

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

CHRISTINA LAUREN

USA Today and New York Times
bestselling author of *The Unhoneymooners*

The Exception to the to the

RULE

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**CHRISTINA
LAUREN**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One

2014

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Missing Assignment

Hi Ms. Solyom,

I am a student in your first period Calc class. Based on midterm grades, it looks like I have a missing assignment under the Unit 4 Math packet. I believe I turned this in. Is there any way you can check? Alternatively, I can redo the packet.

Thank you.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

Hi c.sun,

I'm not Ms. Solyom. I'm a student. The teacher codes for our high school district emails are 88, so Ms. Solyom would be t.sol88@ipsd.edu.

Also, you should probably sign your name at the bottom of an email to a teacher so that she knows who's emailing her.

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

Hi T,

Sorry about that. Typo. Thanks for answering.

C.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

Hi C,

Don't worry about it. Tbh, it was the only note I got from a guy on Valentine's Day, so I'll take it.

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

That sucks. But also, how do you know I'm a guy?

C.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

I just took a wild guess since you didn't use any exclamation points and any female in this city would use several.

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

Smart. So from your lack of exclamation points you must also be a guy.

What school do you go to?

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2014

Subject: Re: Missing Assignment

I am the exception to the rule.

And didn't your parents tell you not to share personal information with strangers on the internet?

Happy Valentine's Day,

T.

Chapter Two

2015

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2015

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day

Hey T,

Wanted to make sure you got at least one Valentine's note this year.

Happy Valentine's Day.

C.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2015

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

C!

You are the mythical unicorn who remembers dates and conversations.

Happy Valentine's Day to you, too.

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2015

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

What can I say? I'm the exception to the rule.

Chapter Three

2016

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day!

C,

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY!!

I didn't want to forget. It feels like a tradition now!

xo

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

T,

DAMN!

I was going to send this when I got home tonight, and you beat me to it.

And look at your egregious exclamation point usage, Miss Exception to the Rule.

Happy Valentine's Day,

C.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Egregious? I think you mean spirited! Today is a holiday! About love! Aren't we supposed to be enthusiastic?

(And yes, in case it isn't obvious, this is the first Valentine's of my life where I've actually got a boyfriend, so let's hope he doesn't shank it on the date plans.)

T.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Lol, have some faith. I'm sure Mr. Boyfriend will blow your mind.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

I'm a simple woman: forget flowers; give me a cupcake and it's a perfect date.

Are you seeing anyone?

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Is this an actual personal conversation we're starting? Didn't your parents warn you against sharing information with strangers on the internet?

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

We aren't strangers! We've known each other for two years now. And how's this: we won't give names or other identifying information.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Sounds like a plan.

I do have a girlfriend, and we're getting dinner at Din Tai Fung later with a group of friends.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

You're not supposed to give me specifics like restaurant names! What if I had plans at Din Tai Fung as well with my date and I walked in to see

someone who looks exactly like he'd be named c.sun16?? The mystery would be ruined.

From: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

I guess we could use acronyms only, but then I'd be telling you that my girlfriend and I are at DTF with a group of people, and that seems like something that could land me on a sex offender list.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Omg fajdks;afsjksfa go eat your soup dumplings, you filthy animal, and I'll see you next year.

T.

PS: I also want to say because our district email addresses make this secret impossible to keep: Happy early graduation, C, and I hope you're feeling good about whatever comes next.

Chapter Four

2017

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day

Yooooooooooooo

I win.

C.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I'm sorry, DID YOU START A NEW EMAIL
ACCOUNT WITH THE SAME USERNAME

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I am nothing if not the laziest.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Lazy people don't email at exactly midnight just to win a race to wish someone Happy Valentine's Day.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

What can I say, I'm a conundrum wrapped in a mystery tied with a puzzle shoved in a pickle jar.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Oooh, exactly how hammered are you right now?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Pretty hammered

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Are you still in Irvine?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

No. I moved away for college.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Don't tell me where! I enjoy the mystery.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Oh I won't. I know the rules.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Are you having fun, wherever you are?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I guess?

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Lol that was a pretty vague answer.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

okay i'll do better

I'm having fun at college, yeah, but right now I'm really fucking hungry.

And this party is pretty lame which is probably why I had more beer than I usually have

But the dude throwing it—I know how you are about not sharing names and information so I won't tell you his name even though he's from Boston and I'm like 98.2% sure that 58% of men born in that city have the same name—is on a sports team that I am also on and he's pretty cool so I wanted to show up for him. But other than him and 1-2 guys from the team, there's not actually that many people I know here

And here's another thing. I'm getting deep now are you ready? It's weird to move away from home. Not bad weird, necessarily, but different. Everywhere feels so different than Irvine. Irvine is a bubble, and we all know that when we're

growing up there but it's different to leave and see how sheltered and privileged we all are.

How are you

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Okay C, I'm impressed.

This was genuinely elaborate. You sound a little homesick, though. I'm sorry. 😞

I'm okay. My boyfriend and I (yes the same one from last year) had plans to go away with his family this weekend, but two weeks ago I drove by him in his car making out with some girl I found out goes to a different high school, so he is now my ex-boyfriend, and tonight I'm learning to sew so I can make voodoo dolls and slowly stab them with sewing pins.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu

Date: February 14, 2017

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Are you serious? That dude is a dick.

I ended things with my gf before I left for school and it was like two weeks before she was dating one of my best friends. I was fine that she moved on and I wasn't mad, but it made winter break pretty awkward.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu
To: c.sun16@email.com
Date: February 14, 2017
Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day
Woof. I bet.

From: c.sun16@email.com
To: t.sol18@ipsd.edu
Date: February 14, 2017
Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Yeah but do'nt worry about that. College has been good to me.

From: t.sol18@ipsd.edu
To: c.sun16@email.com
Date: February 14, 2017
Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day
Ok Romeo! Get yours!

See you next year.

T.

Chapter Five

2018

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day!

I WINNNNNNNNN

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.edu

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

NO FUCKING WAY, you will not believe this, but I was literally about to hit Send.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

And yet, she pulls out the win! Sweet, sweet victory!

What's up, C? Are you drunk at a party again?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Ha ha no, I have a huge exam tomorrow in [class name redacted for T's privacy regulations], so I'm at the library.

Are you building voodoo dolls again?

Also, nice email address, girl, I see you.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Had to keep with the trend. And since you're literally the only person I email other than teachers or my grandparents, I figured we'd keep the talk of college parties off my school email address ha ha.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Okay, yeah, about that. The next day I felt like such a dick. "College has been good to me." But we don't really message outside of this day, so I felt weird sending an email that was like, hey, sorry I sounded like a slutty douche last night. Figured in this case, the statute of limitations on apologies is at least one year.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

You're not a slutty douche, C, you're a conundrum wrapped in a mystery tied with a puzzle shoved in a pickle jar. Apology unnecessary but accepted.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Oh my god.

I forgot about that.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Well, lucky for both of us and the importance of history, I did not.

Are you feeling more settled at school?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Yeah, I think that night I was just feeling homesick. You're a senior now, right, so if you're going to college you probably know or will know soon where you're going. If you haven't decided yet, let me encourage you to take the leap and

go somewhere new. It's hard, but it's worth it. I don't know about you but I'm super close to my family, and I think it would have been so easy to just stay local and be in school there, but there really is something great about going somewhere different and seeing a new part of the country or world.

You don't have to tell me, but do you know yet what you're doing next year? I know everyone gets sick of that question. And if you're not planning on college, ignore all of this and tell me what you're doing instead.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

I'm sick of the question but I don't mind it, if that makes sense? College pressure is the Irvine way! And yeah, I applied early to my #1 for the athletic program and got accepted, so I'll be moving later this summer. For a second I considered changing my mind and staying close to home but then committed. I'm excited and nervous.

