling back, clearing his throat, and reaching for his wallet. He nods toward the truck. "How much do we owe this fine gentleman for the ride?"

I have to smile at *gentleman* being applied to Gorby but then amend my thoughts because Gorby—if he's not the truest gentleman, I don't know who is. The kind of generous, kind human being that makes me want to rethink . . . well, all of my life choices, actually.

Something I've been doing a lot of the past twenty-four hours.

"I'll take care of it," I say, accepting the cash Bob generously holds out. "And I will of course pay you back every penny the second I get everything sorted from my lost wallet."

"You'll pay me nothing," Bob calls after me.

As I move back toward the truck, Tom's gaze locks on mine, and despite the wide smile on his face for his family, his eyes seem as conflicted as I feel that we've really, truly reached the end of this journey.

Our journey.

And then, behind me, I hear *her*. An unfamiliar female voice that doesn't belong to Tom's mom or sisters. "Tom!"

His gaze seems to drag away from me. Toward Lolo.

"Sorry I wasn't out here to greet you," I hear her say. "I was just FaceTiming with my brother so I could see my niece's Christmas pageant, and oh my gosh. I'm so glad you're here . . ."

I continue toward the truck before I can hear the rest.

Gingerly, so as not to ruin the festive mood by tearing my stitches, I hoist myself back into the cab where Gorby sits with a happy grin, watching the Walsh reunion.

"Gorby," I say, exasperated. "Are you *crying*?"

"Can't help it." He wipes his eyes. "Becky and I are a sucker for family at

Christmas.”

I look over my shoulder, waving happily at Tom’s sisters and brother, who I have yet to properly hug, and then, because I force myself, I look at her.

Lolo is . . .

Well, not exactly what I expected. She’s blond, but instead of being tiny and petite and fashionable, she seems . . . very real. Very nice, actually. And there’s no denying that her smile as she talks excitedly with Tom is very, very real.

She loves him. He loves her. And I surprise myself by realizing . . .

I’m happy for him.

And yet . . .

“You gonna tell him?” Gorby asks.

I look over, surprised to find the truck driver studying me. Still smiling, but a little less jovial.

“What? Tell who what . . .” I sigh when he simply gives me a look that says I’m better than cheap denials. “No, Gorby. I’m not going to tell him.”

Gorby gives a sad shake of his head. “Tom deserves to know, darling.”

“He deserves a lot of things,” I say. *Better things than I can give him.*

I try to hand Gorby the cash, but he looks affronted and shoves my hand away. “It wasn’t no big thing spending a few hours with you kids. Nice to have the company, actually.”

Belatedly, I realize that it’s Christmas Eve and that Gorby will be spending it in a truck, alone. Close as he and Rebecca are, Rebecca can’t sing “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” with him like I can.

“Gorby, I don’t suppose . . .” I jerk my thumb toward the Walsh home. “They’d love to have you. There’s always room for one more here.”

I should know.

“Oh gosh. I appreciate that,” Gorby says as he turns on the engine. “But I’ve gotta hightail it. Em will kill me if I’m not home by the time the kids

wake up to Santa.”

I blink. “Em?” Kids.

“Sure. My wife. We’ve got three boys, and a little girl on the way.”

“I— You didn’t mention them.”

“Course not, darlin’. Rebecca gets jealous.” He winks.

I shake my head with a smile, and then acting on impulse, I lean over to kiss his cheek. “You’re a treasure, Gorby. I’m not entirely sure you don’t have a pair of wings under your dry-cleaned flannel.”

“I’ll never tell,” he says, giving me a friendly squeeze, then waves me back with his hand. “Now, go on. Go be with your family.”

“Oh. Not my family,” I say as I scoot toward the door.

Gorby tsks. “And here I thought you were a smart girl. Merry Christmas, Katherine.”

I hop down and smile up at him. “Merry Christmas, Gorby.”

I slam the door shut and step back from the curb as I and the entire Walsh family wave goodbye to the jolly, big-hearted truck driver.

“Are we sure he isn’t Santa?” Tom’s sister Meredith says, coming to link arms with me. Then she glances over. “Damn, it’s good to see you. And may I just say. You look terrible.”

I laugh and hug her. “I’ve missed you.”

“Back at you. But can I please find you a change of clothes? You’re covered in blood.”

I glance down at the white blouse I put on at the crack of dawn this morning. “Ketchup, actually. Hazards of truck travel.”

“Still. I’m getting you clothes. Also, people!” She turns and calls to her family. “Can we please move this party inside and out of the snow.”

“Yes, let’s,” Nancy says. “You too, Katherine.”

