

THE EX

IF YOU
THOUGHT
SHE WAS
GONE...

THINK
AGAIN

FREIDA McFADDEN



The Ex

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Ex

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

Table of Contents

[Prologue: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 1: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 2: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 3: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 4: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 5: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 6: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 7: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 8: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 9: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 10: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 11: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 12: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 13: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 14: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 15: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 16: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 17: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 18: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 19: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 20: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 21: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 22: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 23: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 24: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 25: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 26: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 27: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 28: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 29: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 30: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 31: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 32: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 33: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 34: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 35: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 36: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 37: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 38: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 39: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 40: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 41: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 42: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 43: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 44: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 45: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 46: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 47: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 48: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 49: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 50: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 51: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 52: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 53: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 54: The New Girl](#)

[Chapter 55: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 56: The Ex](#)

[Chapter 57: The New Girl](#)

[Epilogue: Two Months Later](#)

Prologue: The Ex

When my live-in boyfriend of many, many (many) years told me he was taking me out to dinner to discuss “something important,” there was only one thought running through my head:

It’s about damn time.

Of all our friends, Joel and I had been together the longest. I don’t want to say how long. It’s embarrassing. Let’s just say that I danced at the weddings of friends who had been together half as long as we had. And then a few months earlier, my sister got married. My *baby sister* got married before I did. In India, they have a rule that the eldest sister must be married off before any of the younger siblings may, and I think it’s about time they bring that rule to the western hemisphere. Because otherwise, you end up sitting alone at your little sister’s wedding while elderly aunts pat you on the hand and assure you that it will be “your turn next” until you end up hiding in a stall in the ladies room, stuffing wedding cake into your mouth.

Joel missed that wedding because he pulled the short straw and ended up with an ER shift that day. Or that’s what he told me. After the fact, I have to wonder.

But tonight, all was forgiven as I walked into the crowded bar and grill where Joel and I were meeting for dinner, since he was coming straight from the hospital. The tables were packed so tightly into the small space that I had to twist my hips to navigate across the room. Smoking had been banned in this establishment for many years, but I still detected a whiff of cigarettes, clinging to the wood of the tables and chairs, ground into the sticky floor.

This was, in fact, the very same bar and grill where we had our first official date together all those years back—if that

wasn't a sign he was about to pop the question, what was? I had barely enough time to change clothes after work, and I'd made the most of it. I splurged on the Ultimate Little Black Dress last month, and I'd been dying for an occasion to wear it. I spent nearly an hour with my curling iron, trying to get my hair maximally silky and shiny. I loved the look on Joel's face when he saw me in a sexy outfit—the way his mouth dropped open slightly, and a smile spread across his face.

My first clue that something was amiss was that Joel was wearing his green scrubs. Not that Joel wearing scrubs was anything out of the ordinary. He worked as an Emergency Room physician at a local hospital, and he admitted he'd live in scrubs if it were socially acceptable. I did our laundry every Sunday, and there was usually a full load of nothing but scrubs. He wore them whenever I didn't nag him to put on real clothes. I mean, jeans and a T-shirt would have been fine. I wasn't picky.

So it wasn't a *surprise* to see him wearing scrubs. Yet I figured if he were going to propose, wouldn't he want to wear something nicer? Also, it made me feel ridiculously overdressed in my Ultimate Little Black Dress when he was wearing freaking scrubs.

A waitress started talking to Joel as I approached the table. She was all of twenty-two with curvy hips and blond hair, and before I got to my seat, her hand was on his shoulder. Joel in regular clothes got second looks, with his penetrating blue eyes, shy smile, and lean but muscular build. But in scrubs, he was absolutely irresistible to women.

“Hey.” He lifted those blue eyes when he saw me. He looked tired, but that was also nothing new. “You're here.”

The waitress reluctantly pulled her hand off my boyfriend's shoulders. I was unsurprised by her reaction to me because I got it all the time. The eyes traveling up and down my body as she appraised her competition. But at last she left us alone.

“How was your shift?” I asked as I settled into the chair across from him.

His face brightened the way it always did whenever the subject of his work came up. Joel loved his work more than anyone I knew. Even when we first met, back when he was a first year medical student, he knew he wanted to be an ER doc. He lived for his work. It was absolutely the most important thing in his life.

How things have changed since then. Now that he has *her*.

“I diagnosed a dural venous sinus thrombosis,” he said. “Two days ago, they let this girl walk out with just some Fioricet for her headache. I caught it though.”

“So...” I grinned at him. “You saved her life.”

“Well.” He lowered his eyes. One thing about Joel was that he never oversold himself. “Maybe. I’m sure someone would have figured it out eventually. And then I passed her on to neurology, so if anyone is going to save her life, it’s them.”

“Of course you did,” I insisted. Because while my boyfriend was always reluctant to tout his own achievements, I had no trouble doing it. I would tell anyone who would listen about the Great Dr. Joel Broder. I wasn’t bragging—I believed everything I said. I was so proud of everything he had achieved during the time we were together. In my eyes, there was nobody better than him. No better doctor. No better man.

No better person to spend the rest of my life with.

I still believe that. In spite of everything that happened next.

“There are lots of people I don’t save,” he said.

Without him saying the words, I know what he’s referring to. One month ago, a man dropped dead in his ER. A young man—about our age, give or take a year. He came in complaining of vague chest pain that had been triaged as “likely heartburn.” Joel hadn’t even seen him yet when a “Code Blue” was called. Joel rushed to the room, but wasn’t able to save him. *Cardiac arrest*, he said.

Joel took it really hard. He went into our bedroom, lay down on the bed, and stared up at the ceiling without speaking for several hours. I couldn’t get him to eat dinner, even though

I made his favorite: spaghetti with homemade marinara sauce and meatballs. It takes me nearly two hours to get that recipe perfect, but it's Joel's favorite. *How do you get the meatballs to taste so good?* (The secret ingredient is buttermilk—a tip from my Italian grandma. I never told him that though.)

I woke up at two in the morning that night, and he wasn't in bed or even in our apartment. When I frantically called him on his cell, he said he was "taking a walk." He didn't return until sunrise—I know because I sat up waiting. It took days for him to start acting normally again. And it was clearly still in the back of his mind at all times.

I didn't entirely understand it. He'd seen dozens of people die during his career in medicine. Maybe even hundreds. Why did this one death shake him so badly?

"He was a doctor too," Joel said to me now. "Did I tell you that? He worked as a hospitalist downtown. One of our ER docs went to med school with him."

"Oh," I said, because I wasn't sure what else to say. I didn't want to talk about death. Not now. It was the least romantic thing I could think of.

He took a swig from his copper-colored drink. I didn't know what it was, but it wasn't his usual wine or beer. It looked and smelled like... bourbon. I'd never seen him drink hard liquor before. Well, that wasn't true. But not since he graduated medical school.

It was my second clue something was amiss. Yet I ignored it and plowed forward anyway.

"So," I said cheerfully, "you said you wanted to talk to me about something? Something *important*?"

When I relive that night in my memory, it's at this point that I start to cringe.

"Yeah." He rubbed at the back of his neck. His eyes were avoiding mine. I looked at the pocket of his scrub top, trying to make out the outline of a ring box. "So here's the thing..."

Will you marry me?

“I...” He coughed into his hand and took another swig from his drink. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately, you know? After that guy...”

“It wasn’t your fault, Joel.”

“I know, but that’s not the point.” He rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hands. “I just... I can’t stop thinking about him. He was... I mean, it’s not like he was a walking coronary. He was healthy. Young... like me. A *doctor*, like me. And he just... dropped dead. No warning. Just...” He snapped his fingers. “Like that.”

This didn’t feel like a marriage proposal. If it was, it was a really, really bad one.

“Well,” I said, trying to turn this around. “That sort of thing makes you want to... you know, reevaluate your life. Move forward. Right?”

Buy a house. Have babies. Grow old together. Sit on a porch in matching rocking chairs, holding hands.

Joel’s eyes lit up. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Wonderful!” I reached out across the table for Joel’s hand, but he pulled it away before I could reach him. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“I think it’s for the best.” He picked up his drink and swished the copper liquid around. “You and I—we’re not good together. Not anymore. And it’s better to move on, rather than —”

“*What?*” My heart skipped in my chest. “Not good together? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about...” He blinked a few times. “Isn’t that what you meant? That we should... go our separate ways? Move on?”

“Not move on!” I practically spit out the words. People had started to turn and stare at us. “I said ‘move *forward*.’ Like... get married.”

And this is the part where the memory *really* makes me cringe.

Joel's mouth fell open. "Get *married*?"

"Well, why not?" My heart was slamming in my chest. I wondered if Joel would feel bad if he made me drop dead. "We've been together *forever*. We live together. We're great together. And... I love you."

This was the part where he was supposed to tell me he loved me too. I sat there, waiting for him to say it. But he didn't. He just sank down in his seat, staring at his drink.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just... our relationship isn't working for me anymore."

Not *working* for him? What the hell did that mean? I still can't figure it out. I felt like an employee he'd decided to let go because I'd outlived my usefulness. Or maybe I was too old.

When I later saw the next girl he dated, the latter became a real possibility. And I do mean "girl."

"Joel, I love you," I said again. "Please. Don't do this. You're my whole life." My eyes filled with tears. "Please."

If there's one thing I wish I could take back about that day, it would be to eliminate the begging. I'd never considered myself a weak woman. Begging a man not to leave me—I still feel the sting of humiliation from that one. But my words were true. Joel was my life. I loved him more than I'd ever imagined loving a man. It was fairy tale love. And fairy tales always have happy endings.

"I'm sorry," he said again, unable to meet my eyes. "You... you can have the apartment."

"I can't afford the rent on my own," I said. I loved my job and I was very good at it, but my salary was piddling compared with his.

"I'll help you pay it then," he offered. "Until you can find another place."

He was so nice about it. That's the thing about Joel—he's a good guy. Always so kind and considerate and *good*. He had two months off after he graduated from medical school, and

instead of using that time to have some fun like his buddies, he decided to fly to Senegal to volunteer at a medical clinic. I went with him and volunteered to help out doing what I could. We got our shots together—the yellow fever one made me particularly ill—and stocked up on malaria pills, and we spent six weeks living in a hut together. The room we shared was only slightly bigger than our walk-in closet, and the one tiny fan in the corner of the room did nothing to dissipate the stifling heat. After a week, I was covered head-to-toe in mosquito bites. But somehow, it was the happiest six weeks of my life.

“What if we went to Senegal again?” I suggested, clinging to the memory of when we used to be happy together. “We could volunteer again. Couldn’t we?”

He shook his head. “That... it wouldn’t...”

I was running out of ideas. I felt like I could convince him not to go if only I could come up with the right words.

“Please don’t do this,” I whispered. “Please.”

More begging. Ugh. I promise I’m not usually so pathetic.

I studied Joel’s face, with his pale eyelashes, thick brown hair, and the flush creeping up his neck. “Is there someone else?” I asked.

“No,” he said quickly. “There’s no one else.”

The subtext was obvious: *Not yet*. There would be someone else someday. Another woman. One he’d someday deem worthy of marriage, the house in the suburbs, the kids, the matching rocking chairs—everything I wasn’t good enough for. Because he and I didn’t *work*.

“Don’t do this to me,” I said, the volume of my voice rising above the din of the restaurant. Joel hated making a scene. He would do anything to avoid it. I was making him very uncomfortable now, although it was his own damn fault for doing this in a restaurant. Maybe he thought if he did it at home, I’d rip the whole place apart. I had no idea that as we were having this conversation, his buddy Pete was hauling his

belongings out of the apartment so they wouldn't be there when I got back.

Joel glanced around. Half the people in the restaurant had their eyes on us now. He looked really uncomfortable. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

"I'm sorry," he said for the third time. And then he stood up, tossed a few bills on the table, and sprinted out of the restaurant.

I was stunned. Fifteen minutes earlier, I had been planning a life with the man I loved. And now? Now it was all down the toilet.

They say there's a thin line between love and hate. In those few seconds between when Joel stood up and when the door to the restaurant slammed behind him, my love for Joel Broder started to morph into hatred. It didn't all happen that day, but with time, I grew to hate him. I hated that I wasn't good enough for the life he imagined for himself. I hated the pity in his eyes when he offered to pay the rent on our apartment because he knew I couldn't afford it. I came to despise the new girl he would meet who would someday take my place at the altar when he was finally ready to settle down. Much more than I ever hated Joel, I came to hate this nameless, faceless woman.

I wanted to get back at him for what he did to me.

And *her*.

That was my intention from the beginning. When Joel dumped me that night, he took away my entire life—my home, my friends, my dignity. I could never get any of that back. All I wanted was to even the score.

I never meant to kill anyone.

I swear.

Chapter 1: The New Girl

There are three businesses that nobody in their right minds would want to own in the twenty-first century:

- 1) A travel agency
- 2) A video store
- 3) A bookstore

Cassie Donovan has been booking trips online for her entire adult life, and she only vaguely remembers what it was like to walk into a store and borrow a DVD to watch on her family's DVD player. She doesn't even *own* a DVD player anymore.

Yet here she is, shelving her latest acquisition of slightly worn books at the used bookstore she inherited from her grandparents: Grandma Bea and Grandpa Marv. She was only twenty-two when she took over the store—just out of college. Nobody else in the Donovan clan had any interest in taking the reins of a used bookstore that was struggling in the setting of a growing online and electronic book sales market. But Cassie always had a passion for print and couldn't let Bookland close its doors.