A few of my friends are going to IVC and then will transfer to a UC junior year. It makes sense economically and it's such a great option . . . but I've always wanted that freshman dorm chaos. That fun disorientation and fish-out-of-water newness and all that. I'm close to my family too, it's just me and my mom and my younger

brother [consulted my Details & Privacy Rule Book on this level of detail sharing; determined it was acceptable], but Mom wants me to go have an adventure.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Your mom sounds cool.

I think my mom had a psychotic break when they dropped me off at college. I'm the youngest of [number redacted; please consult your D&P Rule Book] and so when they drove off, rumor has it my mom lost her shit at a [regional restaurant redacted; please consult the D&P Rule Book] and threw a cinnamon roll at my father.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Per the official D&P Rule Book, family size is allowed; regional restaurant names are not.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

In that case, I'm the youngest of four.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Okay four kids in college, though? I'd throw a cinnamon roll at the man responsible, too.

Anyway, go study for your test. And good luck.

See you back here next year.

xo

T.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2018

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

See you next year.

And good luck with whatever you decide. I know you'll be fine.

C.

Chapter Six

2019

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 13, 2019

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day

WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER

Happy Valentine's Day, T.

C.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Okay (1) are you eighty? And (2) did you just reveal to me that you are in the eastern time zone, my dude? If not, you sent it early and I think that means I'm the official winner and I'm calling it, as I am the keeper of the rulebook.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I am not in the eastern time zone, however, the Time Stamp Rule Book accepts my victory. You

are the keeper only of the Detail & Privacy Rule Book.

I am the king of 2019. The end.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Ok I'm going to let you have this one because it seems like you really need it.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I do. Today was a shit day.

But whatever. I'm curious to know if you moved and how you're doing.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I did move. Pretty far, tbh. I'm doing . . . okay. I was really homesick at first, but I've made some good friends. I also have my [sport redacted] teammates . . . I think you're an athlete, too, so you know there's a built-in social circle there, which has been good.

I think the hardest thing for me is figuring out what I want to do. Everyone coming into college with us knows exactly what they want to do with their lives. Like, my roommate is obsessed with guinea pigs and volunteers at practically every animal shelter in this city. She will absolutely end up working with animals in some capacity and has always known that. I like a lot of things, but I don't LOVE any one thing. It feels scary, you know? To worry I might commit to something because I have to but not because I love it.

Why was today a shit day?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

My youngest sister had a guinea pig growing up (named Freckles, I figure pet names are exempt from the name rules, also she died like 7 years ago and has no online presence) and the rest of us were deeply uninterested in holding Freckles or having anything to do with her. But then we realized Sister #3 was allergic and instead of finding another home for her, our parents moved Freckles into Sister #2's room, and even years later Sister #2's room smells like rodent bedding. This injustice has been brought up at many a family dinner.

Anyway, I get that feeling of pressure about choosing a major immediately. I came in thinking

I knew what I wanted to do and pivoted last year (sophomore) to something related but different, and it was fine. I feel like there's this expectation that you'll come in at 18 and know exactly what it is you'll do for the rest of your life, but it isn't realistic. Luckily my three sisters went through it first and reassured me that it didn't matter that much. Do it at your own pace.

And today was shitty because I ended things with the girl I was seeing, and one of my sisters was in a car accident. She's okay, but banged up, and it sucks not being home for that stuff.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Shit I told you I have three sisters. I hope I have not broken the rules per D&P.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

It's fine, I told you I have a younger brother. But omg that's scary about the car accident. I totally get wanting to be home for that stuff. I have a little bit of a similar situation here. My mom is fine but had a lumpectomy in November for Stage I breast cancer, and it sucked not being there. Winter break was good for some Mom

cuddles and hang time, but then coming back here where it's freezing is hard.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Oh man, T, I'm sorry about your mom. I hope she makes a full recovery. How are you holding up?

And yeah, the weather is a rough transition, isn't it?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Thanks, C, I'm doing okay. Just trying to be helpful to her as much as possible. It looks like she will be okay, we caught it early.

And wait—did you break up with a girl the day before Valentine's Day? You couldn't give it 48 hours?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

I did. I know. A dick move. But she got 4 more months than she should have, according to my friends.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Oh was she mean to my friend c.sun16? Do I have a beef with this woman now?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

It wasn't the healthiest relationship I've ever been in, I'll say that. As one of my sisters reminded me, it's always good to recognize what doesn't work for me. So it's all good.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

It is all good. You get to be your own valentine today. Just like me. How's this: let's both go find a soup dumpling place and enjoy the hell out of it.

Happy Valentine's Day,

T.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2019

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Perfect. I'll eat a saucy, steamy dumpling in your honor.

Have a good one, T. See you back here next year,

C.

Chapter Seven

2020

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day?

Oh my god we both forgot. There will be no victor this year.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

Oh noooooo, we suck! This makes me so sad!

I mean, to be fair, it's a weird vibe right now? I'm not sure where you are, but things where I am are feeling . . . a little stressful.

I hope you had a great Valentine's Day, though. Did you do anything fun? I'm going to get soup dumplings tonight in your honor.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

Yeah, I feel this, too. Be safe.

I didn't do anything yesterday. Hung out with some friends, but nothing romantic.

How is your mom doing?

I'll get some dumplings tonight, too.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

My mom is doing great, thank you for remembering. She's a badass.

Omg wait I just realized you graduate this spring! Congratulations! Do you know what you're doing after college?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

Yeah, I'm headed to grad school in [you won't want me to tell you what city] for [you won't want me to tell you what program]. Also I meant to ask you whether you ever felt like you connected with something for your major? I know that had been stressing you out a bit.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

Good job, you badass! Is it weird that I just had a pang of sadness that I won't be at your college graduation? I know we don't know each other, really, and I don't have any idea where you're going to school, but in the past six years of change and chaos, you've been a constant. We come from the same hometown so in a way we do know each other. Or at least, we know where we come from. Maybe someday, way in the future, we'll run into each other back in Irvine and I'll just somehow know it's you.

Anyway, I'm getting sappy. And re: my major, I did! Actually, I was happily plugging away as a psych major and then I took a [subject redacted] class with this new, young professor, and it was like a total revelation. I'm in love. Hoping to grad school it myself when I'm done.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2020

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day?

It's not sappy. I agree. And it's a cool thought. If I'm ever back in Irvine for good, I'll drop you a line. You do the same.

And I'm so glad that you found what sparks you.

Happy Valentine's Day, T.

Chapter Eight

2021

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 13, 2021

Subject: Happy Early Valentine's Day!

Yes, I am four hours early! And no I don't care! I WIN!

I know we said last year that if we were both going to be in Irvine we were going to connect, but I guess that plan doesn't work when we're in the midst of a global pandemic. I thought about you a lot this past year, though. I hope that doesn't sound weird. Around May and June, especially, I wondered whether you were bummed to not be getting a graduation ceremony. You were just on my mind a lot. I don't know why I didn't email. It felt like I'd be breaking the rules, I guess.

Did you get to start graduate school this past fall? Are you still in Irvine? Or, I guess, did you ever come back?

I came home in March. Our school had a 3-day move out, and it was chaos, but I made it back here and finished the year online. I decided to delay my junior year because I didn't want to do everything virtually, so I'll go back in the fall. It sucks a little to be behind a year now, but my

major isn't one that's easy to do outside of the classroom. I spent the last 7-8 months coaching kids' [sport redacted per the D&P Rule Book, lol, why are we still doing this?] and it's been so fun and good to be outside as much as possible.

Anyway, Happy Valentine's Day, C. I hope you're doing okay.

T.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 13, 2021

Subject: Re: Happy Early Valentine's Day!

Haha sneaky, but I guess I can't protest since I started the early email trend. Happy Valentine's Day, T.

Woof, yeah, the last year has been wild, hasn't it?

I did come home last March when school shut down. My whole family holed up in the house and I have to admit, it was actually great at first, despite the way it felt like the world was ending all around us. It sucked not getting to walk at graduation but initially we all felt grateful to be healthy and together. Lots of game nights, cooking, together time.