“Okay, but I can’t stay. I have to—”

Tom’s mom pretends she doesn’t hear this, and I heave out a sigh. Extracting myself from the Walshes’ loving grip might be trickier than I

imagine.

“Katherine.” Tom’s voice comes from behind me.

I suck in a breath and turn to face the inevitable, though I purposely focus my attention on Lolo instead of my ex.

“Hi. You’re Lolo.”

“I am.” Lolo smiles and extends a hand, which I shake. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you.”

I narrow my eyes and give her a suspicious look. “Wonderful or . . . ?”

“Interesting?” she amends with a laugh.

“Better,” I say, though I’m surprised to find that I’m smiling back. I was prepared to hate her, but she seems . . . perfect. For him.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your accident. What awful timing,” Lolo says. “How are you feeling?”

“Good!” I say, my voice so high that out of the corner of my eye, I see Tom start in surprise at the unfamiliar pitch.

“So, so good!” I babble on. “Headache’s better. Back’s a little itchy where the stitches are, but all good. Just so good.”

Tom looks full-on alarmed now, but I studiously avoid his gaze.

It’s not like I lied. My head really does feel better. My back too.

My heart, though? Quite honestly, I’m increasingly worried I’ll never be able to put that back together again.

THIRTY-FIVE
KATHERINE

December 24, 2:30 p.m.

The Walsh house is noisy on the best of days. On Christmas Eve, the excited chattering is nearly deafening, and it takes me a minute to find a quiet corner. With a cell phone borrowed from Tom's younger sister Kayla in hand, I duck into Bob's study on the far side of the house. I doubt there's much I'll be able to accomplish on Christmas Eve, but at least I can start the process of canceling my credit cards, ordering a new phone, and—

“Oh!” I put a hand over my pounding heart. “Bob. You scared the crap out of me!”

“Sorry,” Tom's dad says with a smile. “Don't mind me. Here. In my own office.”

I wince. “Right. I'm the interloper.”

“Never,” he says, giving my shoulder a fond pat as he crosses to the sideboard. “I don't suppose I should offer you a drink, given that bump on your head?”

“If you don't, I might cry,” I reply, setting Kayla's phone on an end table and curling up in one of the cozy wingback chairs I've always loved.

Bob joins me, handing me a glass and sitting in the chair beside me. We clink glasses and I take a sip, but several moments of companionable silence

pass before he speaks.

“So. Nancy convinced you not to go to Boston?”

I give him an arch look. “It’s Nancy. Did I ever really have a choice?”

He smiles fondly. “There was no way she was going to let that happen. She called Irene the second Tom told her your escape plans.”

“Escape plans,” I repeat, swirling the Scotch. “That’s a telling choice of words.”

“It is, isn’t it.” He gives me a sly smirk.

“I’m too exhausted to think about going to Boston, but . . .” I sigh and set the glass aside. “I can’t stay here. Not tonight. Surely everybody knows that.”

Bob’s smile dims. “Yeah. Yeah, we know that. Doesn’t mean that we couldn’t all hope, though. And maybe convince you to stay. Just until dinner? You could be long gone before . . .”

The midnight proposal.

“I can’t do that to Tom. And Lolo. This is their day. Their Christmas,” I say. “I’ve already done enough damage. In any other circumstances, though, you couldn’t drag me away,” I add. “I’ve missed you guys. Especially you.” I reach over to squeeze his hand. “This time of year has always been hard for me, but you . . . you always took care to make it a little easier for me.”

Bob flips his hand over so that he’s holding my hand, which he squeezes back. “I’ll never be the dad you lost. But it was fun getting to try for a little while there.”

I blink back tears, but they’re the touched, bittersweet variety that seems to be creeping up on me more and more often lately.

I swipe at one. “God. If the people back in New York could see me now. The Grinch is turning into a big old softy.”

“You’ve always been a softy,” Bob says. “Just with a hard candy coating.”

I laugh. “A euphemism if I’ve ever heard one.”

I take a sip of my drink and close my eyes, resting my head back against

the chair.

“Where is Tom?” Bob asks. “Kitchen with everyone else?”

I nod but don’t open my eyes. “He’s finally getting his Bolognese.”

“Lolo’s a vegetarian. Didn’t touch it.”

“Lots of people are vegetarian, Bob,” I say gently, as though I didn’t spend much of yesterday finding things to criticize about her as well.

“I know,” he says with a long sigh. “And she sure seems like a nice girl.”

There’s a silent *but* at the end of his sentence, and I don’t touch it, even though I know he wants me to. Katherine from yesterday morning might have relished things to pick apart about Tom’s perfect girlfriend.

New me just wants . . .

“I want Tom to be happy,” I say aloud.

“Your Christmas wish, huh?” Bob asks.