She pulls a dog-eared paperback out of the box. *Rebecca* by Daphne DuMaurier—one of her favorites. Yet the classics never sell. She'll be lucky to get a dollar for this one. A dollar isn't enough to keep a business going.

“What's going on back there, Cassie?”

The voice of Cassie's friend and business partner Zoe Malloy floats out from the front of the store. Zoe was Cassie's college roommate, and when Bookland fell into Cassie's hands, she decided to offer a share in the business to Zoe in order to get her help. Cassie's accounting degree helps her in balancing the books (or trying), but it's Zoe who knows about sales. It's a fact that when Zoe is at the front of the store, they sell more books than they do when Cassie is there. Maybe it's

Zoe's glowing personality. Maybe it's her sales technique or her degree in Communication. Whatever it is, Zoe is a better saleswoman than Cassie will ever be.

"Are you done yet?" Zoe yells. Bookland is absolutely tiny, yet you can somehow get lost inside it. Everywhere you turn, there are shelves filled with books—Grandma Bea managed to stuff a ridiculous number of bookcases in this small space, and sometimes Cassie worries they'll all go tumbling down like dominos. "Cassie?"

"Just another minute!" Cassie calls back as she shoves the last of the books on a shelf.

Cassie wipes her hands on her skinny blue jeans as she walks back to the front desk where Zoe is sitting on one of the stools she set up in front of the cash register. Stools are not very comfortable, but the old chairs literally fell apart six months ago, and she found these two stools on the street in front of a brownstone downtown. Zoe helped her drag them to the store.

Cassie hates to admit it, but Bookland is in a bit of financial trouble. She hasn't managed to drag it out of the hole it was in when Grandma Bea died. But she will.

One way or another.

Zoe's got a paperback cracked open in front of her. Zoe loves to read as much as Cassie does, but she likes the newer stuff. Her current cover features a picture of a woman with a drop of blood dripping from a fang jutting from her lips. Vampire novels are not Cassie's thing, but Zoe devours them—and they sell much better than the classics. Zoe looks the part too, from her jet black hair cut in a bob around her face, dark red lipstick, powder-white skin, and black nails. Zoe is gorgeous and only slightly frightening.

Zoe insists they'd sell more books if Cassie would let her do her makeup, but she's resisted so far. All Cassie ever wears is a layer of lipstick if she remembers—and sometimes she doesn't even remember that much. Today is one of those days she didn't remember.

It's not just the makeup though. Zoe is simply friendlier than Cassie. Zoe knows how to chat up a customer like nobody's business—everyone is her friend. She's even befriended the homeless woman who occupies the empty gap between the book store and the drug store next to them. Apparently, her name is Maureen.

“HD,” Zoe murmurs. “Three o'clock.”

Sadly, Cassie knows exactly what this cryptic code means. HD stands for “Hot Doctor.” Bookland happens to be located a mere block away from a large teaching hospital, and tends to get its fair share of young physicians and medical students, looking for various medical textbooks. Unfortunately, Bookland doesn't carry medical textbooks. So while Zoe enjoys this eye candy, Cassie mostly finds it frustrating.

Still, she follows Zoe's directions and looks in the direction of three o'clock, and... well, this guy is definitely an HD if there ever was one. The green scrubs give away the doctor bit. And the hot bit... yeah, that one isn't up for debate. Thick, dark hair slightly tousled from the wind, eyes the color of the ocean, and a pretty nice build under those scrubs.

“Dibs,” Zoe says. Even though she's got a boyfriend.

“Fine.”

Zoe taps her shiny black fingernails. She has the longest fingernails Cassie had ever seen, although she claims they're mostly for self-defense. New York is a dangerous city. She says the fingernails save her a bundle on mace. “You can have him if you really want him.”

“I don't want him.”

“Why not? He's gorgeous. And no ring.”

“I don't know.” Cassie glances at the guy in scrubs, who is flipping through a dog-eared copy of a graphic novel. “He's too old.”

“He's too *old*?” Zoe's dark red lips form an O. “How is he too old? He's mid-thirties, at the latest.”

Cassie turned twenty-six a couple of months ago. “Right. He’s like ten years older than me.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s perfect. Men mature later than women, so you have to date men ten years older.”

Cassie’s not sure she agrees. She can hardly manage men her own age, much less than older men.

Zoe narrows her eyes. “When’s the last time you’ve been on a date, Cassie?”

Cassie quickly makes herself busy organizing the bookmarks on the counter. Zoe made them and they bring in a little bit of revenue to supplement what they earn on books. Zoe is really talented—she could have been an artist if she wanted. “I’m not sure.”

“So... what? You’re not interested in men anymore?”

“I’m just... busy.”

That is the truth. It is taking every ounce of Cassie’s energy and time to keep Bookland from closing its doors. She has been posting flyers all around the neighborhood, negotiating cheap advertising, and keeping the store open as many hours as she can stomach. She doesn’t have time for dating. Not now. Maybe someday.

It doesn’t help that all of the dates she’s been on in the last several years have been a disappointment. And her last relationship was so unsatisfying, she couldn’t wait to be single again.

Cassie fully expects Zoe to keep hassling her about her social life. But instead, Zoe sucks in a breath and nudges her hard. “Here comes HD. Look pretty.”

Sure enough, the guy in scrubs is approaching the desk. Now that Cassie sees him close up, it’s clear he’s every bit the Hot Doctor. His blue eyes are so vivid and sexy that her resolve to keep out of the dating market wavers slightly. But only slightly.

Usually a guy like that would make a beeline for Zoe, but instead, he approaches Cassie. He looks her in the eyes and

offers an endearingly crooked grin. “Hi,” he says.

She had irrationally hoped that when he spoke to her, he would have awful coffee breath or rotted yellow teeth or *something* that would make him less appealing, but no. He’s got perfect, white teeth and smells like a combination of aftershave and the outdoors.

Zoe nudges her again. “Hi,” Cassie says.

She waits for him to say the words every other guy in scrubs says when they come into Bookland. *Can you help me find [fill in name of medical text]?*

But he doesn’t say that. A crease forms between his eyebrows and he says, “I’m looking for a copy of *Wuthering Heights*.”

If Cassie had been drinking a beverage, she would have spit it out dramatically. This extremely attractive man in green scrubs wants a copy of the greatest love story of all time? “*Wuthering Heights*?”

He nods. “Is that something you have?”

“Of course.” And now her heart is racing in her chest. Not because this will be her first sale of the afternoon, but because a man who loves that book could be worth opening up her social calendar for. “Follow me, please.”

She steps out from behind the desk, and he diligently follows her to the back of the store. She leads him to the four narrow shelves marked “Classics.” The books are coated in a fine layer of dust because nobody ever peruses this section, aside from the occasional teenager on a school assignment. The “Classics” sign is in Grandpa Marv’s handwriting—Bea never took down any of the signs her late husband wrote, even as the writing became faded. And now that both of them are gone, Cassie won’t touch them, even though the paper is starting to disintegrate.

Cassie plucks one of their two copies from the shelf and blows dust off it as surreptitiously as she can. “Would you prefer hardcover or paperback?”

He chews on his lip. “Uh... which one is in better condition?”

“They’re both in excellent condition,” Cassie says, trying not to sound indignant.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to offend you.” That crooked smile again. “See, the book isn’t for me. It’s for my mother. It’s her birthday.”

“You’re buying your mother a *used* book for her birthday?”

He ducks down his head. “It’s not what you think. My mother... she likes books to have a story. Like, she wants to imagine who owned it before and what journey it’s been on and...”

She smiles. “That sounds like my grandmother.”

Grandma Bea used to say things like that all the time. Every time she got a new shipment of books, she would lift up each volume, bring it to her nose, and inhale. She said different book brands had different smells—for example, Penguin books smell like vanilla. But then the journey the books would take would give it another unique odor on top of that. *Cigarettes*, she would say. Or maybe *Chanel*. She would come up with stories about who owned certain books. Cassie loved listening to those stories as much as she liked reading the books.

Cassie replaces the paperback and plucks the hardcover volume off the shelf. The pages are so worn that they’ve turned yellow. “This book was given to us by a middle-aged woman,” she tells him. “She read it every day in the park while waiting for her married lover to appear. They stole one hour together every day, but he couldn’t leave his wife because she was ill and he was afraid the shock might kill her. He kept telling the woman it would just be a little longer, then they could be together. So the woman met him every day like that for one year... five years... twenty years, until...”

He raises his eyebrows. “Until?”

She smiles. “I don’t know. I just made it at all up. What do you think happens?”

“I think they find a way to be together. A happy ending.”

“But what about the wife? Doesn’t she deserve a happy ending?”

He laughs. He has a nice laugh that shows off a row of white teeth. “This is too much philosophy for two in the afternoon.” He folds his arms across his chest, and she notices what are some very nice biceps protruding from his scrub top. “By the way, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What is HD?”

Cassie’s mouth drops open. He heard Zoe talking before. Wonderful. “HD?” she says weakly.

“I heard your coworker say it.” His eyes twinkle. “When I was walking over to you. She said, ‘Here comes HD.’”

She is going to *kill* Zoe. “Um, well... we weren’t talking about you or anything. It stands for... high... definition.”

“High definition what?”

“Television.” Cassie tries to shrug, but only one shoulder gets in on the action. “I was thinking about buying a high definition television. So.”

“Right, of course.” He nods. “I got a high def TV a few years ago. It’s great. The picture is so clear.”

Great, now he’s giving her advice about high definition televisions. As if she could afford that. She’s lucky they haven’t shut off her electricity. But anything is better than admitting they were ogling him from across the store.

“So,” he says, “how much is the book?”

Cassie flips over the hardcover in her hands and reveals the price on the back. Twenty dollars, which seems a bit steep for a used book—no wonder it’s never been sold. Grandma Bea must have priced it. She was very protective of her copies of *Wuthering Heights*, especially after Grandpa Marv died.

She starts to tell him ten dollars, but before she can, he says, “Okay, I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful. I’ll go ring it up.”

“Thanks...” He hesitates, one eyebrow raised.

“Cassie,” she finishes for him.

“Cassie,” he repeats. He sticks a thumb at his chest. “Joel.”

She nods, not sure why they’re bothering to exchange names. He will purchase this book and she’ll never see him again. It’s not like he’s any great lover of literature who will be returning for many future purchases.

Cassie rings up the book, trying not to think about the fact that this is the first time she’s opened the cash register this afternoon. How long can she keep this going?

Joel pulls a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet and holds it out to her. His thumb brushes slightly against her fingers as she takes it from him, and a tingle goes through her hand. A forgotten sensation, but not at all unwelcome. Maybe Zoe is right. Maybe she needs to reenter the dating world again.

“I like these bookmarks,” Joel announces, breaking into her thoughts.

She perks up, wondering if she might score another sale. Or at least keep this appealing man here just a little while longer. “They’re handmade.”

He raises his eyebrows. “*You* made them? They’re incredible. You’re really talented.”

“I didn’t,” she admits regretfully. “Zoe made them.”

Zoe lifts her eyes from her vampire novel. She looks between the two of them, shakes her head, and then sighs loudly. “Hot Doctor,” she announces.

Cassie whips her head around to look at her coworker. Joel’s eyes have widened.

“That’s what HD stands for,” Zoe clarifies as she lays her book flat on the table. “Hot Doctor. We saw you standing there

and agreed you were a hot doctor, so... well, I think it's self-explanatory at this point." She taps on the desk with her long fingernail. "Aw, and now Hot Doctor is blushing."

Cassie had been averting her own eyes, but it turns out Zoe is right. Joel hasn't turned red as a beet the way Cassie does when she's embarrassed (as she surely is now), but his ears have flushed pink and he's rubbing at the back of his neck.

"You're *both* blushing!" Zoe claps her hands together, like Christmas has come early. "That is *so* cute." She focuses her gaze on Joel. "You should ask her out, HD. She'll definitely say yes."

If Zoe weren't her business partner, Cassie would fire her.

"Uh..." He coughs. "Cassie, do you... I mean, would you be okay with me calling you sometime?"

"Wow." Zoe clasps her chest. "For a hot doctor, you are *not* smooth. Just ask her on a date. She's free every night of the week."

For the love of God...

He tugs at the V-neck of his scrubs. "What do you say, Cassie? Are you free on Friday night?"

"Yes," she admits. As well as Saturday, Sunday, Monday...

A smile lights up his face. A guy that cute shouldn't have been so nervous about asking out a random girl. It makes Cassie wonder if he's been in the clutches of a long-term relationship and has only recently escaped, so his skills are rusty. She tries to put that thought out of her head.

"That's great," he says. "Can I pick you up here?"

She nods, finding that a smile is twitching at her own lips.

Chapter 2: The Ex

My most recent photograph on Facebook from last night featured yours truly in a short, slinky red dress, with four-inch black heels that, with the right camera angle, made my legs appear endless. I don't want to admit how many shots it took to get the exact right camera angle.

Okay, it was forty-three. Forty-three snapshots of me, taken with my iPhone in the full-length mirror hanging on my bedroom door, to get that perfect shot. Which I then immediately posted on Facebook with the caption: "Ready for a night out on the town!"

Sixty seconds after the post went live, I was stripping off my slinky red dress and my heels, washing off my makeup, and settling in for a marathon of *Top Chef* on my sofa. Alone.

But it paid off. This morning when I woke up, there were twenty-seven "likes" of last night's update and multiple comments. Yes, several of those comments were condescending remarks like, "Good for you, getting out there again!" I wasn't concerned about that. The only thing I cared about was that one of those "likes" was from Joel Broder.