I don't really know how to say this, or whether I even should, because it isn't like we really know each other outside of this day, but I know that your mother went through some health issues back in 2019, and at this point it does feel like

you know me. Seven years, now, we've been doing this.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that my dad died last summer. He didn't get COVID, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and went pretty fast. The worst part, I mean the absolute shit of it, was not being able to see him once he was admitted to the hospital.

So I was in Irvine with my mom and sisters until late December when I moved away again to begin grad school in person. I started a semester in, like, a month and a half ago, but everything is so chaotic for all of us, at least a lot of us are in the same boat. Like yours, it's not a field that does very well over a computer.

I'm here now and adjusting. I like [new town redacted, though I agree at this point it's sort of moot] a lot. I'd been at UW Madison for undergrad, I guess I can tell you that now, and it was great, but so different from California as you can imagine.

I hope you're doing well, T. For what it's worth, you wouldn't be breaking any rules to message me a different day. You can email me anytime.

C.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2021

Subject: Re: Happy Early Valentine's Day!

Oh my god, C, I am so sorry about your dad. I don't even know what to say, this is just devastating. I'm so sorry for you and your mom and sisters. Ugh. I wish I could hug you.

Love,

T.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2021

Subject: Re: Happy Early Valentine's Day!

Thanks, yeah honestly, it's been rough. I felt bad leaving home again, too, because I realized that even though I'm the youngest, my dad took care of his girls in a way that I want to continue even though he's gone. He kept up with everyone's life day-to-day. He always knew what questions to ask. I want to follow in those footsteps but feel a little lost.

We're all just figuring it out as we go.

But I really love what I'm studying right now, and everyone else in the family is doing well, considering. My oldest sister just had her first kid in January, so I'm an uncle to a baby girl now, and my middle sister is getting married this summer, so life goes on even when hard things happen.

Happy Valentine's Day officially now. Go get some Din Tai Fung and toast a dumpling to me.

C.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2021

Subject: Breaking the rules for soup dumplings

Here's a picture for you from dinner last night. Soup dumpling and my hand holding chopsticks. I consulted the D&P and this was allowable. It was particularly delicious last night, too. I can't stop thinking about you and your family. I know they don't know me, but send your mom and sisters some love from me.

xo

T.

Chapter Nine

2022

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Look who's back on top

Happy Valentine's Day and I'll take my victory lap now.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

Ahhh. I even set an alarm for midnight, but I slept right through that flimsy bitch.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

How are you? Are you back at school or still in Irvine?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

I'm back at school! It's so awesome to be back on campus. I don't think I realized how isolated I'd started to feel. Everything is amazing. Except for the snow. That is less awesome. Everyone thinks of Southern California summers as this magical time, but the best kept secret is that we have the best February of any place in the world. Summers are boob sweat and crowds.

How's your mom doing?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

I cannot attest to the boob sweat but agree re: crowds. And the social isolation of the pandemic must have been brutal. If we were smarter, we would have met at a park. Why didn't we think of that?

Mom is doing pretty well. She's always been healthy but never super into fitness per se, but got really into hiking last year, so she's 55 and in the best shape of her life. There's a lot of saucy "If your father could see me now's" happening, and, quite frankly, I don't want to know how that sentence ever ends, but I'm happy for her. She's doing all right.

You're in your junior year now, right? Still doing your same redacted sport? Still studying your same redacted subject?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

Ha ha yes yes I am still playing the sport and still studying the thing. In fact I can tell you that my sport is lacrosse because I'm pretty sure if you were at Madison you never saw a women's lacrosse game, or if you did, you probably weren't very impressed (yes, this is team slander and I welcome trash talking in response). I can give you a small hint and say that my school's women's team is very good. Because I took a year off, I still have 1.5 years of eligibility left, which is good because I hope to be captain next year.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

Lacrosse is pretty badass, T. You will get no trash talking from me, especially coming from Irvine where I'm not sure whether even 50% of our community could successfully differentiate lacrosse from field hockey. I cannot tell you my sport because it is a small but successful team at Madison, and you'd be able to figure me out with a simple Google and we all know how you feel about that.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

This is going to be forward, but I've gotta shoot my shot: Will you be home at all this summer? If so, do you want to meet up? (If you have a girlfriend, tell me because in the interest of full disclosure, I have had a little crush on you for years now and am basically asking you out on a date.) (I will also immediately panic once I send this email.)

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2022

Subject: Re: Look who's back on top

Okay well I know what you mean about having a crush because I've sort of had the same *What If* thought a few times. But I'm so sorry, T. I would love to meet you, but I do have a girlfriend and agree that if we did connect in person, it would inevitably feel like a date. I do hope you have a very happy Valentine's Day, though, and will still be getting dumplings tonight as tradition requires. Until next year?

Yours,

C.

Chapter Ten

2023

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day!

I love winning.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

You were destined to win this year since I would absolutely not be the first to send the email after asking a taken man out on a date last year!

Happy Valentine's Day, C!

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

I'm not taken anymore, if that helps . . . And I'll be in Irvine for the last two weeks of August.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Not only do I have a boyfriend, but he is moving to the same city I am for graduate school, and we are packing up for the road trip over—you guessed it—the last two weeks of August.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Goddamnit. 😞

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2023

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Lol i know. TEN Valentine's Days, though. Ten!! It's so cool that we've done this since we were 14 and 16 years old. Happy Valentine's Day, C. Maybe next year we'll meet. Even if it isn't romantic, it will be so good to see you in person someday.

xo

T.

Chapter Eleven

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day!

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY, FAVORITE

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Hey! Happy Valentine's Day. What are you up to?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

My roommate and friend are dragging me to a party. I broke up with the bf a couple weeks ago, and there's a non-Valentine's thing at the house of a friend of a friend or something—honestly, I don't even know. I'm just preemptively annoyed because I'm sure there won't be soup dumplings there.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Oh, wow, I'm sorry about the bf. I hope you're okay.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Oh, no, I am totally okay. I ended things. He'd gotten clingy and weird, and you know how grad school is. There isn't time for clingy and weird. How are you?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

OK cool, so then is it too soon to ask you out next time we're both back in Irvine?

And I'm good. Busy. Hoping to wrap up things and do the dissertation defense in the fall. I'll be in Irvine for a week in June but can also come back when you're in town.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

It's not too soon ...

You'd come back just to see me?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Without question.

Chapter Twelve

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Terra

I run my fingers decadently over the plushest sofa I've ever sat upon and sip the best wine I've ever tasted, unfortunately feeling more bored than I have in my entire life. My friends insisted that what I needed postbreakup was a non-Valentine's-Day-themed Valentine's Day party, but I can assure you that no newly single woman ever wants to do anything remotely celebratory on Valentine's Day.

Yet, here I am. The wine is good; the cheese is, too. And plentiful: there's a huge spread of it on the gleaming glass coffee table in front of me, and not a pink-wrapped Hershey's kiss or chalky heart candy to be found. Chef's kiss. But the cheese seems mostly to be for show. No one appears tempted. I've only seen one woman eat a single green olive, and it was about ten minutes ago. I watched as she delicately retrieved the pit from between her lips with her thumb and forefinger, fretting visibly for a handful of seconds about where to discard it before seeming to decide to fold it into her palm. I think it might still be in there.

Relatedly, this isn't my kind of party. I'm more a jeans-and-board-games kind of gal. An outdoor-bonfire kind of vibe. This is a wine-and-cheese-and-*New-Yorker*-articles-discussion party. A what's-your-favorite-podcast party. I don't even know whose house we're in; I think my roommate, Elise, said the guy who owns it is a friend of her friend Nathan's,

which is a circuitous way of saying that the owner could be any one of the fancily dressed people sipping malbec and discussing which hedge fund is their favorite.

But whoever lives here is clearly very rich because this place is *enormous*. It's the kind of Philadelphia house that makes a penniless, first-year graduate student like me feel vaguely pre-defeated, because I've set the success bar firmly at Paying Off My Student Loans Before I Retire. I can't imagine affording something like this in any version of my future. I can't even afford the cab ride home, which is why I'm stuck here until Elise and our friend Jamie are ready to bail.