I let out a startled laugh. “Sure. We can go with that.”

“And you think you leaving is what would make Tom happy?”

“Well, it’s certainly not his ex-wife hovering nearby while he proposes to Lolo,” I joke.

“And yet, he chose to stay in New York. To help you. To bring *you* here for Christmas.”

“Well. Yeah. Because he’s angling for sainthood. You know how Tom is. Classic oldest child, always duty-bound to do the moral thing.”

Instead of responding, Bob tilts his glass back and forth, watching the Scotch swish gently from side to side, approaching the edge but never spilling. “You know, Tom and I have never talked much. I don’t know why. I guess because, of all the kids, I was still working so much when he was a kid. He and Nancy just became thick as thieves. He got so used to telling her everything, but when it came to me . . .”

Bob shrugs. Stops the swishing to take a drink. Resumes. “So I got real used to *watching* Tom. It was how I knew what he was thinking. Feeling. And because I’ve been doing it so long, learned to read him so well, I’ve

come to notice that what's on his face . . . sometimes it says a whole hell of a lot.”

I can tell Bob is gearing up to tell me something that my protective walls aren't strong enough to handle at the moment, so I hurriedly try to deflect by leaning forward and lowering my voice to a joking whisper. “Bob. Are you trying to tell me you think you can read your son's mind?”

He snorts. “Of course not.”

I sit back, relieved.

“I'm trying to tell you I can read my son's *heart*,” Bob continues in complete seriousness. “And I could tell the second he got out of that truck. What he wanted? It wasn't Lolo.”

THIRTY-SIX
KATHERINE

December 24, 3:00 p.m.

Before I can press Bob on what exactly he means by his bombshell revelation, his office door is burst open by Meredith's girls, who are practically vibrating with the opportunity to show "Auntie Katie" their Santa pictures.

And Christmas spirit and sentimentality must be seeping from the Walshes' surplus of Christmas ornaments like asbestos because I find myself a little watery-eyed to know that I'm still Auntie Katie.

Rationally, I know that Clara, the younger one, was tiny when Tom and I split and likely has only the haziest memories of me, but still . . .

Auntie.

My heart is growing three sizes after all. Because the sheer *joy* at being labeled a member of the family, even in a tangential way, is almost as strong as my joy at hearing Bob's words.

Words that keep bouncing around in my head, even as I declare both of my nieces' Santa pictures equally adept. My former nieces. Mustn't forget that.

And yet . . .

"I could tell the second he got out of that truck. What he wanted? It

wasn't Lolo."

"Come on, Grandpa," Sophia says, holding out a hand to Bob. "Mommy says it's time for *It's a Wonderful Life* before dinner."

"Did she now," Bob says, climbing to his feet and taking his granddaughter's hand, even though it's covered in what seems to be frosting. "I don't suppose I can put in a vote for *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*?"

"Oh, you can put in a vote," Sophia says as she drags him out of the room. "But I don't reckon it would do much good."

Bob turns and meets my eyes with raised eyebrows. *Reckon?* he mouths.

"You too, Auntie Katie," Clara says, trying to pull me from my chair. "The whole family watches."

"Oh, you know what?" I say as I let her lead me from the room. "I need to grab something upstairs real quick. I'll be down in a little bit."

I start to wonder if lying to children on Christmas Eve counts as a deadly sin. And then I remember: Santa. The biggest lie of all. I'm good.

Even still, Sophia gives me a suspicious look. "What do you have to grab?"

Um.

"Pills," I blurt out. "I got hurt pretty bad yesterday. I have to take some medicine for my head."

That's at least truth-adjacent because the mere *idea* of watching *It's a Wonderful Life* in the same room as Tom and Lolo cuddled up on the couch is bound to give me a headache.

"I could tell the second he got out of that truck. What he wanted? It wasn't Lolo."

Damn it, Bob, I think as I stomp up the stairs. Do you not know me at all? I don't deal in wishes and dreams and unicorns. I can't afford to have people running around, planting seeds of hope, derailling a perfectly adequate life . . .

Obviously, the medicine I got from the hospital was taken along with my purse and suitcase, but in the shared hallway bathroom I find a bottle of Advil in the medicine cabinet. I help myself to a couple, which I swallow with some water scooped from the sink.

I stand and use the back of my hand to swipe my mouth, then freeze when I see my reflection. I look . . . different.

I mean, not good different. That's obvious, given, well, everything.

But somehow I look . . . softer. Maybe a little happier too.

I point at Mirror Katherine. "Tighten up. We cannot afford to go soft right now. Not until we find a way out of this mess. It doesn't have to be pretty. We can pick up the pieces later."