In the five months since our breakup, Joel and I have not remained friends, but we are still Facebook friends. He is able to see my carefully orchestrated photographs and updates that show I'm having the time of my life without him. If he sees enough of these photographs, will he eventually start to feel regretful over what he gave up? And maybe decide he wants me back?

It's pathetic. I know. I need to stop. But until Joel changes his status to "in a relationship," I keep trying. I can't help myself.

So when I walk into Starbucks and see Joel sitting at his usual table in the back, dressed in his usual scrubs, hunched over his Android with the fingers of his left hand wrapped around a Caffe Mocha, I don't turn around and walk right out

the door. Fortuitously, I'm dressed in my best pair of acid-washed skinny jeans paired with a top I got from the discount rack at Macy's last week that shows the perfect amount of cleavage. My hair is gleaming from the highlights I put in last week—the salon is far too expensive but worth it. The box just isn't the same.

Okay, it's not *entirely* fortuitous that I'm running into Joel while looking my best. The truth is, about two years ago, Joel got sick of me texting him whether he'd left the hospital yet, so he installed an app on my phone called WhereAmI. This app allowed me to locate him anywhere he goes via GPS with startling accuracy. If he goes into a Starbucks, it can even tell me which one.

I had assumed when Joel broke up with me, he'd have turned off WhereAmI on his own phone. But he hasn't. I can only assume he's forgotten all about it, because I'm still receiving minute-to-minute updates about his whereabouts.

I should delete the app. I definitely should. It's not healthy to be tracking my ex-boyfriend around the city. I'm no psychologist, but I know that much.

I'll delete it. Soon.

As casually as I can, I get on the Starbucks line. I don't look in Joel's direction and pretend I don't even know he exists. When it's my turn, I order my usual: a vanilla latte. Then I take out my phone as I wait for my drink to be made.

Don't look in his direction. Pretend he isn't even here. He will come to you if he wants to talk to you.

"Hey..."

I glance up from my phone, and sure enough, he's gotten up from his seat and he's standing in front of me. And God, he looks *so* good. *He* didn't engineer this meeting—how does he manage to look so great? I lower my phone and throw my shoulders back, reminding myself he saw the photo of me dressed to the nines last night and "liked" what he saw. And as his eyes sweep over me briefly, I can tell he likes what he sees yet again.

“Hey!” I flash an easy smile. Easy, breezy. “How are you? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I’m good.” He rakes a hand through his dark hair. Are those slight purple circles under his blue eyes? Maybe he’s not doing as well as I’d thought. “But you... you look great.”

I check his tone for pity, and there’s none. He means it. “Thanks. I’ve been... pretty busy. You know, work... life...” Television... ice cream... alcohol...

“I can see that...” He manages a crooked smile. “Actually, I’m really glad I ran into you.”

My heart speeds up in my chest. This is the third time we’ve “accidentally” run into each other since the breakup five months ago, but this is the first time he’s been interested in anything more than an awkward hello.

“What’s up?” I say.

“Well, listen...” He shifts between his feet. “I know your situation and all that, but... I really... I can’t...”

“Yes?” *I can’t live without you. I want you back.*

“I can’t afford to keep paying two rents,” he finishes. The second the words are out of his mouth, he drops his eyes. “I know your financial situation, but... between that and my loan payments, I’m digging into my savings. I can’t... I mean, it’s been almost six months.” He takes a deep breath. “This is the last month I can pay. I’m sorry.”

My stomach sinks. He doesn’t want me back. He’s just sick of bankrolling our old apartment.

To be fair, I can’t blame him. Our apartment wasn’t cheap—nothing in Manhattan is—but it’s hard for me to give it up. Everything about it reminds me of Joel, and giving it up would be like admitting we’ll never get back together. That it’s finally over for good.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. He’s looking at his sneakers, which are a shade on the grayscale, with one dark splotch that may or may not be blood. “I didn’t want to yank the rug out

from under you, but... well, like I said, it's been almost six months."

I swallow a large lump in my throat. Joel has no idea how bad my financial situation really is, although even if he did, he still wouldn't agree to keep paying indefinitely. "No, of course. It's understandable. I... I've actually found a new place."

I don't know how I got to be such a liar. I always considered myself an extremely truthful person.

"Really?" For the first time since I walked in here, a genuine smile lights Joel's face. "That's great!"

I nod. "It's downtown, in the village. Really cute and bohemian."

"Well, congratulations." He looks like he's about to reach out and touch my shoulder, but at the last moment pulls back. "I'll have to... well, if you have a housewarming party, maybe I'll..."

I lift my chin. "Yeah, maybe I'll send out a Facebook invite. You're welcome to come."

Fantastic. Now I'm inviting him to a housewarming party for an apartment I don't have.

"It's really great seeing you," Joel says, glancing back at his seat with his Caffe Mocha growing cold on the table. "So... uh, I guess... I'll see you around?"

It takes all my willpower to force a smile onto my lips. "Absolutely. Great seeing you too."

I watch him hurry back to his seat. I stand there in his wake, taking deep, calming breaths. It's not over. Just because I'm giving up the apartment, it doesn't mean I've lost. I can still save this.

Chapter 3: The Ex

“Micro-studios are *very* trendy right now, Ms. Mascolo.”

I am standing in the tiniest apartment I’ve ever seen. My real estate broker, Cindy, has now shown me three apartments, each smaller than the last. This one is only seventy square feet. Yes, that’s right. Seven-zero. I need to suck in my breath to fit into the room. There are coffins larger than this apartment.

“And it’s furnished,” Cindy adds, gesturing at the small sofa pushed against the wall, and the tiny desk smashed into a corner. There’s even a mini-fridge on the side of the sofa, doubling as an end table. “You’ll just need a microwave and maybe some sort of hot pot.”

“What about a closet?” I ask around the bile rising in my throat.

Cindy pushes aside a faded yellow curtain and there it is: what may be my new closet. It’s roughly one-sixth the size of my current clothing space. I’ll have to get rid of most of what I own if I move in here.

I glance around again, sure I’ve missed something. “What about sleeping?”

I’m certain Cindy’s going to inform me that sleeping standing up is all the rage right now, but instead, she gestures at a set of stairs leading to a nook just above our heads. No wonder the ceiling is so low.

“You’ve got an upstairs bedroom,” Cindy says, without cracking the smile that I feel such a statement clearly deserves.

I climb the stairs, which is really more of a ladder than a staircase. It leads to a tiny nook above the apartment where I can put a mattress. When I’m lying there, I will have about a foot of space between my nose and the ceiling. The coffin metaphor is becoming more and more apt.

“What about a bathroom?” I ask.

“There’s one in the hallway. You’ll share it with four other residents.”

I climb back down the ladder carefully, landing unsteadily on my feet. I don’t want to live here. I really, really don’t want to live here. But my options are horrible. I’m too old to deal with a strange roommate, and even renting out a room in Manhattan is pricy.

I tried Queens. I looked at three apartments there that were at least somewhat larger than this place, but the easiest commute would involve two busses and a subway, totaling three hours of daily commuting time. At least this place is in a good neighborhood—right near Lincoln Center and Central Park.

“You don’t have anything bigger?” I ask hopefully.

Cindy arches an eyebrow. “Ms. Mascolo, this apartment is in the upper limit of your price range.”

“Yes, but—”

“And it will be snatched up by the end of the week. Believe me.”

I run my hand along the top of the mini-fridge. I get a jolt of electricity and yank my hand away.

“Oh, you don’t want to touch that,” Cindy says.

I shut my eyes. This can’t be my life.

“So do you want the place or not?” Cindy glances down at her gold watch. “I’ve got another client in twenty minutes.”

“I…” I look around at the tiny living space. My knees feel like Jell-O. I recognize I’m on the brink of being homeless, but I can’t live here. I’ve been here less than fifteen minutes and I’m about to have a panic attack. “I need to think about it.”

Cindy shrugs. She’s not giving me the hard sell, because she knows someone really will snap up this apartment by the end of the week. But it won’t be me. I’ve still got two weeks left before I have to move out of my current place. I can wait a little longer.

After we leave the apartment building, Cindy rushes off to another appointment. She's a busy woman, and I need a place to live more than she needs the commission she'll get from whatever apartment I choose. I watch her hurry down the block, her cell phone pressed to her ear. She laughs at something the person on the other line says to her.

I wonder if she's laughing about me. About the woman who thinks she's too good to live in an apartment the size of a walk-in closet. But no, that's self-obsessed. She's probably already forgotten me.

I walk down the street, my eyes peeled for signs hung up to advertise apartments. Every wall in the city is a potential billboard where I could discover my next place to live. Maybe there's a gem out there that nobody else knows about. Two bedrooms, one bath, located on the upper west side—only five hundred dollars a month!

God, I'm becoming delusional.

My eyes drop to the cardboard sign on the street. *Homeless. Anything helps.* Next to the sign is a woman not much older than I am. She's sitting on the ground, wearing dirty blue jeans, neon yellow sneakers, and a gray coat with a fur lining on the hood. It's not coat weather, but she's got the coat on anyway. Her hair is disheveled—too long and a peppery mix of gray and the same shade of dark brown as my own. She peers up at me with watery chocolate-colored eyes. Her right hand shakes as she extends the Styrofoam cup she's holding. There is dirt caked into her fingernails.

“Spare change, lady?”

Joel always used to tease me that I was far too generous with homeless people on the street. *You could go through a whole paycheck walking through the Bowery.* He was right. Whenever I see someone down on their luck enough to be living on the street, I feel a rush of sympathy for them. It always gets me to open up my wallet.

But today, when I look down at this woman who has made this tiny outdoor corner her home, I feel something else:

Fear.

I always thought there was a distinct line between me and The Homeless. They did drugs. They were alcoholics. They had mental illness. I was safe from that life because I drank responsibly, said no to drugs, and was sane (more or less). But now, with my rent due in two weeks and absolutely no way to pay it, I realize the line isn't as distinct as I'd once thought. In two weeks, I'll be able to take a seat next to this woman on the pavement.

"Spare change?" the woman asks again, as if I hadn't heard her the first time.

I swallow hard, but a lump sticks in my throat. I think about the money in my purse. It's not enough to pay the rent on a halfway decent apartment, but it's enough to help this woman out. I dig out five dollars.

"Here," I say as I try stuff it in her cup.

Some of the dullness in her eyes fades. "Thanks." She hesitates, frowning for a moment, then glances at the 7-11 one store down. "Hey, would you buy me a sandwich?"

I blink a few times, surprised by the request. I've given money to plenty of homeless people over the years, but this is a first.

"They won't let me in," the woman explains.

"Oh." That makes sense. "Well, what would you like?"

"Let me look through the window."

She gets to her feet faster than I would have thought, abandoning her sign on the ground. The smell of urine and dirty socks emanates from her coat, and I have to breathe through my mouth. She walks close to me, as if she's scared she might need my support. This can't be my future. It *can't* be.

She follows me to the entrance of the 7-11, and together, we peer through the glass door of the shop. I don't know how she can make out anything, but she squints at the sandwich display and finally says, "Chicken salad."

I walk into the 7-11, feeling slightly indignant that they won't even let that poor woman make a purchase. I squint in the fluorescent lights as I browse the sandwiches, finding two with chicken salad—one with white bread and one with wheat. I debate over which one to buy for far too long, but then realize it doesn't matter. If she's hungry, she won't care if it's white or wheat. It's not like she'll throw the wrong sandwich in my face.

I take the sandwich to the counter, not bothering to purchase anything for myself. I realize the woman never gave me back my five dollars to buy the sandwich, but that's fine. I can afford it. For now.

"Four twenty-seven," the clerk says without glancing up at me.

I reach into my purse to pull out my wallet and...

Wait, where is it?

I just had it out a minute ago, when I was getting out the money to give to the woman. Did I drop it during the walk here? Is that possible?

"Just a moment," I mumble to the clerk.

I abandon the chicken salad sandwich and hurry outside. I don't see my wallet lying on the street—and I'd certainly notice it, because it's red. I walk all the way back to where the woman was sitting on the ground with her sign and... she's gone.

Well, the sign is still there. And the cardboard. But the woman and all her belongings are gone.

That bitch stole my wallet! No wonder she was walking so close to me.

I stand on the sidewalk, blinking back tears. I can't believe that just happened to me. As if my day couldn't be any worse, now I've had my wallet stolen by someone I was trying to help.

I'm not sure how much more I can take.

Chapter 4: The New Girl

The only reason Beatrice Muller met Marvin Donovan is that someone nearly pushed her into the train tracks.

Bea was in the subway station, waiting for the train that would take her uptown to her job as a salesgirl at Gimbels. As was a habit with her, Bea had been carrying a novel within her overstuffed purse that she'd gotten from the Gimbels bargain rack at the beginning of the summer. When the train showed no signs of arriving, Bea pulled the dog-eared paperback from her handbag and started to read, squinting in the dim light of the underground station.

When someone jostled her, the paperback flew out of her skinny fingers. To hear Bea tell the story years later, that paperback traveled twenty feet into the air to land on the tracks below. (In reality, it was probably more like two or three feet—tops.)

Nineteen-year-old Bea let out an anguished cry. The book was irretrievable on the train tracks. Not only that, but it was her favorite book. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte. The greatest love story of all time, in Bea's opinion.

Bea stepped to the edge, hovering over the tracks, which were littered with food wrappers, coffee cups, and now her beloved paperback. She contemplated lowering herself down there to rescue it.