I appreciate that my friends wanted me to get out of the apartment; I appreciate that they have a hard time believing that I really am okay after ending the relationship with Nick that lasted nearly two years. But given that they vanished to schmooze almost as soon as we got here, I'm going to ask a few more questions next time before agreeing to a "girls' night out."

What I want to be doing is chilling back in my bedroom, eating delivery soup dumplings, and continually rereading C's inexplicably sexy "Without question" email. But instead I'm here, wearing a dress, slowly sipping great wine, resisting cheese, and speaking to no one.

I look down at my phone and open C's email again.

Without question.

My pulse quickens, my neck flushes, and, impulsively, I hit Reply.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

And I will, also without question, come home when you're there. Let me know the dates you'll be in Irvine, and I'll be there, too.

My email sends with a little *whoosh*. We're going to meet.

We are finally going to meet.

I stand, needing to walk off this nervous energy. I grab the bottle of wine on the table near me and slip through the clusters of people to the back of the room, where a wide staircase leads upstairs. Why not? I have nothing else to do.

Chapter Thirteen

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Terra

Upstairs there are at least five bedrooms, with their doors all open to the hall. The room that draws me in is a library. Bookshelves stretch from floor to ceiling and line the entirety of three walls, except for a narrow space in the center of the back wall where a long window overlooks a park lit by small spots of yellow streetlights.

Isn't it everyone's dream to have a library like this? I trail my fingers over the spines, squinting to read titles in the dark. There's fiction, nonfiction, reference, poetry. Books on photography and art and travel and cars. There are a few authors I recognize—Ursula Le Guin and Joan Didion and Donna Tartt, the kind of fiction written by women that a man would own—but there are even more that I don't. The collection is huge but feels a little haphazard, not especially curated. The room is beautiful but not warm. There's a giant firm leather sofa with old-fashioned brass detailing and two matching chairs with an ornately carved wood coffee table between them. Why does it feel like no one ever comes in here?

I leave the light off, sink down onto one of the chairs, and lift the wine bottle to my lips.

I've never been a huge drinker, but since I've graduated and there's no professional women's lacrosse league, I've discovered that wine and I are

newfound buddies. But still not such close buddies that a glass plus an unknown quantity consumed straight from the bottle doesn't go directly to my head. The tipsiness means that my thoughts float aimlessly. I quickly move past thinking about Nick, because I've wrung all of the thinking possible from that emotional sponge, and I steer clear of letting my mind wander to my research because it occupies all of my daylight thoughts and shouldn't deserve my nighttime ones, too. But then my thoughts land on C again, and the idea of meeting up in person with him after so long makes me feel weak with nervous anticipation.

I wonder what he's doing right now.

I wonder, for the millionth time, what he looks like.

I wonder whether I've seen him back home before.

And it's these thoughts that distract me enough that I don't hear the voices, a man and a woman, until they're right outside the door.

Wine, attending a stupid party in a strange house, and my adrenaline-soaked blood from thinking about the *Without question*. Those are the only reasons to explain why, instead of comfortably remaining seated and facing whoever is about to enter the room, I panic and bolt with my bottle of wine into the library's tiny closet, shutting myself inside.

Chapter Fourteen

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Callum

I allow myself to be led down the hallway, sensing the inevitability of what's coming. Of course, Kristen and I aren't the first exes to occasionally hook up after we've ended things, but for every time we said *This is the last time*, there is, at some point, an *actual last time*. For me, that was three weeks ago. For Kristen, it seems that *actual last time* hasn't happened yet.

She tugs me into Dylan's library and shuts the door, sealing us up inside. It smells like lemon wood polish and dust in here, and even when I walk toward the window, I can sense the way Kristen prowls over to me. I turn away, feigning obliviousness, pretending to study some of the book spines.

"Do you think he's ever fucked someone on this couch?" Kristen asks, and I didn't realize how close she'd come. Her breath fans warm across the back of my neck. I feel the hairs there stand on end and take a step to the side before turning to face her.

"Probably not." Leaning casually back against the waist-high ledge in the middle of the bookshelf, I smile, trying to make the mood friendly, but not *we're-in-agreement-why-we're-here* friendly. "Leather gets a little squeaky. But that velvet sofa in the living room? He's absolutely banged on that."

A sound, like a tiny gasp, comes from somewhere across the room. For a beat, I'm elated that there's someone else in here, someone to distract Kristen from her mission. But when I lean to the side, looking, there's no one there. We're alone.

Kristen steps forward into my field of vision, right up against me, and begins toying with the top button of my shirt. "Wanna be the first, then?"

Yes, I'd known it was inevitable, but the request still fills me with vague dread. We already broke up once. This is the problem with the casual hookup: having to break up again.

I like Kristen; I want us to still be friendly. We dated exclusively for a few months. The sex was always decent, but outside of that we have almost nothing in common. I guess it's that combination that always made it easy to keep coming back into each other's bed out of boredom or intoxication or lazy desire, but the lack of emotional connection always made me feel sort of gross afterward. Unfortunately, we have friends in common, work in the same lab, and even have a small research collaboration. *Don't shit where you eat*, our graduate mentor said once, and he'd been talking about grad students behaving badly at department parties, but maybe he was also talking about dumbass ideas like dating your labmate.

More to the point, however, is that it suddenly feels unfaithful to be shut up in a room with Kristen when I asked T out tonight. Even if we won't see each other until June, it doesn't feel right to mess around with Kristen immediately after firming up that agreement.

“Listen,” I start gently, but she cuts in, setting her fingers on my lips.

“*Shhh*. I know what you’re going to say.” Her mouth is only an inch from mine, and I smell the wine on her breath. “That we need to stop hooking up. But do we? Really?”

Frowning, I pull my head back and meet her gaze. “I think so.”

“No one will know we’re in here. I bet Dylan forgets this room exists.”

“That’s probably true,” I hedge, “but that isn’t why I’m saying no.”

“You give such good dick,” she says, and yep, there it is: the familiar desire to dissolve into the floor. I enjoyed Kristen’s dirty mouth for approximately ten minutes the first night she flirted with me, until I realized it wasn’t ever connected to actual sex. We’d be getting iced coffee at Starbucks, and she’d lean over and tell me she wanted me to lick her with my cold tongue. She’d hold up a 100 ml graduated cylinder in the lab and run her tongue over her teeth. Passing me in the hallway, she’d tell me she could see the outline of my dick in my pants. In bed, this kind of talk would be one thing; it could be private and fun and filthy. But in the middle of Starbucks, the lab, the hallway? Come on. All I could ever think to say was something like, “Cool.”

“Thanks,” I say now.

“I mean it.”

“I believe you.”

“You don’t want to bend me over that couch?”

I'm really trying to be laid back about this. I just want to get back downstairs, thank Dylan for a nice party, and get home. "Not tonight."

"I could ride you. I'd ride you so good, Cally."

I have to swallow to not release the laugh-wail that seems to expand in my throat. She's never called me that before and would have no way of knowing I hate that nickname. "Not here."

"No one makes me come like you," she says, leaning in, smelling my neck. "Every time. Better than I do alone."

"I'm sorry . . ." Squeezing my eyes closed, I set my hands on her shoulders, carefully urging her back.

"You're serious?" she asks, stepping away and looking at me with new clarity.

"Yeah." I swallow, nodding. God, it is going to be so awkward in the lab tomorrow. "I'm sorry, Kristen, but I do think we should stop for real."

She stares at me for three endless seconds. "You're an asshole, Callum." She turns and leaves the room. Silence rings out.

Silence, except for a tiny rustle. A miniature squeak. Another sound that I now register seems to be coming from the closet.

Chapter Fifteen

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Terra

C*allum?* my brain screams, a high-pitched, internal shriek. *Callum Sundberg?* The graduate student in our program a few years ahead of me and Elise? The literal embodiment of charisma? The capable-yet-intimidating TA for our neuroanatomy seminar? The man so tall and hot and untouchable we peek at him around objects—trees, books, doorways—like looking at an eclipse? *Callum* is in the room on the other side of this door? As soon as I heard Kristen say his name, everything clicked into place. God, of course Callum is the man who “gives good dick,” who made her come like no one else, who just turned down sex so absolutely, *so decisively*, that she left without another word.