Mirror Katherine merely gazes back at me, bemused, like she's a couple steps ahead of me on the *Christmas Carol* journey and has already had goose with Tiny Tim.

I make a sound of disgust and flip the light off so I don't have to deal with her. Heading toward the stairs, I slow down when I hear Tom's voice coming from his bedroom, and I wince, braced for Lolo's voice to follow, but it's not hers. It's his mom's voice, and they're both speaking in hushed tones.

My feet slow even further until I stop beside the cracked door, not close enough to be seen, but just close enough to eavesdrop.

Don't judge me.

"Thanks for this, Mom," Tom says.

"Oh, don't be thanking me. All I did was get it out of the safe. That ring is yours, Tom. For your wife. I was surprised you gave it back to me in the first place."

The ring! *My* ring.

Except, not anymore.

My stomach clenches with the awful realization that he plans to propose to Lolo tonight after all.

Tom is silent for a moment, and I can picture him turning the ring box in

his hands, frowning. Brooding.

“It didn’t feel right to keep it. Not after the divorce,” he replies finally.

“And it feels right now? To take it back?”

This time, Tom doesn’t hesitate. “Yeah. Yeah, it really, really does.”

My breath comes out on a pained whoosh as the tiny seed of hope that Bob planted dies a slow, agonizing death at Tom’s confirmation.

He’s proposing to Lolo at midnight. With the ring.

I close my eyes and inhale as quietly as I can while still trying to steady myself. *See?* I tell that idiot version of myself I saw in the mirror. *This is why we don’t go soft!*

I’m taking a step backward so I don’t get caught when a soft “hey” sounds directly in my ear.

I jump. “Jesus!” I turn to face Kayla, Tom’s youngest sister. “Good God, you’re quiet!”

“Extra-padded socks. The ones you got me last year!” She kicks out a leg to show me.

“Shh!” I hiss at her too-loud voice. “Also, I got those for running, not espionage.”

“*Me* espionage! You’re the one spying on Mom and Tom.”

“I’m not—”

“What’s the scoop?” she whispers, leaning toward the cracked door where Tom and his mother continue to talk. Due to Kayla’s appearance, I’ve missed whatever they’re saying, and I’m glad. Probably the wedding date.

“What’s the plan. Off Lolo?” she asks, looking at me over her shoulder.

“What?!”

“You know.” Kayla bugs her eyes and drags a thumb over her throat.

“Yeah, I know what ‘off’ means, Kay. And I thought you guys liked her.”

She shrugs. “Of course we do.” Then she grins. “We like you better.”

Before I can think of a reply, Tom’s and Nancy’s voices get closer as they approach the door. Kayla, God bless her, puts a hand on my chest and shoves

me backward into the neighboring bedroom she used to share with Meredith, and I duck out of sight.

“Kayla.” Her mother’s voice is censoring but resigned. “What are you doing hovering outside your brother’s bedroom?”

“Reliving the good old days,” Kayla chirps. “Remember that one when Mom and Dad were at a New Year’s party and you were supposed to babysit, and instead you invited Jess Vaughn over, and you didn’t close your door all the way, and I saw—”

“You want to play that game?” Tom interrupts. “How about we tell Mom about that time after your high school graduation, when—”

“Truce!” Kayla says loudly. “Truce, truce, truce. No more!”

“Thought so,” Tom says, his smug, older-brother voice growing more distant as the three of them make their way down the stairs.

“Oh. Hey, Lo!” I hear him say. “You got a sec? I was thinking we could go for a quick walk before dinner.”

“Sure,” Lolo says, her voice coming closer as she climbs the stairs. “I was just going to grab my phone from the charger. But I’ll get my coat and hat too and be right down.”

I wait until I hear Lolo rustling for her stuff before I emerge from my hiding place and step into Tom’s room.

She whirls around. “Oh! Hey, Katherine. What’s up?”

“Actually,” I say quietly as I shut the bedroom door. “I have sort of a big favor to ask of you . . . but it’s one that I think will work in both of our favors.”

“*Why?*” Lolo asks after I’m done explaining.

I tell her the truth, even if I can’t manage a smile as I do so. “Tom put his own wants and needs aside to do what was best for me. It’s time I return the favor.”

THIRTY-SEVEN
TOM

December 24, 4:50 p.m.

My walk with Lolo goes well.

Incredibly well, actually.

Better than I ever could have imagined.

But there's still one more conversation I need to have, and I'm braced for it to be much, much harder.

Still wearing my winter coat and hat, I step into the living room, where my family is sprawled out watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, as is Christmas Eve tradition.

"Hey," I say, ignoring the glares I get for interrupting the movie. "Anyone know where Katherine is?"