Then she felt a hand on her arm. She looked up and saw a young man in a white dress shirt. She had always appreciated a well-dressed man, and she also appreciated the way his black hair was combed neatly on his scalp and his green tie matched the exact vivid shade of his eyes. "Excuse me, Miss," the young man said to Bea. "I'd like to replace that book for you."

The man led Bea to a bookstore, which was a short two-block walk from the subway station. They chattered brightly as they walked, and Bea learned that the man's name was Marvin Donovan and that his family owned a used bookstore,

where he had worked since coming back from serving in the army.

When Bea walked into Bookland, she fell instantly and hopelessly in love. With the store and with the young man who had brought her there. She gazed dazedly at the rows and rows of books, wanting to sweep them all into her arms. Marv plucked a copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the Classics section of the bookstore, which then filled an entire bookcase and was not nearly as dusty. Marv later told Bea he knew exactly where it was because it was his favorite book as well. She tried to pay him the ten-cent price of the book, but he refused.

Bea was very late to work that day and it was her third tardy in as many weeks, so Gimbels told her not to come back. But it didn't matter because when Bea and Marv got married six months later, she went to work at Bookland. It was her dream job. And Marv was her dream husband.

They kept that bookstore going through thick and thin. There were times when the books were flying off the shelves and other times when they went a whole day without a sale. More than once, they had to do things they weren't proud of to keep the doors from closing.

But that's a different story.

Over fifty years after Marv gave Bea her copy of *Wuthering Heights*—the one she kept in her nightstand at all times—Marv was shelving books in the sports section of Bookland when he felt a crushing pain in his mid-sternum. He fell to the ground and was cold by the time Bea got back from having lunch with their daughter.

Soon after, their granddaughter Cassie Donovan started working at the bookstore, to help Grandma Bea out. Of all the children and grandchildren, Cassie was the only one who loved Bookland the way Bea and Marv did. Cassie tried to comfort newly widowed Bea during her shifts at the store, but Bea didn't need to be comforted.

“Marv is still here,” she insisted. “His ghost is here with me. Just like Catherine's ghost came back to be with Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.”

And so Bea continued to insist the ghost of Marvin Donovan haunted Bookland. Whenever a pen rolled to the ground, Bea would pipe up, “Stop making trouble, Marv!” On one occasion, Cassie saw with her own eyes a child’s backpack knock a book off the shelf, but Bea persisted in scolding Marv about “messing with the inventory” for a good five minutes.

It was sweet. Bea thought *Wuthering Heights* was the greatest love story of all time, but Cassie knew the greatest love story of all time was between Beatrice Muller and Marvin Donovan. And when Bea suffered a cardiac arrest five years after Marv died, in nearly the exact same spot where they’d found him, it only cemented in Cassie’s head that there would never be a love as strong as the one between her grandparents.

The romance between Bea and Marv is a lot to live up to. That’s why Cassie hasn’t been on a date in so damn long.

But tonight she’s going out with Joel, and it’s going to be great. Except Cassie hasn’t been on a date in so long, she’s not sure what the conventions are anymore. Are jeans and a nice blouse appropriate? Must she wear a dress? How much makeup is the right amount of makeup? And why is she obsessing over this?

“You need more makeup,” Zoe tells her in no uncertain terms when they’re getting close to the time when Joel will arrive to pick her up. Zoe has agreed to close the bookstore. It’s been a busy evening, for some reason, and they can’t afford to close early. She needs the money desperately if there’s any chance of the store not going under.

Cassie frowns at Zoe. Zoe is the definition of “too much makeup.” Her inky mascara is lined with several extra millimeters of black, giving way to purple. The effect makes her eyes pop, but also sort of makes her look like she got beat up.

“Maybe just a little,” Cassie concedes. She hates that she cares. She hates that she tugged one of her few sexy dresses out of her closet and slid into it for the purpose of her date.

She's supposed to be focusing her energy on Bookland, not on some hot doctor.

"Definitely."

Cassie's purse hangs off the back of the chair behind the desk. She digs through it and retrieves a tube of lipstick.

"No, not *that*." Zoe's nose crinkles like Cassie just tried to paint her lips with excrement. "Please don't use that color."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's lip-colored lipstick. What's the point?"

"It's natural."

"Oh, *God*." Zoe rolls her eyes. "Look, do you want me to make you look hot or not?"

Not. Cassie wants to tell her coworker that she's going to go on this date as herself, and not jump through hoops to look like someone she's not. After all, *Joel* isn't putting on makeup right now. But then she remembers the tingle that went through her when his fingers brushed against hers. "Okay, fine."

Fortunately, there's a lull in customers during which time Zoe is able to quickly fix her makeup. It takes fifteen minutes, and when she holds up Zoe's compact, she's scared of what she'll see. But it turns out, Zoe did a brilliant job. She looks entirely different in the best possible way. Like herself, but a prettier version of herself.

Zoe beams at the sight of her handiwork. "Didn't I do a great job?"

"You did," Cassie admits.

She taps her tube of mascara against her chin. "We should offer this as a service to people who buy books. Like, have a makeup counter."

Cassie stares at her friend. "*A makeup counter?*"

"Sure." Zoe grins. "It's not like women are buying books because there are men knocking down their doors. I bet lots of

our customers would love to get a little makeover. A makeover and a book.”

Cassie just shakes her head.

Joel shows up at precisely seven o'clock. Cassie almost doesn't recognize him out of his scrubs, but he looks just as tempting in khaki slacks and a white dress shirt. He's even wearing a dark blue tie that brings out the color in his eyes. He put on a *tie* for her. She can't remember ever going out on a date with a man who wore a tie to the date. She's relieved she went with the dress this morning.

“Cassie,” Joel says, a grin spreading across his face when he sees her. “Are you ready?”

And then he pulls a rose out from behind his back. An honest-to-God rose. That's a new one—none of the guys in their mid-twenties would ever show up with a rose. “Oh,” she gasps.

He hands it to her, and again, their fingers brush against each other. And again, she gets that tingle. “I wasn't sure what kind of flowers you like, so...”

“I like roses,” she says. Grandpa Marv used to present fresh flowers to Grandma Bea every single week for the duration of their marriage, and she used to put them in the window of the store. But after Grandpa Marv died, there were never flowers in the store again. “Thank you. And you're right on time.”

He nods. “I got here a little early, but I figured you were still working so I've been... uh, circling the block.” He rubs at the back of his neck. “And now I wish I hadn't told you that.”

She laughs. “I'll forget I heard it.”

“Would you?”

Cassie glances at Zoe who is rolling her eyes. “Thanks again for locking up, Zoe. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Have fun, you two.” Zoe leans back in her seat and flashes her teeth at them. “Don't do anything I wouldn't do.”

And I mean that, because if *I* wouldn't do it, it's got to be some really bad shit."

Cassie has no doubt that's true.

The sun is just starting to set when they get outside the bookstore. Cassie loves this time in the fall, when the oppressive heat and humidity of the summer has finally let up, but it's still warm enough to get away with a dress and no jacket in the evening. A gentle breeze lifts the dark strands of hair from her neck. They stroll down the block, and she's unsure of the destination. They texted a few times, and he mentioned the possibility of Indian food, but now she thinks the heavy, creamy Indian dishes she usually likes would make her feel bloated and unattractive.

"Where are we going?" she asks him.

"Punjab Café is just down the block," he says.

"Actually," she says, "what about Giotto's? That Italian place two blocks uptown?"

His eyes darken, almost imperceptibly. "I don't really like Italian food."

"Oh." Cassie wants to be agreeable, but in her head, a red flag goes up. Who doesn't like *Italian* food? American cuisine is so entangled with Italian that he may as well say he doesn't like *food*. "What about sushi?"

His shoulders sag in relief. "That sounds good."

"But we can't get anything with peanuts," she says. "I'm allergic."

He raises an eyebrow. "Itchy rash allergic? Or bells and whistles to the hospital allergic?"

"Used to be bells and whistles," she says. "It's not as bad anymore. If it's a tiny amount of peanut, I'm fine, but my throat closes if it's too much."

"Do you carry an epi-pen?"

"Yes, of course," she says, although as she says the words, she's not entirely sure. Is it still in her purse? It's been so long

since she's had an anaphylactic reaction that she's almost forgotten about it. Maybe she's not even allergic anymore.

As they walk to the sushi bar, Cassie worries about the price tag on this meal. She can't afford a sushi dinner. She can barely afford ramen noodles. On dates in the past, she's always insisted on covering her half of the check—it's a pride thing. But God knows what the check will amount to in a decent sushi restaurant.

But when Joel smiles at her, she decides not to worry about it.

As soon as Cassie walks into the small Japanese restaurant, she sees a conveyor belt carrying small plates of food past customers sitting in cozy booths and larger tables. Zoe had mentioned there was a conveyor belt sushi place nearby, but this is the first time she's ever tried it. She and Joel snag a booth where a train of sushi plates travels past them, tantalizing them with California rolls and sashimi hidden under glass covers. Cassie watches the plates go by as they wait for their waters.

"I love the concept of conveyer belt food," she says.

"I agree," Joel says. "All food should be available this way."

"Little cheeseburgers, traveling by on a conveyer belt," she muses.

"Four little buffalo wings."

"A handful of French fries."

"Six onion rings."

"I think I should close the bookstore," Cassie says, "and open up a conveyer belt everything restaurant."

He grins at her and she swoons a bit. "Brilliant."

She's only partially kidding. She suspects she'd make more money if she did so.

"The salmon plates are discounted." She studies the menu. "Only three dollars a plate! That's a great deal."

A waiter comes by to deposit two glasses of water on the table. Cassie notices his glass has a suspicious smudge on it, which makes her worry about the quality of the raw fish, but she decides to live dangerously. She's yet to have food poisoning during her time living in Manhattan, which makes her think she may have developed a tolerance to the particular bacteria that inhabit the restaurants and food carts sprinkling the city.

As soon as the waiter leaves, Joel's brows knit together. "Don't get what's discounted. Get what you like."

"Hmm." Cassie takes a sip of her water. "You don't know what the finances of a bookstore owner look like."

"Right, but..." His fingers play with the napkin in front of him. "This dinner... it's on me. I'm paying. So you should get whatever you want."

She allows her eyes to meet his. "Usually I pay for half."

"Not tonight." He shakes his head. "I asked you out, so I'm paying. Also, I'm not the kind of jerk who would make his date pay for half the dinner."

"But—"

"Not negotiable." A smile touches his lips. "Don't worry about it. I'm the hot doctor, remember? I can afford to treat you to dinner."

She leans back against the cushion of the booth, knowing she won't win this argument and not sure why she's even trying. "Okay."

"So like I said, get whatever you want. Order their best wine."

Without meaning to, she giggles. "Conveyer belt wine?"

He laughs. "Now *that* is a great idea."

She suspects if she opened up a conveyer belt wine store, she could retire early.

Cassie knows she should be scoping out the sushi, but instead, she finds herself staring across the table at Joel. God,

he's sexy. She gets that tingle again, this time through her whole body. He's staring at her too, a smile on his lips that she suspects mirrors her own. She wonders if he'll kiss her at the end of the night.

She hopes he does.

Actually, she wishes he would kiss her now. Who came up with that rule about a kiss at the end of a date? What a stupid rule. Because now she just has to sit here, thinking about kissing him. How can she digest her food with those thoughts circling her brain? No, the kiss should be *first*.

She should tell him about her brilliant idea. This seems like something he ought to know about.

“Joel!”

Cassie jerks her head up. A stocky man in baggy jeans and a T-shirt with a shaved skull is approaching their table, a big grin on his face. He doesn't stop until he gets right up in front of them, and the guy claps Joel on the back.

“How're you doing, Broder?” the guy says. “It's been... shit, how long? A year? Two years?”

Joel smiles, although his jaw visibly tightens. “Hi, Rob. Good to see you.”

“You still at the hospital?” the man, Rob, asks.

“Same old, same old.” Joel shrugs. “You still working at the clinic?”

“Yeah, but I hate it. Looking for other stuff.” Rob's eyes stray to where I'm sitting. A smile spreads across his lips. “And I bet I know who this is. It's really great to *finally* meet you. I swear, sometimes I felt like Joel wouldn't shut up about how wonderful you are. *The perfect woman*. I know he's in love with you, but give it a rest, right?”

The color drains out of Joel's face. “Rob...”

“You two must be getting married soon, huh?” Rob lets out a cackle. “Sorry, I'm probably speaking out of turn, but Joel needs to know with a girl as beautiful as you, he's going to have to give you a ring sooner rather than later. And he's

already kept you waiting long enough, from what I've heard.
Am I right, Francesca?"

Francesca.

Who the hell is Francesca?

Chapter 5: The Ex

When I am depressed, anxious, angry, or even happy, I cook. It is my favorite thing to do.

My grandmother, Angela Mascolo, known to me my whole life only as Nonna, taught me everything I know about cooking. She was born in Sicily, and her Italian mother taught her the buttermilk secret to perfect Italian meatballs when her head wasn't even high enough to reach the counter. Nonna tried to instill her love of cooking in her daughter—my mother—but Mom wasn't interested in such things. I was always closer to Nonna than I ever was to my parents, and when Joel left me, I spent ages in her kitchen, cooking up a storm.

The horrible day I've had—starting with looking at awful apartments and ending with a call to the police to report my wallet stolen—warrants lasagna. I'm putting together a meat sauce from Italian sausage. Sausage makes a much better lasagna sauce than ground beef. And Nonna gets fresh mozzarella at this tiny Italian grocery store where they give her food dirt-cheap. I wouldn't make lasagna with anything but fresh mozzarella.