I smother my horrified laugh and bend, pressing my face to my knees. I cannot fathom being turned down like that by a man like Callum Sundberg. Truthfully, I cannot fathom having the nerve to proposition him in the first place, but then to be so summarily rejected! I feel Kristen’s humiliation as a spike in my own pulse. How could any mortal come back from that? I would sooner dig my own grave out in Death Valley, climb in, and slowly desiccate to death.

But in an instant, *that* humiliation is nothing. Because the closet door swings open, and Callum Sundberg is right there. Well over six feet, beautifully

fit, with light-brown hair and gleaming hazel eyes, he's looming over me, staring down with a mixture of surprise and horror to where I'm curled up around my half-empty bottle of wine.

"Holy shit. I thought I heard someone in here."

Like an idiot, I wave. "Yes, hello."

"Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

"I'm fine. I came in here to escape the party and then heard someone coming and panicked."

"Dylan wouldn't care if you were in here."

"That's nice but I have no idea who Dylan is."

He smiles, looking more closely at me, and my humiliation deepens when he asks, "Isn't your name Teresa? You're a first-year?"

"It's Terra, actually."

"That's right." His eyes fall closed, and he takes a deep breath. "You heard everything, didn't you?"

"I did."

The words *You give such good dick* seem to reverberate between us.

"You're in a class I TA," he says mournfully.

"Indeed, I am." I swallow. "Don't worry. It doesn't have to be weird."

How, self? I wonder. How will it not be weird?

No one makes me come like you do. Every time. Better than I do alone.

"Please don't tell anyone about this," he says quietly. And what man in the history of time would

ever want his prowess in bed kept a secret? Please. But my heart does a tiny, swooning flip when he adds, “Kristen would be mortified.”

And even as the words “I promise I won’t” flow from my lips, I know I’m lying. Thank God it happened on Valentine’s Day, because the second I get home, I’m going to email C and tell him all about this.

Callum reaches down, extending his hand to me, and I take it. He pulls me up and when our eyes meet, his thumb passes, warm and smooth, over my knuckles. “You sure you’re okay?”

Revision: I will tell C everything except the way I feel that thumb stroke everywhere. “I’m sure I’m okay,” I tell him, knowing I’m not okay at all.

Chapter Sixteen

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Tonight was boring until it was BONKERS.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Bonkers? Tell me.

Also, I'll be home June 3–11.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

We are finally leaving in like 10 minutes, so I'll email you the entire story when we get back to the apartment. I think we are the last 3 people here, and somehow, I still haven't seen the person who owns this house.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Sounds like we both had an interesting evening.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

There is no way your story wins.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Well, now I'm intrigued.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Okay, so I told you how my friends were dragging me to this party. It was just as boring as expected. I'm sure everyone was very nice, but it was pretty fancy and not at all the mood I was in. I only knew a few people there, and my friends ended up deep in conversation with other people, etc., you get it: I was bored.

So I went wandering around. It's this huge house in this really nice neighborhood of the city I live in, and let me tell you: this is not usually my

thing. I don't usually wander around a stranger's house. But again: BORED. Also, I had wine. SO I'm in this library alone and I hear someone coming so I panic and instead of just staying in the chair like a normal person and being like, "Hi, yes I'm just hanging out and getting away from the party for a few minutes," I hid in the closet.

Two people came in. They were clearly former lovers. She was begging him to bang her, C. *Begging*. He was very firmly like "No, I will not bang you." It wasn't until the very end when she said his name that I realized it's my TA. MY VERY HOT, VERY INTIMIDATING TA. And the worst part was that I MUST HAVE MADE A SOUND BECAUSE WHEN SHE LEFT IN SHAME AND SHAMBLES, HE WALKED OVER AND FOUND ME IN THE CLOSET.

I knew everything that she'd said. And he knew I knew. And now I think he's proctoring an exam on Friday morning, and I definitely want to feign illness.

Help.

T.

PS: Since we're talking about meeting up . . . should we finally exchange names? Numbers?

Chapter Seventeen

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Callum

I do not think *disbelief* is the right word. I don't even know what the right word *is*.

I read T's email again, and then again, and I really think that no matter how badly I want to lie to myself right now, there is no universe in which we just happened to experience two sides of the exact same encounter in different places in the country.

T and Terra are both first-year graduate students.

T and Terra were both hiding in a closet earlier.

T and Terra both overheard her TA being propositioned, and I was propositioned, and I am a TA of a graduate class.

T is Terra.

Her name is Terra.

A class list crystallizes in my mind, and I mentally scan down toward the bottom.

Terra Solace.

t.sol.

I just met her, but she has no idea she's just met me.

I set my phone down and sit at the edge of my couch cushion, back straight, eyes fixed on the wall of

my living room, trying to remember every detail of her face.

Large dark eyes, full lips, small, pointed chin. I think she has freckles, but I'm not sure; all I can see now is the way she looked up at me in shock and mortification from the floor of the closet. Her hair is chin length, dark brown, straight, and smooth. She's on the taller side, but thin, long limbed.

My weakness is tall women.

She played lacrosse. She was raised by a single mother. She has a younger brother.

And since I was sixteen, she's been part of my life.

I've noticed her, of course, but only in the way heterosexual men notice all women who are generally off-limits: fleetingly, without lingering perusal. Because Terra has been off-limits: Still *is* off-limits. I wouldn't ever date someone in a class I'm TA'ing. I'm not trying to sound like a moral douchebag; I was sleeping with a peer whose anger at me could have a direct impact on my doctoral research. But Kristen and I are on even footing. First-year grad students are in a uniquely vulnerable situation: they're all stressed, overworked, fatigued, and hoping that they get picked to work in their first-choice lab after a year of grueling rotations.

But seeing Terra through new eyes . . . a piece of my life clicks into place. It's a strange, solidifying feeling, and I don't know how I'll pretend to not know it's her. I don't *want* to.

I rub my knuckles over my sternum. My chest aches. I want to email right now and ask her where in

Philly she lives, whether she's close to the Penn campus, whether I can come over and meet her in person all over again.

She's single. She *wants* to meet me. But, shit, it isn't so easy anymore.

Because Terra is a student in a class for which I do a majority of the grading.

Terra overheard a private conversation I was having with an ex.

Terra thinks I'm intimidating.

(But she also thinks I'm hot.)

Terra wants to exchange names and phone numbers.

Fuck.

Chapter Eighteen

FEBRUARY 15, 2024

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Holy shit. You weren't kidding. That's an insane night.

It's hilarious that you ended up in the closet and heard all of that. I'm sure he's embarrassed as fuck. Hopefully he was nice about it and didn't make you feel bad?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

He didn't. I mean, he didn't remember my name, and that was somewhat mortifying, since my group of friends calls him Our Lord and Savior because they all think he's so hot, but I'm just a first-year. I don't really expect him to know who I am. He seems like a decent guy. And if I'm being honest, I mostly feel bad for the woman. To have good sex and then lose it? The tragedy! (Not that I'd know.)

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

Our Lord and Savior . . . I mean, there's a nickname.

And what do you mean, "not that I'd know"?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 15, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

I really should not be emailing at 2 in the morning after I've had this much to drink. I'm saying so much here after being so appropriate in this email box for so long! But what can I say? I must be a conundrum wrapped in a mystery tied with a puzzle shoved in a pickle jar.

The nickname has a stupid story. Basically we all met him at a department party this fall and called him God until my friend Jamie admitted that, as a lapsed Catholic, the nickname made her vaguely uncomfortable and Elise doubled down and began calling him Our Lord and Savior. And then he became our TA and . . . yeah. Callum (that's his name) is objectively attractive, but I am excited to see you this summer. If you're on the same page, that is . . . I notice you didn't give me your name and number, so I don't want to cross that boundary until you're ready.