I get a few headshakes. A couple of shrugs.

"Thanks so much," I mutter before taking the steps two at a time. "Katherine?" I go down the line of bedrooms, thinking maybe her head was bothering her and she wanted to lie down.

She's not in any of them. Or in the bathrooms.

Worried now, I ask my family to help me look, and trust me when I say it's a testament to their affection for Katherine that they don't hesitate to abandon the movie to help.

But my parents' house isn't all that big, and a mere ten minutes later, it becomes abundantly clear.

Katherine isn't in the house.

Stunned, I lower to my parents' couch, shakily lifting my clasped hands to my lips.

Twenty-four hours ago, I wasn't able to wrap my mind around the fact that Katherine Tate was back in my life.

Now? My heart can't imagine a life without her in it.

Only, I don't know where to find her. I don't even have a clue where to start looking.

"Hey." Meredith sits beside me, pats my knee. "What are you thinking?"

I drop my hands slowly, look at my sister, and utter a phrase I never thought I'd say: "I wish Katherine had her phone."

THIRTY-EIGHT
KATHERINE

December 24, 11:40 p.m.

“Hey, Joey. Any chance there’s an outlet back there?”

The bartender, and my new best friend over the past several hours, glances up from polishing a glass. “I can do you one better. Right in front of you, beautiful.”

“Ah! Handy. Thanks.” I bend to look under the bar, and sure enough, there’s an outlet that some wonderful genius thought to install in the bar of a hotel lobby.

I push the plug of my new iPhone charger into the outlet with a soft, satisfying click and let out a little sigh of happiness at being back online and the owner of a shiny new phone. And let’s take a second to pat last year’s Katherine on the back for signing up for an Apple credit card, which allowed me to buy my new phone baby at the store, even without a wallet.

The hotel’s not bad either, though for *that* I needed some help from . . . brace yourself . . .

Lolo Bauer. (What, you thought she didn’t have a last name? It’s fine. I didn’t either.)

I needed the favor of a lifetime and asked my ex-husband’s girlfriend to loan me money for a hotel. She did me one better, booking me a room on her

points and calling me an Uber, plus giving me enough cash for . . . well, let's just say this isn't my first martini.

She didn't take much convincing either. Let's just say our goals were aligned.

I didn't want to be there for the marriage proposal. She didn't want me there for the marriage proposal. Everybody wins!

Well, maybe not the Walshes. I do feel guilty for Irish goodbying it out of there, but I've already resolved to stop by the house before I head back to New York to say a *proper* goodbye.

A permanent one this time.

I love them. It's time to let them go.

I love him.

It's time to let him go.

"Another before last call, love?" Joey asks. "We're shutting down a little early tonight. Christmas Eve and all."

"Right, of course." I wait for the usual irritation at this stupid holiday to creep up, but oddly, it never does. In fact, even through my slightly melancholic mood, Christmas doesn't feel stupid at all.

"You know what, yeah," I say. "Why not. Like you said, it's Christmas, and I've got some things to take care of on my fancy new phone. Except, let's make it a Manhattan this time."

"You got it," Joey says, tapping the bar once and reaching for the bourbon.

"Should you be drinking that?" someone asks. "With your concussion?"

My head feels a little fuzzy, and not because of the alcohol. And not because of the concussion either. But with *déjà vu*.

Wordlessly, I stare at the man pulling out the barstool beside me and taking a seat.

"Tom?"

"Never could get one by you," he says casually, as though it's not weird

that he's at a mediocre hotel lobby bar on Christmas Eve, when he should be . . .

I shake my head, increasingly convinced that I'm hallucinating. "Wait. Is this an actual *Christmas Carol* thing? Am I Scrooge? Was everything I experienced just a dream?"

"You *are* Scrooge," he confirms, reaching out to eat one of my cold french fries. "But no. Everything was not a dream."

"Then who—what? How did you find me? Did someone call you again? As my emergency contact?"

"Nope." He eats another fry. "Because you weren't in an accident this time." He pauses his chewing. "Wait. Were you?"

I shake my head as Joey sets a Manhattan in front of me. Tom points at it. "I'll take one of those. Please."

"No," I say quickly. "He's not staying. You're not staying," I say to Tom. Tom looks at Joey, points at the drink again with a smile.

"Okay, if you're staying, then I want answers," I say, pivoting my chair to face him.

"Sure," Tom says agreeably. Suspiciously so. "What would you like to know?"

"Um, I don't even know where to begin," I say. "How about where the hell is Lolo? Aren't you supposed to be down on one knee right about now?"

He checks his watch. "Almost. I've got a few minutes to spare."

My mouth gapes open. "And you're spending those minutes . . . here?"

"Her sister's," Tom says.