Of course, I won't be making lasagna at all if I take that micro-studio. Except for the kind in a plastic bowl you heat up in the microwave. Nonna's kitchen may be small, but it's got a decent oven and a full-sized refrigerator that doesn't electrocute me when I touch it.

Nonna walks into the kitchen to observe my cooking. When I was very young, Nonna had dark hair like I do, only slightly peppered with gray, but she's since turned completely gray, although her hair is still long and wound into a loose bun behind her head. She keeps a pair of glasses with lenses the size of my fist perched on her nose at all times—I wouldn't recognize her without them. She's nearly ninety now, but there's nothing frail about my grandmother. She proudly walks two miles a day around the city when it isn't too icy, and her

powerful arms are as big as... well, not tree trunks, but certainly paper towel rolls.

“It smells so wonderful, *patatina*,” Nonna says, smiling at the aroma of tomatoes, sausage, basil, garlic, and oregano. Ever since I was a little girl, she has called me by the nickname *patatina*, which means “little potato.” No, it is not a flattering nickname. But in Italian, it doesn’t sound so bad. And these days, Nonna usually favors Italian all the time. She always spoke in English when I was young, but as she gets older, she has switched back to her native tongue. I am fluent, but I’ve been told I have an embarrassing American accent.

“Thanks,” I mumble. It does smell wonderful. Why didn’t Joel want to stay with me when I could create a sauce that smells so good? Doesn’t he miss it? If he doesn’t miss me, doesn’t he at least miss my food?

“Joel... he is a fool,” she declares, as if reading my mind. She always pronounces his name Jo-elle. He used to hate it. *It sounds like she thinks I’m a woman.* I smile at the memory. “You are the perfect woman. How could he get anyone better?”

I let out a sigh. “Yeah, well...”

She brightens. “I have a perfect man for you!”

Oh God. Nonna has an endless stream of horrible men she’d like to set me up with. Each one is worse than the last. “No, thanks.”

“He is the son of Estelle, from book club.” She picks up the lump of mozzarella cheese and gives it a sniff. “His name is Robert. She says he is free any night of the week because he does not work.”

Fantastic. “I think I’ll pass.”

She puts down the mozzarella, apparently finding it satisfactory. “Did you find a new apartment today?”

“Not yet.” I pick apart a lump of sausage with my spoon. “The options aren’t great. There’s nothing good in Manhattan, and the stuff outside of Manhattan is a little better, but I’ll have a horrible commute.”

Nonna watches me for a moment. “You could live here.”

I nearly drop the spoon into the pot. “Here?”

“Yes, why not?” She gestures around the apartment, which she owns outright. “There is space here. And it is not so far from your work.”

Nonna’s apartment is in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. It’s a straight shot into the city on the D train. It’s more travel time than my current place, but it’s a dream come true after the locations I saw in Queens. “But where will I sleep?”

“I have an extra bedroom!”

Nonna gestures at the small room where she keeps her sewing materials. I dubbed it “Nonna’s Sewing Room.” It is, in fact, large enough for a bed (barely), but I wouldn’t want to take away her sewing room. Nonna makes all her own dresses by hand. Granted, they sort of look like an old woman made them by hand, but she loves doing it. I don’t want to take her room.

“You need that room,” I protest.

She waves her hand. “My arthritis is too bad to sew much anymore. What I need is *you*, *patatina*! If I fall and break my hip, who will rescue me?”

“Nonna, you walk farther than I do every day.”

“Well, maybe *I* need to be there when *you* fall and break your hip.”

I give the sauce another stir. “Okay, but I’m going to pay you.”

“Absolutely not! My home is your home!” She shakes her head. “You take out the garbage, buy some groceries, wash a few dishes... that would make me happy.”

I’m tempted. Living here would be so much better than any of the micro-studios. Nonna is getting on in years, and she could use some help. I worry about her here all alone. This way I could keep an eye on her *and* have a kitchen that includes more than a microwave and a hot pot.

Granted, it doesn't feel like a step up in the world to be living with my grandmother. But I'm low on options. I've already got credit card debt and I don't see my income jumping in the next few months. Maybe someday, but not now.

"Think about it, *patatina*," Nonna says.

"I will," I promise.

Nonna leaves the kitchen slowly. She's limping. Just slightly, but I notice it. Maybe she really does need someone here with her.

Once she's gone, I reach for my phone in my purse to see if I have any email. Nonna doesn't own a computer, so I need to rely on my phone for that when I'm here. If I moved in though, I could get Wi-Fi set up. I could afford to pay for it if I don't have to pay any rent.

I don't have any email of interest, but while I'm holding my phone, my thumb lingers over the WhereAmI app. I should delete it. Now is the time.

Delete it. Stop obsessing over Joel.

Except instead of deleting it, I somehow click on it. Somehow.

A map of the city fills the screen. The GPS narrows in on Joel's location. It's a Friday night and he's not home. He's not in the hospital either, although he's not far from there. He appears to be... at a restaurant.

He could be there with friends. Just because he's out on a Friday night, it doesn't necessarily mean he's out on a date. I shouldn't jump to conclusions.

And even if he is out on a date, so what? He's entitled after we've been broken up for nearly six months. It's just a date—it's not like he's marrying the girl.

I wonder if she's prettier than me. If she's younger than me. If she's a doctor in the ER like he is.

I look down again at the map. There's one way to find out for sure, isn't there?

I suck in a breath, contemplating my next move. It's one thing to orchestrate a couple of chance meetings with Joel. If I were to take the train into the city to spy on him and his date, that would be taking things to a whole new level. It would cross a line. I don't want to be the crazy ex-girlfriend. I *don't*.

Yet...

I turn off the stove. I toss my phone back in my purse and grab a light sweater from the closet. "Nonna!" I call. "I'm going out!"

Chapter 6: The New Girl

This man Rob will not shut up.

“So what a thrill to finally meet the wonderful Francesca,” he says. “And now that I’ve met you, I see what all the fuss was about.”

“Rob,” Joel chokes out. “This isn’t...”

There’s an awkward silence while Rob puts it all together. That Cassie is not Francesca. She’s not the wonderful woman who Joel thought was perfect and beautiful and wanted to marry. She’s nothing more than a girl who owns a failing used bookstore.

“Wow,” Rob says. “I really put my foot in my mouth, didn’t I?”

Joel just shakes his head. “Rob, this is Cassie.”

“Well, hello, Cassie.” Rob offers a crooked smile. “Sorry for the mix-up. Have you two been together long?”

“It’s our first date,” Joel says through his teeth.

“Oh wow,” Rob says again. “Shit, Joel, you must hate me.” He flashes Cassie an apologetic look. “I was just exaggerating all that stuff about Francesca, you know. Trying to make him look good in front of his girl.”

“Thanks for that,” Joel mutters.

Rob raps his fingers on the table. “Well, I’ll leave the two of you alone then. Hope I didn’t ruin the evening.”

That remains to be seen.

Cassie sits there, her fingers clutching the hem of her dress, waiting for an explanation, not certain she wants one. She had already suspected Joel had recently come out of a long-term relationship. But it’s one thing to suspect it, and it’s another thing to have it thrown in her face.

She doubts many great love stories have started with being mistaken for the guy's ex-girlfriend.

"I'm sorry about that," Joel says. "I'm so... so sorry."

She shrugs like she gets mistaken for ex-girlfriends on dates all the time. "It's not your fault."

"Yeah..." He rakes a hand through his dark hair. "I just... I think you should know... he was exaggerating. A lot."

She manages a tiny smile. "So this Francesca wasn't the most perfect human being who ever was?"

"No." He lowers his eyes. "She wasn't."

A million questions pop into Cassie's head. *When did the relationship end?* It must have been recent if this man assumed they were still together. *Who ended it?* She's not sure why, but somehow she thinks it was Francesca who pulled the plug on their perfect relationship. *Did you love her?*

Well, of course he did. That much is obvious from his face.

"I don't want to talk about Francesca," Joel interrupts her thoughts. A muscle twitches in his jaw. "That's the last thing I want to talk about. So... let's change the subject. Okay?"

"Okay," she agrees, even though it's the only thing she wants to talk about. But he's right. Ex-girlfriends are not an appropriate first-date conversation. Or any date conversation.

A song starts playing in the background. It's a man's voice, although Cassie can't identify the singer or the name of the song. But Joel's ears perk up and he smiles. "I used to love the song. Haven't heard it in a long time."

"I don't know if I've ever heard it."

His eyes widen. "Really? This is Sister Hazel. It was on the radio all the time back in..." He frowns at her. "Is it rude to ask how old you are?"

She laughs. "No, not rude. I'm twenty-six. How old are you?"

He hesitates. "Older than you."

“Oh, that is so unfair.” She shoots him a look. “I told you how old I am and now you won’t tell me how old you are?”

“Well...”

“Okay, in that case, I’m going to guess...” She squints at him across the table, studying his face for lines and gray hairs. She detects one possible gray hair around his temple. When he smiles, there are lines around his eyes, but they mostly disappear when his face relaxes. Mid-thirties, or thereabouts. But she feels in the mood to tease him. “Fifty... seven?”

His mouth falls open. “That’s a joke, right?”

She blinks. “Older or younger?”

He grins at her. “You know, it makes you look even worse if you agreed to go out with a fifty-seven-year-old if you’re only twenty-six.”

“What can I say? I’m looking for a sugar daddy.”

“Says the girl who wouldn’t even let me pay for dinner.”

The spell that was broken by that idiot who mistook Cassie for the ex-girlfriend has returned full-force. They’re staring at each other again, and even though she loves sushi and hasn’t had it in ages, she can’t wait for the meal to be over so she can walk close to him on the street and maybe get that kiss she’s been thinking about.

“Thirty-six,” he says.

“Oh my God, you’re *so old*,” she teases him.

“Considering more than half my patients are geriatric, I usually don’t think I am.” He takes a sip from his water. “But right now... on a date with a twenty-six-year-old... yeah, feeling a little old. When I was in high school and taking the SATs, you were a kindergartener eating paste.”

“Uh, I never ate paste.”

“You think I can’t recognize a paste-eater when I see one?”

She laughs. She likes the smile that plays on his lips when he teases her. He’s very sexy. And so what if he had a serious

girlfriend right before her? Everyone's got a past.

Chapter 7: The Ex

I don't entirely know how I got here.

One minute I was staring at the tiny avatar of Joel on the screen of my phone, and the next minute, I'm riding the D train into Manhattan. I didn't have a plan in my head—not really. Mostly, I want to reassure myself. I want to take a peek into the restaurant and find Joel there with his buddies, and know he hasn't found someone new.

But what's the point of that? Joel doesn't want me back. He made that quite clear when he asked me to move out of our former apartment if I couldn't cough up the rent. He's willing to try to be friends, but that's the best I can hope for.

Then again, it's been nearly six months, and from what I've heard, he hasn't been dating. That says something, doesn't it?

When I get out of the subway, the sun has fallen in the sky and I throw on the sweater I had wrapped around my shoulders. Joel was the sort of gentleman who would always give up his jacket for me when I was cold. He would see me shivering and laugh. *Don't you ever bring a jacket?* Then he'd wrap his own jacket around me, and it would feel warm and big and smell like his aftershave.

Sometimes I forgot my jacket on purpose so he'd give me his.

If I ever saw him do that for another woman, I don't know what I would do. It would break me. That's why we can't be friends.

When I get to the restaurant, my heart is pounding, although I'm not sure if it's from the brisk walk or from what I'm scared I might see. I approach the restaurant, doing my best to be inconspicuous. That's not hard for me. I am not someone who attracts much attention.

I peer through the glass windows of the restaurant, ready to duck out of sight if I'm spotted. *Please let him be out with Pete or Jim.* I squint at the tables and...

I don't see him. He's not in there.

I whip out my phone. I open the WhereAmI app, and see the avatar of Joel has left the restaurant. It's hovering about a block away.

I should go home. Maybe grab a bite at a restaurant then take the train back to Bensonhurst. Or maybe I'll send Lydia a text and see if she's free—I haven't heard from her in ages. That's what I should do.

Except instead I start walking toward Joel's avatar.

I see them when I get to the corner. Joel isn't out with the boys. He's out with a woman. If I wanted to reassure myself, I have done the exact opposite. And...

She's beautiful.

God, she's beautiful. I can tell even from nearly a block away. She's wearing a dress that shows off miles of leg, she has flawless olive skin, and her dark hair is loose and sexy going down her back. And she's young. So young. I don't want to think about it.

There's something about her that reminds me of myself, only prettier and younger. She's the two point oh version of me. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse about the whole thing.

I wonder how long they've been seeing each other. I squint at her face, and it doesn't look familiar. I haven't seen her featured on his Facebook page or other social media. It's got to be a new relationship. Maybe even a first date.

I wonder if they've kissed yet. If she's been to his apartment. If they've slept together.

This is the point where I know I should turn around. I have gotten an answer to my question, and even though it's not the answer I had wanted, it's an answer. Yet I can't make my feet move. I can't look away.

Especially when he leans in toward her until his lips are against hers.

I can't describe how it feels to see the man you love—the man you were certain you would marry and spend the rest of your life with—kissing another woman. It's a sick, horrible feeling, like the entire world is falling out from under me. And the kiss... it lasts forever.

I remember the first time Joel kissed me. It was the night we met. We were at a Christmas party thrown by a mutual friend, and he showed up in his scrubs (no surprise there) and was passed out on the sofa sitting up when I arrived. When I sat down on the couch, it jostled him awake. I apologized for waking him, and as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, a smile spread across his face. *I'm glad you did*, he said.