And by "not that I'd know" I mean that I feel bad for Kristen (that's the woman's name) but not so

bad that I'm not a little envious that she's experienced it. Does that make sense? Like part of what she was saying to him felt embarrassingly over the top, but part of it felt really . . . real. And I don't know if there is any guy from my past, even one who ended things and I still had feelings for, who I would go to and say, "I need this one more time." Overhearing that conversation made me realize I've never really had good sex.

I can't believe I'm about to hit Send on this but

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 15, 2024

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day!

We are totally on the same page. In fact, earlier tonight, my ex approached me and part of what made it uncomfortable was that you and I had finally agreed to go on a date. I felt disloyal even being there. It just sucks that we have to wait until June.

I get what you mean about feeling envious about that. And being raised by my mother and three older sisters, I can't tell you the number of times my sisters reminded me—whether or not I wanted to discuss it—that it takes women a long time to learn what works for them re: sex. So maybe you just haven't found a guy who is willing to be patient and figure it out with you.

I want to give you my name and number, but this is a big reversal in our system. Let's talk about

that more when we haven't been drinking?

C.

Chapter Nineteen

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

Terra

One would think I'd be nervous about the exam I'm about to take, but really, I'm exhausted from not sleeping (alternately studying and rereading C's email suggesting HE! IS! A! PATIENT! LOVER!) and also dreading seeing Callum this morning.

The more I thought about it yesterday, the more I realized how fucking insane I looked for hiding in a closet. He came out looking like an A+ sex stud, and I came out looking like Gollum curled around her bottle of wine.

There's no way that this isn't going to be awkward.

Except . . . it isn't. I walk into the classroom, compulsively early as always, sit in my seat, and Callum immediately comes over, crouching in front of me. We are the only two people in here, and it feels wildly intimate how close we are.

"Hey. You good?" he asks, and those brown-green eyes search mine, and he gives a tiny, unsure smile. "After the, uh, incident Wednesday night?"

My pulse trips all over itself before sprinting away. He really is so intensely hot; the longer we maintain eye contact, the more worried I become about releasing a spontaneous moan. "Am—am I good? Yes. I'm fine. Are *you* good?"

He breaks out in a real smile, and it's devastating. It's an underwear-shredding smile. The seductive smile of a man who gives good dick. "I'm fine," he says quietly, eyes flickering past my shoulder as the room begins to fill. "Embarrassed. But I just wanted to check on you."

"I don't think *you* need to be embarrassed," I whisper, laughing.

"*Ehh,*" he says, wincing cutely, "it was just private."

"And I'm sorry that I trespassed on a private moment," I tell him. "I punished myself by finishing the entire bottle of wine and treating myself to a brutal headache yesterday morning."

He laughs, low and sexy, like a man who very patiently delivers orgasms every time, and *God*, I think my brain is melting. C is right. I need a man who is patient, because whatever I've been missing must be amazing.

"You ready for today?" Callum asks.

"For today?"

A tiny smile. "The exam?"

"Oh. That. Yes. Very ready for it. Ready to take it, I mean." I pause, swallowing. Why does this eye contact feel like foreplay? "I'm referring to the exam."

There's a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he stands. "Good."

And when I get up at the end of class and leave, Callum gives me a small smile and a wave. I really hope I haven't just completely bombed it, because

only two minutes after I finished it, I don't remember a single question on the test.

Chapter Twenty

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

Callum

I set the stack of exams on Dr. Ashkar's desk. "Hey, Mike. I'm going to have to recuse myself from grading these."

He looks up at me, lowering his glasses. "Oh yeah? What's up?"

Mike Ashkar is the newest faculty member in our department and the one professor I am sure to be friends with long after I finish my doctorate. I have resigned myself to tell him this much, and no more: "I've got a thing for one of the students."

"Which one?"

"No way."

He laughs. "All right. I'll do them. You owe me lunch."

"I owe you lunch *and* a bottle of Aberlour, but just the twelve."

He laughs and I turn to leave, but he stops me. "Callum, wait. Did I hear right that Mikkelson is taking over your TA role for the rest of the term?"

"Yeah, I swapped over to his neurophys section."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Same reason?"

I grin. "Same reason."

"You're really not going to tell me who it is?"

“Hell no,” I say and turn for the door again. “Because if she rejects me, you’ll never let me live it down.”

“You got that right. Good luck.”

From the second Terra walked out of the classroom, I wanted to see her again. Immediately. I have this buzzed, vibrating feeling in my limbs. No matter how fantastical it sounds, it feels like we were destined to run into each other in some truly unbelievable way.

I suppose I don’t have to wait. I could email her right now and tell her who I am, but I saw the way she was in class. She’s nervous with me—she admitted in an email that she finds me intimidating—and if I told her now who I am, I worry that dynamic would dominate. I don’t want that between us after everything.

Unfortunately, as soon as I leave Mike’s office, I realize that I’ve just inadvertently quit the one space where I’m sure to easily run into her. I’m neck-deep in worrying about how to manufacture a chance run-in when I look up in line at the soup-dumpling counter at Franklin’s and see her only a few places in front of me.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Mind if I join you?” I ask.

Terra startles, jerking her attention away from the pile of journal articles spread around her Styrofoam food container. “Oh—hey!”

I gesture to the crowded food hall around us. I have the perfect excuse that nearly every other table is occupied. “Okay if I sit?”

She scrambles to clear the papers and make room for me. “Yeah, yeah, of course.”

I sit and look across the table at her. Her neck is pink, her cheeks flushed. She’s nervous, but she really is so beautiful. I’d never really thought too much about what she might look like, but somehow I can still say she looks just like I imagined she would. Strong and scrappy and unpretentious and sexy. I want to soak up every physical detail about her now that she’s right here in front of me: her plush lips, the scattered freckles across the bridge of her nose. Dark hair covered with a red-and-blue Penn beanie, the ends flipping up beneath the hem. Long neck, long fingers, unpolished short nails. The swell of her breasts beneath the tight fabric of her long-sleeved thermal shirt.

My mouth goes dry.

I clear my throat, blinking back up to her face and grateful she’s still too distracted by stacking her papers in order to notice me staring. “How did the test feel today?”

She reaches up, pulls the hat off, and self-consciously drags her fingers through her cute, staticky hair. “Okay, I guess? I’m not sure. I feel comfortable with the material, so hopefully that shows.” She laughs a little, meeting my eyes. “I guess you’ll know soon enough.”

“Actually, I’m not the TA anymore, as of about a half hour ago.”

“Why?”

“I swapped with Bryan.” At her frown, I add, “Mikkelson?”

She nods. “Yeah, I know who he is. I just didn’t realize TAs switched midterm.”

I look down at my plate and grab a dumpling with my chopsticks. “We do sometimes.” This is a lie. “You’re done with the cortical unit, and he’s in a neuroendocrine lab and knows the upcoming material better than I do.”

Terra narrows her eyes at me, suspicious. “You sure it isn’t because I know all about your sexual prowess?”

I’m unable to keep my laugh in. This is exactly how T would have teased me, and I fucking love seeing her relax. “Yes, you’re right. Having a reputation of being an amazing lay is just too great a burden for me.”

Her giggle is cute. “Well, we’ll miss you. Bryan is a mansplainer.”

“You’re not wrong.” I watch her finally take a bite of cucumber salad. A small bite. Maybe she’s still a little nervous with me. “Where did you do your undergrad?”

She chews, swallows, covering her mouth. “Um, at Boston College?”

I go still. When T told me she played lacrosse, I did what any self-respecting man of my generation would do: I googled the NCAA rankings. BC is second in the *country*. And T hoped to be captain? *Wow*.

“You have an athlete vibe . . . ,” I begin, wondering if she’ll tell me.

I’m relieved when she grins and says easily, “Yeah? I played lacrosse.”

“Was BC any good?”

She tilts her head, side to side. “We did all right.”

Humble liar. I fight a grin and hold another dumpling in front of my mouth. “Where did you grow up?”