I stare at him. "Do you have a concussion? Whose sister?"

"Lolo. You asked where she was. She's in Madison at her sister's. Got a last-minute flight."

"I . . ." I scratch my head. "I'm confused."

"I can see that," he says with a smile. "It's very cute."

"Take that back!" I say, affronted.

“I will not.” His smile goes wider.

I feel . . . something. Confusion mingled with . . . hope?

A hope I don’t think I can *bear* if I’m wrong. Can’t bear to lose him a second time. Panicked now, I hand Tom my phone. “Here. Why don’t you call Lolo, and we’ll get this all sorted out—”

“I’m not marrying Lolo, Katherine.”

Everything seems to go completely blurry, even though I haven’t touched my drink or Tom his. “What do you—what—”

“Cute,” he murmurs again with a smile. “She and I had a talk. It turns out Gorby’s not the only one who noticed that we, what was it . . . crackled with energy?”

“She dumped you because we crackled?” I ask.

“No. Well, sort of. *I* dumped *her* because we crackled. She dumped me because she wanted someone to crackle with and realized I was never going to be that guy.”

“You dumped each other.”

“I think we can stop using the word *dumped*, but . . . yeah. Pretty much,” he says with a shrug.

“Tom, I—”

“You want to know why I didn’t propose to you on Christmas Eve all those years ago? Why I broke from the family tradition I thought was so important to me?”

I shake my head, and Tom reaches for my hand.

“It’s because I couldn’t wait, Katherine. We were sitting there eating Chinese food, and I remember thinking that I would never, ever be as happy as I am with you. I wanted that feeling forever, and I wanted it *now*. I blurted out that proposal because I couldn’t wait another minute to make you mine.”

Tears stream down my cheeks, and annoyed, I wipe them away. “Why are you doing this?”

“You know how I finally found you tonight?” he asks, then leans

forward. “Lolo.”

“Traitor,” I mutter, even though I already figured. She’s the only one who knew where I was.

“But she didn’t tell me right away,” Tom continues. “She made me wait. To ensure I’d get here *just* before midnight.”

“Why would—”

Tom places a box in front of me. The ring box.

My ring box.

Tom stands, pulls me to my feet, and holds my hands as he drops to his knee.

Happiness like I’ve never experienced before splinters through me.

“I didn’t mean to fall in love with you,” Tom says, echoing his exact words from Gorby’s truck. “I sure as hell didn’t intend to *stay* in love with you. But I’ve learned . . . lately, that the best things in life aren’t the ones you plan. The best things in life aren’t *easy*. The best things are the ones you hold on to for all your worth, and if you’re stupid enough to let go, then you fight like hell to get back. There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that I’ll make mistakes. And that I don’t deserve you. But I also promise to never stop trying to make you smile, to make you happy. I promise that I’ll never give up. If you’ll only give me a chance.”

I laugh through my tears. “Gorby’s going to be mad. You forgot the ‘back to’ again.”

“I didn’t forget anything,” Tom says, kissing my knuckles. “That fake proposal in the truck. That was for you. Only you. Surely you know that.”

I pull my hand from his, surprised to realize it’s shaking as I reach for the ring box and flip it open. I start to pull it out, then meet his eyes. “Be sure, Tom,” I whisper. “Be really sure. Because I can’t lose the man I love a second time.”

Tom stands, then cups his ear and leans toward me. “Come again?”

I laugh. “I will not.”

“What if I go first? I love you, Kates.”

“I love you too,” I whisper.

Tom takes the box from me and rests his forehead on mine. We both watch as he slips the ring back onto my finger. Exactly where it belongs.

He lifts his arm and checks his watch. Grins. “Twelve-oh-one. Nailed it.”

“You got it right this time,” I tease lightly.

“*We’ll* get it right this time,” he corrects, bending his head once more.

My phone buzzes on the bar top, and Tom gives me an amused look. “I should have known you’d waste no time getting a new phone.”

“Ah, but it was important,” I say, lifting a finger to explain. “It turns out my emergency contact information was very out-of-date, and I wanted to update it—”

“No need,” Tom says, wrapping both arms around my waist. “Your old one’s right here. And he’s not going anywhere.”

His head lowers again. And again, my phone buzzes. Instead of getting annoyed, he smiles. “Go ahead. I can wait.”

I glance down at my screen. See Harry’s name. There’s only one reason, and one reason only, why my boss would be calling me on Christmas Eve.

I reach out and send the call to voicemail, then turn back to Tom.

“Merry Christmas,” I whisper.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispers back. And then he kisses me.

The Grinch’s heart grew three sizes on Christmas Day.

Mine? I wouldn’t know.