We spent the next two hours talking and ignoring everyone else at the party. He entertained me with stories from his med school rotations, and I confessed to him my dream of opening my own shop someday. We had several drinks in us when he got shakily back on his feet, then offered me his hand to help me up. *Can I walk you home?*

I had been hoping for a kiss at my front door, but instead, we ran into a piece of mistletoe stuck above the doorway. I can't remember which one of us pointed it out, but as soon as I saw it, I knew what he was going to do. When he leaned in to kiss me, I knew this was the man I would spend the rest of my life with.

Or at least, that's what I thought.

Stupid, I know.

And now he's kissing another woman. There's part of me that can't believe this is happening. Maybe I'm trapped in some sort of elaborate dream I can't escape.

God, why is this kiss lasting so long? Are they trying for the World's Record?

I need to leave. I need to walk away. I need to forget all about Joel and move on with my life. But instead, I keep staring at them as they kiss.

And then something inside me snaps.

Chapter 8: The New Girl

It ends up being a great dinner and a great date. The best Cassie has had in years, although to be fair, she can count on one hand the number of dates she's been on in the last few years.

Is it as good as the first date between Bea and Marv? She doesn't know. She wasn't there for that date, although she has to assume it was a good one since they were married only six months later.

Joel won't let her see the number on the check when it arrives. He yanks it away before she can even attempt to reach for it and hands it back to the waiter with his credit card. She doesn't want to think about how much the meal cost, considering how many plates are stacked up in front of them, and they had two glasses of wine each. She tried to take the salmon plates, even though he told her to get whatever she liked. Well, she does like salmon.

The sun has gone down, and the air has gotten brisk when they leave the restaurant. Her formerly comfortable dress is no longer warm enough, and Cassie feels goosebumps prickling her arm.

"You're cold," Joel notes.

"I'm fine," she insists.

"I'd give you my jacket, but I'm not wearing one."

"I'm fine," she says again, even as her teeth start to chatter.

Joel looks down at her. He's about six inches taller than she is—a perfect height for her. Or maybe she's a perfect height for him, even if she's not generally perfect like *Francesca*.

"Come on," he says.

He takes her by the arm. He's not quite holding her hand, but close enough that the goosebumps on her arm multiply. She barely notices where he's leading her until they've ducked into a tiny gift shop on the corner. Her elbows brush against various license plates with names on them, snow globes with the Statue of Liberty within, baseball caps in every color, and yes, sweatshirts.

"I can't afford an overpriced sweatshirt." Cassie worries she sounds like a broken record, but it needs to be said. She's got plenty of perfectly good sweatshirts at home.

"Good thing I'm buying it then."

"Joel..."

"Don't make a big thing about it." He reaches out and fingers one of the first sweatshirts in the rack. "What do you think? Are you a New York City Gurl?"

"Oh God," she laughs. "You know, I'll get mugged if I walk around in one of these."

He examines the second shirt in the rack. "Well, how about New York Mom?"

"I feel like maybe you don't want a second date."

He takes a step back. "Okay, point taken. So... which one do you like?"

She's reluctant to buy a sweatshirt here, but it *is* quite cold. Plus, she's not sure if Joel will let her leave without one. She thumbs through the rack and finally selects a navy blue Yankees hoodie.

"You're going to look adorable in this," he tells her as he pays for it.

"Unlikely."

She's right. When she slips the hoodie over her head, she's immediately sorry she got it. It's big and bulky and ugly. But when Joel looks at her, a smile spreads across his face. "See? I was right. Adorable."

She rolls her eyes. At least it's warm.

They stroll around the neighborhood. He suggests ice cream, but she's stuffed from sushi. She wonders if she should invite him over. Is that what people do on dates these days? She can't remember the etiquette.

Sometimes on sit-coms, a character bemoans a long dry spell without sex, which is always around five or six months. Cassie's dry spell is two years. Her last boyfriend was named Harry—she met him when she was out getting drinks with some friends. He had a job in advertising and was trying to break into the industry, which apparently required him to drink a lot because he was always slightly drunk when they got together after work. At first, he was sweet as he courted her, but the longer they were together, the more irritable and demanding he became. She wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or his personality, but it got to the point where they couldn't get through an evening without fighting.

There was one night when she and Harry were out to dinner, and the waiter gave them a table he didn't like, too close to a boisterous group of college kids. Cassie had suggested switching tables, but instead, Harry bitched and moaned about it through the whole meal. He ruined the night. She realized at that moment that it wasn't the great love story like between Bea and Marv. It was a horror story. (Or at the very least, dark women's fiction.)

She broke up with Harry that night.

After a bad relationship, being alone came as an incredible relief. Cassie basked in her newly rediscovered ability to spend a night out without Harry's moodiness. She was happy being single. It was far preferable to being with someone like Harry.

Then it started to become a dangerous habit. Every time an attractive man would approach her, she'd think back to Harry and all the other unsatisfying and often miserable relationships she'd had. And she'd shake her head no. She preferred to focus on her business and enjoy having fun with her friends.

But now it's bordering on too long. There are times when she aches for another person's touch so badly, she can barely sleep. Other days, she doesn't miss it. Right now, she can't think about anything but the way Joel's hand felt on her arm. She knows she won't be able to go to sleep tonight if they don't share a kiss.

"Do you want to share a cab home?" Joel suggests after she inadvertently lets out a yawn.

Her heart skips a beat. "To... my home?"

One corner of his lips lifts. "We get one cab, they drop you off first, then they drop me off."

"Oh." She isn't sure if she's relieved or disappointed. She's glad at least that he's being a gentleman and not pushing to come over after only one date. "Okay."

Except it turns out he lives in the opposite direction to her. He puzzles it out for a moment, and finally declares, "I'll get you a cab, and I'll find one of my own."

"That's okay," she says quickly. "I'll take the subway."

"Don't even joke about that," he says. "I'm not letting you take the subway home all alone at night."

"It's not *that* late."

"Yes, it is."

Cassie looks down at her watch and... wow, it *is* rather late. Were they really talking together at the restaurant that long? But still. It's Friday night. The subway won't be deserted.

"I'll get you a cab," he says again.

"Listen, buddy." She pokes him gently in the chest. "I take the subway home from here every single night. It's Friday night—there will be plenty of people on the subway. I'll be fine." She tugs at the hood of her sweatshirt. "I've even got my warm hoodie."

"Yeah, but—"

“No butts.” She raises an eyebrow. “I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself. Do you respect that?”

He looks at her for a moment before his face splits into a grin. “Yeah, I respect that.”

“Good.” She returns the smile. “Because I’d hate to deprive you of a good night kiss.”

The smile fades from his face. “I’d hate that too. Am I still in the running?”

She nods. “I think you are.”

“Well, good.”

He gazes at her with those vivid eyes and she shivers, even under her hoodie. He leans in, she tilts her face toward him, and it turns out six inches taller than her is the perfect height for kissing. His lips linger less than an inch away from hers for a fraction of a second and she’s the one who bridges the gap, pressing her lips against his. His breath is warm and her entire body melts against him as they engage in a good night kiss she never wants to end.

Maybe she should invite him over after all.

But no. There will be plenty of time for that. No need to rush.

When they finally part, Cassie notices she’s breathing hard. And Joel seems equally breathless. It takes her a moment to remember where she is and why she’s here.

“Could I…” She can hear Joel swallow. “Walk you to the subway?”

He’s itching to get her into a cab, but she’s not going to give in. She stood her ground, and she meant what she said. She takes this exact subway home every night. It will be fine.

Joel walks her to the subway station. One block away from the station, he reaches out and takes her hand in his. Her heart leaps when he does that. It’s been so long since she’s held hands with a man. Too long. And far longer since she’s held hands with a man she really liked.

She wonders if the last person whose hand he held was Francesca.

He kisses her one final time before she sinks into the subway station. The kiss is not at all tarnished by the scent of urine that seems to cling to every subway station in the city. It takes all her willpower to send him on his way.

While her body jolts with each bump on the subway ride downtown to her apartment, Cassie replays the kiss in her head. She closes her eyes and relives it over and over. Every time, she gets that leap of excitement in her chest. She can't wait to see him again. He promised he'd call tomorrow, and she's certain he will keep that promise. Maybe Joel really will be her Heathcliff. Her Marv.

Cassie has ridden this subway hundreds of times, but it's usually several hours earlier than this. She hates to admit that it isn't as crowded as she thought it would be. As she'd like it to be. She glances around the subway car at the other occupants. A homeless man in a ratty coat sprawled across four seats in a restless sleep. Three teenage boys at the far end, talking smack about some girl. And at the other end, an attractive woman in her thirties with long, dark hair.

There's nothing specifically threatening in this car, but Cassie hugs her purse to her chest, willing the train to move faster. It occurs to her now that she left the rose Joel bought her on the seat in the sushi bar. Well, it's too late to get it now.

The boys stand up as the train grinds to a halt. They get out at the door next to Cassie, and one of them leers at her just before they get off the train. "Wanna join us, baby?" he asks.

"No, thanks." Cassie rolls her eyes. The boys are harmless—she can tell that much. But there's still something in the train car making her uneasy.

She glances at the woman at the far end of the train. The woman is staring listlessly out the far window. It should comfort her to see another woman on the train, but it doesn't.

When the train finally comes to Cassie's stop, she leaps out of her seat. She hops off the train, minding the substantial

gap between the car and the platform. The tight feeling in her chest loosens up as she gets off the train, until she notices the platform is even more desolate than the train was. She strides purposefully down the platform toward the stairs.

As the train dashes off to its next stop, she can't help but notice the car she'd been in is now entirely empty.

It is a two-block walk from the train station to Cassie's home. Usually it's a quick walk, but at this moment, those two blocks seem endless. She shivers under her Yankees hoodie, wrapping her arms across her chest. Why didn't she let Joel get her a taxi? Stupid pride.

She starts to walk down the block, past the animal shelter, past the drug store, past the bank. Everything is closed now. And when she's halfway down the block, she notices something.

With every one of her own steps, she hears a second set of footsteps.

There's someone behind her.

Well, why shouldn't there be someone behind her? After all, it's Friday night—it's reasonable there should be other people on the street.

Except there's something in Cassie's gut telling her whoever is behind her isn't an innocent partygoer. It's a dark feeling in the pit of her stomach. There's someone following her.

When her Grandma Bea was alive, she used to sometimes read aloud stories in the newspaper about disappearances. *Girl went out on a jog and never returned.* Cassie strained her memory, trying to think of one story of a missing girl her age that ended well. She couldn't.

The stories never scared Cassie. She was too smart to let anything happen to her. What sort of idiot goes jogging at five in the morning anyway? That's just asking for trouble.

Why didn't she let Joel get that taxi?

Stupid, stupid...

There was a policeman at the subway station. Maybe she could run back there and try to find him. But then he might insist on escorting her up to her apartment. And she can't risk a cop getting a look at what's in her apartment. That would potentially be... bad. Very bad.

Cassie starts walking more rapidly. It isn't until she crosses the street that she's outright sprinting. One more block to her apartment building. One more block. She reaches into her purse for her keys as she walks, wanting them ready but also anticipating they could be used as a weapon if need be.

By the time she reaches the front door of her building, she's panting. She yanks her key out of her purse, but her hand is shaking too badly to fit the key in the lock. She's certain she's about to feel a hand cover her mouth, but she inserts the key on the second try and the door to her building swings open. She slides inside and slams it closed behind her.

It's only after she hears the lock click back into place that she dares to turn around. She peers through the window by the door, trying to see whose footsteps had followed her all the way home.

There's no one there.

Chapter 9: The Ex

I stood outside her apartment for an hour.

It was close to an hour, at least. I wasn't keeping track. None of it was *planned*. I didn't *plan* to follow her home. But then when her steps quickened and it became clear she was afraid, it energized me. I wanted her to be afraid. I wanted her to know there are consequences to dating Joel Broder.

I wouldn't have really harmed her. For starters, I had no weapons aside from the nearly empty bottle of mace in my purse. (I haven't used it on anyone, but I give it a practice spritz every time I go out late at night by myself.) And also, that's not me. I am not a person who attacks a young woman on a deserted street.

But yes, I enjoyed giving her a scare. Joel broke my heart—what can I say?

In the light of day though, I was embarrassed by my behavior. I immediately deleted the WhereAmI app from my phone. Nothing good will come of tracking my ex-boyfriend's whereabouts on my phone. That's the last thing I should be doing.

Not that it's any big revelation. "Stalking your ex-boyfriend is bad" ranks alongside with "the sky is blue" and "don't put metal in the microwave."

Now it's a week later, and with Joel a little more out of my system than he was a week earlier, I'm doing my version of window shopping. Technically, window shopping involves looking into windows and admiring stuff you can't afford. But that's not much fun. My version involves trying on outfits I can't afford and spritzing myself with perfume I can't afford.

For the most part, it's fun. But sometimes I see a top or dress I really love that fits me perfectly, and it's impossible to keep from buying it. It's too easy to plunk down my credit card, knowing I can deal with the bill at another time in the future.

This black cocktail dress is definitely a battle of wills. I tried it on and it was so sexy—the plunging neckline nearly made me gasp when I got a look at it. If I wore this dress and “accidentally” ran into Joel, it might make him forget all about that girl he was kissing with the olive skin. Of course, now that I deleted WhereAmI, I can’t engineer such a meetup anymore. And anyway, I’m forgetting about Joel. He’s distant history.

I look up from the dress and see a familiar face at the other end of the store. Lydia Lansing. One of my closest friends.

Who also happens to be the wife of Joel’s best friend Pete.