“Southern California,” she says, and I stare directly at her, mentally daring her to volley the question back at me. “Where did *you* go to school?” she asks instead.

I watch her carefully as I toss the bite in my mouth and speak around it. “Madison.”

Her eyes go wide. “Seriously? One of my good friends from back home went there!”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, swallowing, and I realize I’m stuck with the next part of this script. “It’s a big school, but maybe I knew him? What was his name?”

Her dark brows pull together in a skeptical frown. “I didn’t say it was a guy.”

Oh shit.

But would it be the worst thing for me to come out, right here in the middle of Franklin’s, and tell her? Now that I’m sitting across from Terra, it feels so obvious, so inevitable, so easy. “Yeah, well—”

“But it *is* a guy,” she says, laughing. “So you’re off the hook.” She plucks a dumpling from her plate, sliding it between her full lips. I watch her chew and

swallow, trying not to let my expression show that I'm imagining kissing her. "This is going to sound really weird," she begins. I know exactly what she's going to say, and now I'm dying to hear our story from her soft, plump lips.

"Hit me." I lean in.

"But I don't actually know his name."

I huff out a laugh. "Is that right?"

"It's a long story and I won't bore you with it," she says, "but basically when I was fourteen, he accidentally emailed me instead of his teacher, and we've been in touch ever since."

"That's cute."

"But because we were minors at the time, we didn't share info, and now it's sort of a thing to not divulge personal information. Like, not a bad thing, but *our* thing."

"So I guess that means he's not your boyfriend?" I ask, and she looks back at me, dark eyes widening with surprise.

She must see that I'm invested in this answer.

"Well . . . no. But . . . maybe eventually he will be? We're going to finally meet up this summer."

"Not until *summer*? Where does he live?"

She slaps a hand over her eyes, laughing. "Why are you asking the hard questions!"

"I don't know!" I laugh, too, wanting to apologize but also . . . wanting to keep sitting here and eating soup dumplings and flirting with her for the rest of the day until she figures it out.

Terra peeks at me from between her fingers. “I don’t know where he lives.” She drops her hand, laughing. “He’s originally from Irvine, like me. We have this thing, okay?” She picks up a dumpling and holds it aloft, studying it. “We get soup dumplings when we’re thinking about each other.”

She was thinking about me.

I pop another into my mouth. “Is that right?”

She nods. “But admitting that I don’t know where he lives? I hear it, it sounds crazy.” She leans in, lowering her voice. “Do you ever have a feeling about someone? Like they’re your safe space and, I don’t know, like someday it could be more?”

I swallow, nodding. “Yeah. Of course.”

I’m looking right at her.

“I have a feeling about him.”

But the thing is, when she looks up at me and our eyes lock, I’m pretty sure she has a feeling about me, too.

Chapter Twenty-One

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 16, 2024

Subject: Emerging from the hungover study cave

Hi hi,

I swear it didn't take me this long to get sober, eek. I had a test this morning and knew if I wrote back to you yesterday I would obsess about it and put way, way too much time into it.

Thank you for putting the brakes on my tipsy request to share. It was sudden and you were right to wait.

But at the same time, I think I am ready to start to know more about you. Full disclosure: I had lunch with my TA today, you know the one from the party, and he said he went to Madison for undergrad, and I was like, Hey, I know someone who went there! And when he asked me about you, I realized I didn't have any of the kind of information people usually have, like name, location, favorite Golden Girl.

So, I'll start, but I'll start small:

I went to Boston College. My brother's name is Everett. My favorite Golden Girl is Rose.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 16, 2024

Subject: Re: Emerging from the hungover study cave

If the “full disclosure” means that you’re feeling weird about having lunch with your TA—please don’t. Until you’re able to be right in front of me, connecting my face to my initial, don’t feel guilty for spending time with other people and wondering about them, even romantically.

You already know I went to UW Madison, so I’ll tell you something new: I am six foot three. My favorite aunt’s name is Betty, and she’s a lot like Dorothy on the Golden Girls, so I guess that’s my favorite GG. My favorite fruit is mango.

Chapter Twenty-Two

FEBRUARY 17, 2024

Terra

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 17, 2024

Subject: Re: Emerging from the hungover study cave

Good morning!

This is crazy! My middle name is Mango! No it isn't, I'm just kidding. It's Bernice, and I used to hate it, but I love it now. It was my grandmother's name. My favorite fruits are the tiny pixie tangerines you can only get for like a month every winter. No one ever spells my first name right. And I'm five foot ten.

Oh wait, that's four things.

Thank you for what you said about having lunch with my TA. I really, really want to meet up with you. I won't deny that I'm attracted to Callum, but I barely know him and, I mean, you're the only person I actually email. If that's not commitment idk what is.

Also also, I can't imagine Callum reciprocates, so I don't think there's any danger of us seeing each other romantically. I type this knowing how hard it would be for me to read the same thing from

you. But I don't want to hide any more than we already do.

xo

T.

I hit Send and scramble out of bed, throw on clothes, and hop on my bike, pedaling my ass off to get to Williams Café in time for a coffee before I have to be in the lab for an important experimental timepoint. My fussy primary cells do not care if it's Saturday.

I am a mess. I had a weird dream about going to class with Callum and wearing a shirt I thought was cute, and everyone insisted they liked it, but I realized it was just pants I'd cut armholes out of somehow and actually looked hideous. C was in the class, but he and Callum got in a fight and went outside to settle it with a horse race, and I woke up before I found out who won.

Which is why I nearly startle out of my skin when Callum steps up beside me as I'm getting back on my bike.

"Hey," he says.

I barely manage to not drop my coffee and, with a mittened hand, coax it into the cup holder on my bike handlebars. It's freezing out, and he's wearing a black beanie that makes his hazel eyes glimmer. He has the longest lashes I've ever seen on a guy.

Just being this close to him makes my blood hum. C's permission to feel whatever it is I'm going to feel streaks through me, chased by a shadow of disloyal

guilt, and I realize when Callum smiles that I've been staring at his lips.

"Hi," I say, pushing my hat up a little.

"I'm glad I ran into you this morning," he says.

"You are?"

It's just starting to snow, and snowflakes land on his flushed cheeks, immediately melting. In his puffy black jacket, he looks warm. And he's so tall.

The tips of my fingers tingle as the words *I am six foot three* echo through my thoughts.

Callum nods. "I was just thinking about you," he says.

"You were?" I am nothing but idiotic questions.

"There's something about you, Terra Solace . . ."

Suspicion rises in me when he says my full name, a glimmer I can't quite put my finger on, and when I do, I immediately squash it down. I'm not a dummy. Callum Sundberg could absolutely be c.sun, and the way Callum seems to have come out of nowhere with this flirtatious interest in me is hard to explain. Yes, I am aware that a handful of men have found me attractive enough to sleep with, but still. This is Callum. Most everyone in our department would make deals with Hades to bang him.

Also, the possibility that my pen pal C is actually Callum Sundberg is less likely than the earth being hit by a comet in the next half hour. More importantly, I don't want to imagine that, to *hope* for it, because I'm physically attracted to Callum and emotionally attracted to C, and I don't want to be disappointed in

what I see the first time I meet C in person. I will be thrilled to meet him, whoever he is.

“Something about me, huh?” I say. “You barely know me.”

“Maybe I’m intrigued by a woman who goes off to hang out alone at a boring party. Maybe I want to know more about a woman who hides when she’s tipsy.”

“You like a hermit who can’t handle her alcohol?”

I like the way he tilts his face back when he laughs. “Okay. Maybe I’m curious about a woman who played lacrosse at the number-two-ranked school in the country and said that her team was ‘all right,’” he says. “Maybe I’m curious about a student who was the only one in the class to get every question right on a notoriously difficult neuroanatomy exam.”

My eyes go wide. I *aced* it? “Shut up.”

“Dr. Ashkar cc’d me on the grade distribution. I’m happy I get to give you the good news in person.”

“That is”—I cup a hand over my forehead—“that is really hard to believe, actually, because I was such a distracted mess yesterday.”