It belongs to Tom.

And always has.

EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve, One Year Later

“It’s not fair!” Clara exclaims in the too-loud voice of a six-year-old who snuck too much of the Christmas cookie dough. “Why does Grandma get to open a present early, and the rest of us have to wait for morning?”

“Shh,” Meredith says, smoothing a hand over her hyper daughter’s ponytail. “You heard Uncle Tom. This is a gift for the whole family. Grandma’s just the one to open it.”

“Ehhhhh,” Katherine makes a skeptical noise. “Gift might not be the *best* word.”

“Definitely not,” Tom agrees, reaching out to kiss his wife’s temple. “More like a potential termagant?”

“Quite possibly,” Katherine says, scooting over on the couch of her in-laws’ living room to make space for her niece to snuggle up beside her.

“What’s a termagant?” Sophia asks.

Tom points at Katherine, who bats his hand away. “It’s a word for a strong woman.”

“Sure, we can go with that,” Tom says before kissing her again. On the mouth this time.

Sophia pretends to vomit but doesn’t vacate her place between them.

“Mom, what are you doing? Just open it already,” Tom’s brother demands.

Nancy Walsh clutches the half-opened red envelope to her chest, her eyes already red-rimmed and shiny. “I’m savoring the moment.”

“You don’t even know what it is yet.”

“Oh, yes, I do. A mother knows.” She tears open the rest of the envelope and peeks inside, letting out a happy squeal. “I knew it.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Nancy,” the usually imperturbable Bob says impatiently as he grabs the envelope. “Let the rest of us . . .”

He fumbles the envelope, and the entire Walsh family stares at what slips out.

“What is *that*?” Sophia demands, unimpressed.

“That, sweetheart, is a sonogram. Auntie Katie and Uncle Tom are going to have a baby,” Meredith exclaims with a happy snuffle.

Sophia is more impressed now, wiggling off the couch and bouncing in front of them excitedly. “A cousin! Finally. Boy or girl?”

“Girl,” Katherine and Tom say at the same time before exchanging happy smiles.

“A baby girl!” Nancy is full-on crying now. “Do we have a name?”

“Not yet,” Tom says, just as Katherine says, “Yes.”

“We do?” Tom asks, frowning slightly.

Katherine rests a hand on her still-flat belly and beams at her husband for the second time. “Yeah. I was kind of thinking Gorby.”

Tom’s smile is immediate and approving. “I love it. But as a middle name.”

Katherine frowns, as ready for an argument as ever. “But—”

“I was thinking Danielle,” Tom cuts in. “Danielle Gorby Walsh?”

It takes Katherine a moment, but when realization dawns, she blinks in stunned surprise. “Danielle. You want to name her after my dad?”

“I do,” he says, pulling her closer. “I’m hoping if I name her after her

grandfather, then she'll have no choice but to take after her mother."

"You should be so lucky," Katherine says with a smile as she starts to move her mouth down to his. At the last minute, she pulls back and narrows her eyes. "You meant Danielle Gorby *Tate*, right?"

Tom smiles against her lips. "We can bicker about it later?"

Katherine's lips curve upward as she kisses him back. "I can hardly wait."

AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Emergency Contact*! Every creative endeavor is a labor of love, but we'd be lying if we said that this project wasn't extra special to us.

Who is "us"?

We're Lauren Layne and Anthony LeDonne, and in case you missed this sneaking fact on the back cover, we are actually . . . married! And high school sweethearts! *Cue the awwwwwwws.*

And if you're wondering how the heck we came to write a book together . . . so are we!

We kid, we kid. (Sort of.)

The truth is, we backed into this book from a very atypical direction. It started with, fittingly enough:

A road trip.

But not in the way you think, where we were on a road trip and thought, "Hey, we should write a book about a road trip!" It was more . . . halfway through Montana, we were desperate for entertainment—you can only count tumbleweeds for so long—and turned to our Audible library, where we'd downloaded a few screenwriting books for reasons that neither of us can remember.

Fast forward to several road trips and thousands of tumbleweeds later,

and we'd devoured everything by Robert McKee, Blake Snyder, Chris Vogler, Michael Hauge, and a dozen more experts on writing screenplays. The only thing left to do? Actually write one.

So, of course, we did nothing. For years.

And then, one magical weekend (not magical like *that*, don't be weird), we drove from NYC to Lake Placid with one goal: write a screenplay.

Ambitious? Totally. But we didn't know that going into it, and that worked in our favor. We believed it was possible, so we *made* it possible. Sort of.