Lydia is one of those women who you can’t decide if she looks beautiful or intimidating. Really, it depends on her facial expression. When she’s having a good time and her white-blond hair is falling in soft waves around her delicate features, she’s gorgeous. But in a courtroom, with that same hair is pulled back into a severe bun, her blue eyes staring daggers into the witness she’s cross-examining, I’d imagine she’s terrifying.

Lydia and I used to talk or text nearly every day, but I’m struggling to remember the last time we exchanged words. To be fair, I wasn’t fun to be around right after Joel dumped me. We did have a few late nights together with a tub of ice cream. Or something stronger.

She’s examining dresses from a rack. In addition to her attorney’s salary, her husband Pete is an ER doctor like Joel, so she could afford to *buy* clothing from this store, rather than trying it on and looking at it longingly for several minutes before replacing it in the rack. For a moment, I hesitate, wondering if I should say hello. But then I realize I’m being silly. This is Lydia—one of my closest friends.

“Lydia,” I say. “Hi.”

She looks up. Blinks. “Oh...”

Immediately, I wish I hadn’t said anything. I wish I had quietly slinked out of the store while I had the chance.

“Are... are you busy?” I ask. Of course she’s not busy. She’s looking at freaking dresses.

“No.” But her smile is tight. “How have you been? You look... good.”

Oh no. Now I remember the last time Lydia and I got together. We went out to a bar, I had a few too many drinks, and I cried, and then threw up in the ladies room. She had to get me home in an Uber. No wonder she’s looking at me like I’m a mental patient.

“I’m well,” I say, forcing a confident smile. I don’t have to tell Lydia she looks good because she knows she looks good, in her expensive dress with that white-blond hair swept up in a loose French twist. I’ve seen Lydia put her hair into one of those twists in five seconds—I tried to do it once and it was harder than solving a Rubik’s Cube. “And how are you?”

“Very well.” Lydia always talks so formally, like she’s at a royal dinner party. She even calls her husband “Peter” while everyone else says “Pete.” I used to find it charming, but now it’s grating on me. “That dress would look wonderful on you.”

I look down at the black cocktail dress I’m still clutching in my right hand. I should have put it back—it’s far too expensive. Lydia must know that. Or maybe she doesn’t. I’ve always tried to hide my financial situation from her. It was easy when Joel and I were a couple and he always footed the bill when we went out with her and Pete. But the last time Lydia and I went out to dinner, she suggested a swanky French restaurant, and I had to invent a reason to veto it. My French restaurant days are over.

“Maybe,” I lie. “But it’s just a little too...” *Horrendously expensive.*

“Short?”

“Yes,” I say gratefully. “Too short.”

She nods, because “too short” is something Lydia can understand.

“So,” I say, “have you seen Joel recently?”

Why did I say that? I hadn't intended to ask about Joel. It was the furthest thing from my mind. It just... popped out. And now Lydia is giving me a strange look.

"Yes," she says. "I have."

"Oh." I shrug like I couldn't possibly care less. "I hope he's doing well."

"Yes," she murmurs. "He is."

Change the subject. Change it quick.

"I should tell you," she says, "he's been dating. Other women. One in particular."

"Well, so what?" I force a smile. It feels odd on my lips. "So have I."

Lydia gives me a skeptical look. Rightfully so, since I absolutely have not been dating. I haven't been on one single date since the night Joel moved out.

"I have," I insist. "There's one guy who I've had... well, our fifth date is coming up. He's great." Lydia is still giving me that look so I keep babbling on. "His name is Charles. He's in sales, so he's on the road a lot."

Have I said enough to sound convincing? I can't tell. And I don't know why I'm so desperate for Lydia to think I've got a boyfriend when I most definitely do not.

"Do you want to grab some coffee?" I ask. My voice sounds unnaturally high, and I clear my throat. "If you have time..."

"Um..." Lydia looks down at her watch, then glances around the store. "Listen... the thing is..."

Oh my God, is Lydia breaking up with me too?

"Pete and Joel are so close, you know?" She shakes her head. "It's just that... it's awkward if you and I are... I mean, I don't feel comfortable talking about things that Pete told me in confidence."

"Of course," I say quickly. "We don't have to talk about Joel." I add, "I don't even want to. Honestly. I've moved on."

Completely.”

Her eyes are full of pity, which is worse than anything. Everyone looks at me that way now. Even my own grandmother. “I just don’t think coffee is a good idea,” she says.

She is breaking up with me.

Lydia just broke up with me. I hadn’t realized how many of my friends were connected to Joel until he broke up with me and I lost all of them. I know Joel and Pete are super-close, but I thought Lydia and I were close too. Apparently not.

“But I heard you got a new apartment.” Lydia’s face brightens. “Something in the village?”

Oh Lord, the lie I told Joel is starting to spread. “Well, maybe. I haven’t decided yet.”

I’m moving in with my grandmother in Brooklyn.

“If you have a housewarming party,” she says, “I’d love to come. Please invite me. And I can meet... Charles, was it?”

She’s throwing me a bone. If I had any dignity at all, I’d tell her only my real friends would be invited to the housewarming to meet my imaginary boyfriend. But since I don’t even have an apartment to warm, the point is moot.

“I will,” I promise, around a lump in my throat.

And all the while, I keep thinking about this new girl that Joel is dating. The young one with the olive skin and long, dark hair.

Chapter 10: The New Girl

As Cassie steps out of the subway station, her phone pings with a text message. She digs it out of her purse and smiles when she sees Joel's name on the screen.

Do you have any interest in a bag of fun-sized chocolates? A patient gave it to me and I CAN'T STOP EATING THEM.

Cassie giggles. They were talking when they went out last night about how fun it is when October rolls around and those miniature chocolate bars are everywhere, but it takes roughly one week to get sick of them—well before Halloween arrives. Joel told her he felt sad that he never gets trick or treaters in his building, so she invited him to come over on Halloween night. She said they could take turns giving out candy to kids. And after it was over...

Well, that was a question mark. They would see what happens after. He's been to her apartment once in the weeks they've been dating, but never spent the night. But she wouldn't mind if he did. The more time she spends with him, the more time she wants to spend with him.

Joel Broder is the real deal. She knows it's early in their relationship, but there's something between them she's never felt before.

What kind of chocolate? she writes back as she treks the two blocks from the subway station to Bookland.

Twix. Milky Way. Nothing with peanuts.

Okay, bring it over.

Cassie is in the middle of typing her response when she practically trips over a woman pushing a baby carriage. She stumbles and nearly falls, but catches herself at the last second. The woman with the baby carriage flashes her a dirty look, but the most notable thing is the cackling coming from her right.

Maureen the Homeless Lady is laughing at her.

She's got a huge smile on her nearly toothless mouth as she throws her head back and laughs heartily, even though the laugh dissolves into a cough halfway through. The cardboard she's sitting on trembles with each cough. "You better watch your step, girly!" Maureen cackles as she brushes filthy gray strands from her face.

She doesn't dignify Maureen's heckling with a response. She quickly walks up to the door of the bookstore, unwilling to be late. Not that there will be customers lining up at the door, but it's a pride thing. She's never opened up the store late before, and she doesn't want to start just because she stayed out too late with Joel last night and had a few too many drinks.

Except when Cassie gets to the door of her shop, she freezes in shock.

There's blood all over the door. All over the door and all over the glass windows. The entire entrance to her store is soaked in dried crimson.

She takes a step back, her entire body shaking. Who would do something like that? And why? It's not like she has any enemies.

Unless...

No. Not that. Nobody knows about that.

She reaches a trembling hand into her purse and pulls out her phone. She needs to call the police to report this. It's the simple and obvious thing to do. Except she can't make herself dial 911. When did she become so frightened of the police?

Of course, that's a rhetorical question. She knows exactly when she grew wary of the people who could potentially throw her in jail.

But she doesn't have a choice. She needs to call them.

It will be fine.

Chapter 11: The New Girl

“It’s paint.”

The officer taking the report from Cassie doesn’t seem terribly impressed. Sympathetic, but not impressed. Admittedly, she was hysterical when he first arrived, sobbing about blood on the windows of her store. But Officer McNeil took one look at the crimson stain and made his declaration. Paint.

Cassie’s brows knit together. “Are you sure?”

He nods without hesitation. “Yep.”

“Oh.” She frowns, feeling stupid. “I thought for sure...”

In retrospect, he’s clearly right. The way the red material cakes against the door clearly resembles paint. And it sort of smells like paint. She saw it and her mind immediately went to blood. She wonders if that was the desire of whoever did this. They could have chosen any color of paint, but they chose something that looked like blood.

“There are a lot of vandals in this neighborhood,” Officer McNeil says with the wisdom of a man much older than his years. Cassie looks at his buzz cut and baby face and decides he couldn’t possibly be older than she is, but he acts like a cop with one week till retirement. “I’m surprised this is your first incident.”

“Yeah,” she mumbles.

“I’ll put in the report.” The officer holds up his notebook. “But... you know, this kind of stuff happens. At least they didn’t break anything, right?”

That’s true, but it’s hard to explain how personal this feels. Maybe he’s right—maybe it was some random kid who did it. But somehow, it doesn’t feel that way. It feels like this attack was aimed directly at her.

“That homeless woman right outside,” the officer says. “She might have seen something. Did you ask her?”

“No,” Cassie says. She doesn’t want to admit Maureen the Homeless Lady makes her nervous, and she would never willingly approach her.

“Let me go ask her then.”

Please don’t, Cassie wants to say. The officer already wrote down his report and now she wants him to leave. But he insists on questioning this homeless woman.

Cassie follows in the officer’s shadow as he marches out of the store to the nook that Maureen has made her home. She’s surrounded by unfolded dirty pieces of cardboard, both under her and behind her. She’s wrapped in a coat that is several orders too warm for the current weather, with a coat on top of her legs as well. And to her right, in a row on the pavement, are not one, not two, but three coffee cups. She looks up at the officer, the creases on her face lined with dirt, and she frowns. Cassie could imagine someone who lives on the street would be wary of cops.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Officer McNeil says.

Maureen squints at him. “Yup?”

“Someone committed an act of vandalism here last night.” Officer McNeil waves a hand at the door of the bookstore. “Did you see anything suspicious? Anyone throwing paint?”

Cassie takes a step back, her nose crinkling at the odor of urine. But she stays close, eager to hear Maureen’s answer.

“No, I didn’t, Officer!” Maureen says, grinning to show off a single tooth in her upper gums. “I didn’t see nothing! Not a thing!”

The officer frowns at her. “Are you sure about that?”

“Nope!” Maureen replies. Then she bursts out laughing. Probably at something said by the voices in her head.

Well, that was about as helpful as Cassie expected it to be.

After Officer McNeil leaves, Cassie lets out a sigh of relief. She opens up the bookstore, but there's no one waiting to come in, so she's free to wallow in self-pity and google ways to get paint off of glass. Sounds like some vinegar will do the trick.

Zoe arrives at the store just after lunch with what appears to be a new piercing in her nose. Her right nostril is slightly inflamed—a tiny circle of red surrounding a diamond stud. She's glancing back at the door as she pulls off her coat. "What's with the new décor, Cass?"

"It's not a new décor." Cassie rolls her eyes. "Someone threw paint on the door. If you'll help me, we can get it off with vinegar."

"I don't know..." Zoe purses her lips. "I kind of like it, actually. It gives the store a little color."

"You're just saying that because you don't want to help me clean it up."

"Could be." Zoe grins. She's got a crooked incisor on the left that is Cassie's favorite thing about her. "Why don't you ask your boyfriend the hot doctor? I'm sure he'd help you."

"I guess he would..."

"Are you kidding me?" Zoe plunks herself down on a stool behind the desk. "The guy is so into you. He'd scrub that paint off with a toothbrush if you asked him."

Cassie laughs. She doubts he'd scrub the paint off with a toothbrush, but he'd definitely help her if she asked him. But somehow she doesn't want him to know about this.

"Please?" Cassie says.

"Okay," Zoe says. "But you owe me a sandwich."

"Deal."

Zoe reaches into her purse and pulls out a compact. She touches up her makeup several times per shift. "You should have sandwiches here."

"You mean like a pile of them?"

She rolls her eyes. “No, like you should make them to sell. Bookstore and sandwich shop.”

“Um,” Cassie says.

“It’s a good idea!” Zoe insists. “People love eating while they read. It’s a whole industry, and you should cash in!”

Cassie shakes her head. “I don’t know how to make food people would want to pay money for.”

“It’s not like it’s hard,” Zoe huffs. “I was at a café yesterday and got a ham sandwich, and it was just a few slices of ham, a piece of Swiss cheese, and some mayonnaise. That was it! Six dollars. I kid you not.”

“I don’t know.” Cassie bites her lip. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Well, come up with a better one then.” Zoe glances around the store through her mascaraed ‘lashes. “Because otherwise, this place is gone.”

Zoe is right. Cassie hates to admit it, but she’s absolutely right. And Zoe is the only other person in the world who cares. When they were both graduating and Cassie told Zoe about inheriting the shop, Zoe jumped at the idea of helping out. They both loved books, and between the two of them, their literary knowledge was encyclopedic. They made excited plans about how much fun they’d have running Bookland together.

The reality wasn’t as great as the fantasy. When none of their ideas to boost sales panned out, Zoe took a second job bartending. She also has some online job Cassie doesn’t understand except she hopes it doesn’t involve pornography. Cassie has offered to release Zoe from any work or financial obligation, but Zoe has stuck it out. *I believe in this place*, Zoe keeps saying. *We can make it work*.