He studies me for a mysterious beat. “Well, it didn’t show.”

I make fists, hold them up at shoulder height, and do a little dance. I am so fucking *elated*.

Callum watches me with sparkling, amused eyes. “Can I take you out to dinner?”

His question comes out of absolutely nowhere, and my fists drop like stones. “What?”

“Dinner.” He cutely mimes spooning food into his mouth. “Sun goes down. People eat.”

“Like a date?”

“I hope so? I intend to flirt.”

“When?”

He smiles and gives a happy shrug. “Whenever you want.”

It feels genuinely impossible that this is happening. Callum Sundberg is asking me out on a date? After two and a half conversations and zero makeup or wardrobe efforts on my part? I look behind me.

When I turn back, he’s fighting a laugh. “What are you doing?” he asks.

“Double-checking there wasn’t someone behind me.”

He releases the laugh, tilting my face up with a finger under my chin. “I’m asking you.”

Something crystallizes when our eyes meet, and I realize this is actually happening. “I’m in.”

His reply is instant. “Tonight?”

I nod, numbly, and when he holds out his hand, palm up, I carefully set my mittened hand down upon it.

Callum laughs again. The sound is addictive. “No. Give me your phone, Terra.”

“Oh.” I reach into my pocket, pull my phone out, and hand it over.

He texts himself and hands it back. “Text me your address. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

In shock, I watch him walk away.

I look down at my phone. He’s created a new contact with his number.

The Hot TA.

Oh my God.

Until you’re able to be right in front of me, connecting my face to my initial, don’t feel guilty for spending time with other people and wondering about them, even romantically.

Suspicion rears its head again, and I have to shove it away, climbing on my bike and pushing off.

My heart hammers the entire ride to the lab. When I get there, my phone pings with another email from C, and I tap my phone awake with electricity flowing through my fingers.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 17, 2024

Subject: Re: Emerging from the hungover study cave

Four things, now? Okay: my middle name is Jude, after the song. My first concert was the Jonas Brothers with my oldest sister, Annika. Other than the guinea pig, Freckles, we had an adorable but really (I mean truly) stupid cocker spaniel. And I currently live in Philadelphia.

C.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 17, 2024

**Subject: Re: Emerging from the hungover study
cave**

**C . . . my hands are shaking right now. I am
freaking the hell out.**

I live in Philly, too. And I think you know that.

He replies with a phone number. And when I enter it into a text box, an existing contact pops up on-screen.

The Hot TA.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FEBRUARY 17, 2024

Terra

Getting ready for my date with Our Lord and Savior is an all-hands-on-deck emergency.

While I prop my foot in the sink and carefully guide a razor up my leg, Jamie runs the flat iron through my hair and Elise attempts to put makeup on me. I screamed my way into the apartment an hour ago, sending Elise diving for her phone to get Jamie here for reinforcement. It took nearly a half hour of them shouting, “*Callum Sundberg is Terra’s pen pal!*” at each other before it seemed to sink in for any of us. And yet! How on earth is it even possible that I am going on a date with Callum Sundberg, who also happens to be my longtime valentine?

“Bonkers,” Elise whispers again, sweeping some blush across my cheeks.

“Insanity,” I agree again.

“This feels like a dress situation,” Jamie says. “Are you going to wear a dress?”

Even I concede that this situation calls for a little dressing up. I put on a black long-sleeved, scoop-neck dress that is much sexier than it sounds and pair it with my favorite booties and a few necklaces so I don’t look like I’m part of a string quartet or attending a memorial service.

When I step back and look at myself in the mirror . . . I have no idea what Callum will think. He saw me in a dress just three days ago, but I was crouched in a dark, cramped closet looking up at him like a bush baby caught in a hole in a tree trunk. He had lunch with me while I wore a plain gray thermal long-sleeved shirt and no makeup. He asked me out while I was wearing my puffy red Fjällräven jacket with pillow creases on my face and my bedhead shoved under my beanie. I realize he doesn't need me to dress up, *per se*, but I can't really get that thought cemented in my brain.

As if it isn't enough that it's Callum Sundberg picking me up in—*oh, shit*—five minutes, it's also that it's C. It's the boy who thanked me for replying to his typo email and who sent me a note the following year to make sure I got at least one valentine. It's the guy who gave me advice about going away to school and asked me how my mother was doing after having breast cancer. It's the man who lost his father to cancer in the depths of the pandemic and worried about how to best support his mom and his sisters while still pursuing his dream of going to graduate school. It's my soup-dumpling buddy. It's my conundrum wrapped in a mystery tied with a puzzle shoved in a pickle jar.

It's the only person with whom I ever wanted to share Valentine's Day even if, this year, we're three days late.

At seven sharp, I'm an antsy, uncool mess, and I cannot deal with Elise and Jamie's hovering excitement any longer. I walk out of my building just as Callum climbs out of an older Audi parked at the

curb. He walks around the hood and sees me at the same time I see the cupcake box in his hand.

Forget flowers; give me a cupcake and it's a perfect date.

After all this time, he remembered? With my thumping heart scaling my windpipe, I jog down to him, where he and that sparkling, widening smile are walking toward me, faster now, and I throw my arms around him. He catches me with one arm, holding me so tight, and exhaling the most amazing sound into my neck.

Callum pulls the small box from where it's trapped between us and wraps his other arm around my waist. He lifts my feet off the ground and laughs, low and rumbling. The sound vibrates down my spine.

He is tall, arms long and muscular, and his skin smells soap-clean . . . My mind keeps reverberating back and forth between the disbelief that I am meeting C . . . that I am hugging Callum . . . that I am meeting C . . . that I am hugging Callum . . . and when I manage to merge these two realities, I become wildly aware of the heat and mass of his body. He feels incredible against me.

"Is it really you?" I ask into his neck.

"Yeah. It's really me."

"No way." I squeeze my eyes closed, holding him tighter. "I cannot believe this."

"Realizing it was you in the closet was the wildest thing that's ever happened to me," he agrees, his breath warm against my skin. "Let me see you. Come here."

He sets me down, stepping back, and as I sweep my gaze over his face, rewiring everything I imagined with everything I know, I am overcome with the urge to cry. *This* is the person behind the computer for the last ten years. It's crazy, I mean, it is c-r-a-z-y, but certainty lands when he says, "Woodbridge," and I reply, "Uni High," and he says, "Terra Bernice," and I reply, "Callum Jude," and he says, "Rowing," and I pause and then reply, "You already know I played lacrosse," and then he cups the side of my neck with his non-cupcake-holding hand and leans in. "Too soon?" he asks, breath minty, his lips only an inch from mine.

"I don't normally kiss *before* the first date," I tell him. "But you're the exception to the rule."

Chapter Twenty-Four

2025

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2025

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day

I win.

I love you.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2025

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

CURSES! You distracted me with orgasms and then got up to get me water, like a real prince. I love you, too. SO much. I also forgot that I had an alert chime for this email, and the sound of it just gave me a shot of endorphins.

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2025

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

That you have any endorphins left right now is a shock, woman.

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2025

Subject: Re: Happy Valentine's Day

Right? Kristen was no fool. You give good dick.

Come back to bed.

Epilogue

2026

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2026

Subject: What did you say . . .

. . . when I asked you to marry me exactly at midnight?

From: t.sol18@email.com

To: c.sun16@email.com

Date: February 14, 2026

Subject: Re: What did you say . . .

You'll never forget what I said because I think you are still deaf from how loud I screamed YES into your ear.

Are we still going to be emailing each other from the same couch on Valentine's Day in fifty years?

From: c.sun16@email.com

To: t.sol18@email.com

Date: February 14, 2026

Subject: Re: What did you say . . .

Without question.

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xo

Lo & C

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Photo © 2021 Lori Brystan, Brystan Studios

Christina Lauren is the pen name of writing partners and best friends Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings, whose *New York Times* bestselling novels include *The Unhoneymooners* and *Love and Other Words*. They have been featured in the *Atlantic*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *O, the Oprah Magazine*, and others.