Every morning in Lake Placid, we'd wake up at the crack of dawn and sip mediocre coffee in our room, talking about things like beat sheets and the three-act structure and whether we should shower, all while watching the clock until Starbucks opened. And the *second* those Lake Placid Starbucks doors opened, we were inside. Armed with Venti cold brews, breakfast sandwiches, and our Rhodia notebooks, we'd settle at a table and get to work.

The good news: we already knew the premise. We'd plucked a random idea from Lauren's bulging idea notebook: "Woman wakes up from a coma to her estranged husband because she forgot to update her emergency contact information."

The bad news: that was all we knew.

So, each morning, sitting at the same Starbucks table, we built the story around that premise. In painful "we don't know what we're doing" fits and starts, we started with a Beat Board. And when we couldn't consume any more caffeine without vibrating, we took ourselves back to the hotel, where we opened our laptops and forced ourselves through excruciating "writing sprints," trying to turn the plot points into a screenplay.

We'd each take the same scene and do our best to write it—remember, novice screenwriters here!—then we'd take the best dialogue and "laughs" from each version and meld them into something new, something uniquely "us." We'd repeat that process all afternoon until cocktail hour, when we'd

mix a few Manhattans, head to the deck overlooking Mirror Lake, and sit for hours discussing Katherine and Tom.

Miraculously, by the time we drove home on Monday, we had about two-thirds of a script written. And a few months after that, we had a finished screenplay! Which we nervously sent to our agent. And a few months after that, interest from actual Hollywood producers!

(And if you're thinking, *Huh, that seems easy*, it totally wasn't, and we're skipping a ton of detail, like painful learning curves and, oh yeah, a global pandemic.)

After we'd found a home for the script, our amazing agent, Nicole Resciniti, told us what we already knew: "This story needs to be a book."

And she was right. Lauren's been a published romance author for a decade. Anthony? A comedian. Writing a romantic comedy? *Sort of a no-brainer.*

Plus, we already had the entire story and characters figured out.

How hard could it be?

Well. Honestly? *Really hard.*

Bringing Katherine and Tom's story to life in novel form was an entirely different beast than it was in script form, but in some ways, it was even more rewarding. It gave us a chance to dig beneath the surface, to delve into characters that are wildly more flawed than characters in a romance are typically allowed to be. We also let ourselves embrace the comedy aspect, too, because nothing chafes us more than something labeled as a romantic comedy that *isn't actually funny.*

We allowed ourselves to suspend reality and defy genre rules and simply ask ourselves the most important questions for a romantic comedy:

Does this make us *feel*?

Does this make us *laugh*?

Anything else went out the window until we were left with the story you're holding now.

Perhaps most miraculous of all? We did all of this without a single argument or fight or even an ounce of tension. It was a joint effort through and through, a commitment to tell a story—*this* story.

Which all sounds very romantic, but let's be real: all the best fairy tales feature an amazing cast of characters, and ours is no different. A two-person show this was not!

First, if we could take a moment to dramatically slow-clap our agent, Nicole, because there is no way *Emergency Contact* in *any* form would exist without her. If we're the creators of the story, she's its cheerleader, its fiercest defender, its number one fan. She believed in *Emergency Contact* even when we wavered, and for that, we owe her everything.

For the team at Blackstone for giving us the chance to bring the story to life in book form, we are so grateful. Rick, Josie, Sarah, Francie, and the other Sarah for the *incredible* cover that we are just smitten with, plus the entire production team working behind the scenes, especially Caitlin Vander Meulen for her brilliant copyediting . . . thank you for all your time and efforts!

To the incredible Sara Quaranta, whose gift for understanding exactly what a messy manuscript needs in order to shine was an absolute lifesaver and whose deft, kind way of saying "fix this" is unparalleled. We are incredibly indebted for your work on this!

To our family and friends, there are never enough words, really. Knowing that you guys have always been there encouraging us, cheering us on, believing in us. We know it isn't easy to deal with two "creative types" who disappear for months at a time when the muse demands it, but we are so grateful for your patience, your encouragement, and your love. We can only aspire to return the favor.

And lastly, for you, reader. For taking the time to give *Emergency Contact* a spot on your reading list. We know how precious your time is, and we are honored, truly, that you spent it with Katherine and Tom. That you

gave us a chance.

In gratitude,
Lauren Layne & Anthony LeDonne

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Lauren Layne is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than forty romance novels. With millions of books sold worldwide, Lauren has been featured on Inside Edition, the *Wall Street Journal*, *BuzzFeed*, *The Skimm*, *Oprah Magazine*, *PopSugar*, and *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She is based in New York City.

Anthony LeDonne is a stand-up comedian and writer. He lives in New York City with his high school sweetheart.

Subscribe to our newsletter for title recommendations, giveaways, and discounts reserved only for subscribers.

[Join here.](#)