Zoe doesn’t know the truth. There’s only one reason the bookstore hasn’t gone under, and it’s something Cassie can never tell her about.

The door to Bookland jingles, signifying a new customer. Cassie looks up eagerly—this is only her second customer the

entire day. The crimson paint seems to be repelling customers. Just what she needs. Maybe Zoe can mind the store while she goes out to get that vinegar.

It's a young man, which is a bad sign. Young men do not make up even one percent of their customers. Cassie isn't sure if it's because men that age don't read or perhaps they only read electronic books. But before he even opens his mouth, she knows what he's going to say.

"Excuse me," the young man says. "Do you have a copy of Netter's *Atlas of Human Anatomy*?"

He's a medical student. Of course.

"We don't carry medical books," Zoe says regretfully. "But maybe I can show you some other things you might like..."

"Well, all I really need is—"

Except before the man can finish his sentence, Zoe is leading him by the arm to the back of the store. That's why Cassie is glad Zoe sticks around, even if she has to work two jobs on the side. Zoe will persuade him to buy a few books he doesn't even want, just for the chance of getting her number. She'll taunt him with it until the sale is final. Without Zoe, Bookland wouldn't have a chance.

While Zoe is in the back with their customer, Cassie raises her eyes to look at the crimson paint splattered across the entrance. God, it looks so much like blood. She wonders when the vandals who did it were here. Was it in the middle of the night, when the streets were empty? Or were they watching the door in the evening, waiting for her to lock up to make their move?

She hates to admit it, but she sometimes still gets that feeling someone is following her. Ever since that first date with Joel. It's a creeping sensation going up her spine, and it only happens when she's alone. Sometimes she's certain she hears footsteps. But whenever she dares to turn around, there's nobody there.

Is it someone clever enough to follow her without being detected? Or is she simply losing her mind?

After all, why would someone follow her? She has no enemies. And she has just about the most boring life ever. All she does is work and go out on dates with Joel. She enjoys her life, but it's hard to imagine it would be interesting to an observer.

Then again, if someone threw paint on her door, they're more than an observer.

Cassie shakes her head. The policeman said it was vandals and he's probably right. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one. What are the chances someone is following her?

Chapter 12: The Ex

God help me, I've been following her.

I deleted the WhereAmI app. I swear I did. But it turns out that stupid app is harder to get rid of than I thought. I downloaded it again, figuring it would have deleted all the information about Joel, but it hadn't. As soon as I opened the app, there was his avatar. The tiny picture of him floating on the screen, telling me his exact coordinates on a map of the city.

So I went there.

And he was with that girl again. The one with the olive skin, who he'd kissed that night. Lydia told me Joel has been dating, but apparently, it's just that one girl.

By now, I would say he thinks of her as his girlfriend.

I've nicknamed her Olive because I haven't yet figured out her name, but I've found out many other things about her. She owns a business that, based on the number of customers I see coming in and out, isn't doing very well. She likes to wear skinny jeans, and she's got the legs to pull it off. She leaves every day at about two, goes into the deli down the block, and buys herself a coffee.

I have followed her more than once onto the subway during her journey home. She has no idea I'm there. I don't dare get too close, because there's a reasonable chance she might have seen a photo of me on social media, and I don't want her reporting to Joel that I've been stalking her. Olive looks like the sort of girl who wouldn't confront me, but would certainly tell on me.

I'm glad Lydia has refused to spend time with me anymore, because I almost certainly would have broken down and told her I've been following Joel's new girlfriend around. And then she would have told Pete, who would have told Joel.

I recognize how bad it is that I'm doing this. I should be focusing on my own career. Meeting new men. *Anything but following my ex and his new girlfriend around.*

I can't though. It's become a crazy addiction. Following Olive.

Well, not *just* following her.

"It smells wonderful, *patatina*." Nonna wanders into the kitchen, where I have two burners going on the stove. The more upset I am, the more elaborate my meals become. "What is it you are making?"

"Chicken cacciatore," I tell her. The meat is simmering in a pan, and I've got a pot of water on the brink of boiling. The linguine is waiting to be thrown into the pot. Did I mention it's homemade linguine? Nonna has a pasta machine and I find it therapeutic.

Chicken cacciatore was one of Joel's favorites. When he was having a rough week, sometimes I'd make up a little menu for the week, and let him choose the dishes he wanted each day. *You're my favorite restaurant*, he'd say with a grin.

"Such a good cook," Nonna muses. Her brow crinkles. "But you should not be here! You should be out... with a man!"

"I'm fine."

"No." She shakes her head. "Not fine. I have a perfect man for you. My friend Gloria's youngest grandson."

Youngest grandson? My eyebrows shoot up. "How old is he?"

"Don't worry—he's eighteen! That is legal age."

"Nonna, I'm not dating an eighteen-year-old!"

"I did not say 'date'! Just for a little fun. You know what I mean."

My jaw drops open. My ninety-year-old grandmother, born and raised in Sicily to a strict Catholic mother, did *not* just say that to me. "Nonna! How could you say that?"

“Because it is a fact of life, *patatina*.” She shrugs. “If you do not want this boy, then go on the internet. They have websites where you can meet men now. They are everywhere!”

“Nonna...”

“It’s true!” she insists. “You swipe right when you think he is nice-looking. And if you don’t think he is nice-looking, you Snapchat him.”

“I don’t think that’s correct.”

“I am just telling you that you must stop thinking about Jo-el.” She fingers the pasta I’ve made, inspecting its consistency. “He is not so wonderful.”

I pick my phone up off the kitchen counter. Without thinking, I click on the WhereAmI app, which immediately locates Joel’s avatar.

I should delete the app. I should get rid of it for good in a way that I can’t get it back, even if I’m tempted.

I’m deleting it.

Now.

Chapter 13: The New Girl

“I can’t remember the last time I went to the zoo!” Cassie declares as she waits in line with Joel to buy tickets to get into the Central Park Zoo. It’s a beautiful day, the kind that makes you happy to be alive, even though the families in front *and* behind them in line both have shrieking kids, and one of those kids is holding a balloon that keeps smacking Cassie in the face.

“Me either.” He gives her hand a squeeze. “It’s going to be fun.”

Yes, they’re holding hands. They hold hands *all the time* now. Even when they’re just walking down the street, he reaches for her hand, and they lace their fingers together. She hates to admit how much she loves it. And Joel looks so good today, in his jeans and hoodie sweatshirt, with his chestnut hair adorably tousled by the wind.

The tickets for the zoo are obscenely expensive, which probably partially explains why Cassie can’t remember the last time she’s been to the zoo. She’s stopped offering to pay for things. He always waves her off, and she can’t afford any of the things they do together anyway.

“What animal do you want to see first?” Joel asks her.

She taps a finger against her chin as she inhales the distinctive odor of animals. “I’ve always been partial to the penguins. How about you?”

“I like the polar bear.”

She’s got a book on penguins at the store. It’s in the children’s section, and it just arrived a week earlier. She flipped through it, like she often does with new arrivals. The baby penguins were so cute. She wanted to scoop them up and keep one as a pet.

“Joel? Joel!”

Joel jerks his head around, and his eyes widen. A smile spreads across his lips, but she knows him well enough to know when his smile is forced.

She follows his gaze to the source of the voice. There are two couples striding toward them, flanking a blonde child of about five years old. One of the men waves enthusiastically at them, and Joel winces.

“Friends of yours?” Cassie murmurs.

“That’s Pete who called my name,” Joel murmurs back. “He’s my best friend, actually.”

Oh, lovely. She’s about to meet The Friends, without any preparation whatsoever. She looks down at her skinny jeans and sweatshirt. These aren’t the clothes she’d want to wear for a first impression, but there isn’t much to do about it now.

Joel handles introductions. The tall guy in the NYU hoodie with messy dirty blond hair is his best friend Pete, and the gorgeous blonde with the porcelain skin is his wife Lydia. The little girl is their daughter, Violet, who is wearing an impractical velvet dress and shiny black shoes that look like they cost as much as everything in Cassie’s closet put together. The other attractive couple is Anna and Con. Anna has a visible baby bump poking out of her stylish black-and-white striped top. Both women look like they’ve leapt out of the pages of a fashion magazine.

Cassie feels uneasy about the fact that Joel’s best friend has a daughter and his other close friend has a pregnant wife. He’s thirty-six—he must be thinking about marriage and children in the near future. The thought of being pregnant any time soon makes Cassie queasy. Her life isn’t in any kind of shape to bring a child into it. But then again, Joel hasn’t hinted at marriage yet or gone any faster than she’s comfortable with. So maybe she shouldn’t overreact.

After Joel finishes introducing his friends to her, it’s Cassie’s turn. He slings an arm around her shoulders and says, “This is Cassie.”

“Mommy.” Violet tugs on Lydia’s arm. “She looks like Francesca.”

The color drains out of Joel’s face. Since that first night, they’ve somehow managed to go the whole month without the topic of Joel’s ex-girlfriend coming up. Cassie has tried to hint at it, but Joel always deftly changes the subject. It’s clear Francesca is the last thing he wants to talk about, which makes Cassie increasingly curious.

And now out it comes. In the worst possible way.

“Don’t be silly, Violet,” Lydia says. “She’s much younger than Francesca.”

Oh God.

“She’s not...” The color has returned to Joel’s face and now he’s turning red. “I mean, she doesn’t look like...”

Lydia looks amused. “It’s fine to have a *type*, Joel. Just own it.”

Joel glances at Cassie, then back down at his sneakers. Cassie had yet to see a photo of the infamous Francesca, although God knows, she’d tried when she was at his apartment. She did a quick search of the photos on his bookcase, but they were just his parents and his brother.

But when Cassie went to the bathroom, she was certain she could smell a hint of an unfamiliar perfume. Was that the lingering scent of Francesca? It wasn’t like she could ask.

“Are you coming or going?” Joel asks his friends. It’s obvious he’s hoping they’re going so he and Cassie can be alone.

“Just arrived,” Pete says.

Joel’s face falls, which seems to amuse Lydia. “Poor you,” she says.

Pete elbows his wife. “You’re going to join us, right, Joel? We’ve been dying to meet this new woman of yours.”

“Girl,” Lydia corrects him under her breath. They all pretend not to have heard her.

“Uh,” Joel says.

Pete grins at Cassie—his dopey smile is a stark contrast to his wife’s icy gaze. “Come on, Cassie. We promise we won’t bite.”

Cassie and Joel exchange looks. “Of course,” she says. “We’d love to join you.”

As if she had a choice.”

If Cassie and Joel had been alone, they would have gone through the park in a leisurely way with their hands linked. But now Joel is staying a respectable two feet away from her at all times, standing only just close enough that she can hear him when he speaks loudly. He’s really freaked out by his friends showing up. Is he ashamed of her? Ashamed that he’s dating a girl ten years younger than him? One who doesn’t look like she’s walked out of the pages of *Vogue* for a day at the zoo?

Or is he embarrassed that his new girlfriend is apparently a dead ringer for his old girlfriend?

Or maybe she doesn’t want to know.

Violet is remarkably well-behaved. Lydia barks commands at her every minute. *Violet, haven’t you been riding that turtle statue long enough? Violet, if you’re going to touch the glass, please hold out your hands for me to sanitize. Violet, please walk at a faster pace—you’re with adults.* Cassie doesn’t see Lydia as the sort of person she could ever be friendly with. Anna, on the other hand, sticks close to Lydia at all times, observing her as if for cues on how to be a proper mother. Every few minutes, the two of them whisper secrets to one another.

Cassie would bet every cent she doesn’t have that they’re talking about her.

After an hour has passed, Cassie is more than ready to leave. She’s trying to send cues to Joel that she wants to go home. She glances at her watch no fewer than five times and yawns loudly twice. She’s sure he’s going to suggest going

home at one point, but then instead, he says, “Hey, how about lunch?”

How can she refuse?

They find a café that sells horribly overpriced zoo concession food. Cassie has no appetite, but she grudgingly tells Joel to get her a hotdog. The three men take Violet with them to get the food while the three women stay behind to hold the table. Cassie would have liked to get in the line with the men, but Lydia links arms with her and practically drags her to the table.

She has a bad feeling Lydia wants to get her alone.

As Anna settles down at the table, she places a hand on her stomach and her brown eyes widen. “Ooh, that was a big kick!”

Lydia laughs. “It only gets worse, my dear.”

“How far along are you?” Cassie asks, happy to talk about something besides herself.

Anna beams. “Five months.”

“How about you, Cassie?” Lydia focuses on her like a laser beam. “Do you see children in your future?”

“I, uh...” Cassie swallows hard. “I’m not sure...”

“Joel wants kids,” Lydia says. “That’s for sure. Lots of ‘em.”

Anna smiles. “Oh, yes. I would have thought he’d have a few by now.”

Cassie’s brain is spinning. If Joel wants kids so badly, why didn’t he marry Francesca and have some? Did she not want kids? Is that what broke them up? Why won’t Joel ever talk about her?

“Anyway.” Lydia waves her hand. “You have plenty of time to decide. You’re *so* young.” She narrows her eyes. “How old *are* you, anyway? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Twenty... seven.” It’s not entirely a lie. Her birthday is in... well, nine months. Right around the corner.

But there was no point in lying. Lydia laughs and exchanges looks with Anna. God, she's not *that* young. It's not like she's *sixteen*, for crying out loud.

Cassie glances over at the line for food, willing it to move faster. "I wonder what's taking so long..." She forces a smile. "I could have cooked my own hotdogs by now."

Lydia arches an eyebrow. "Oh, do you cook?"

The answer to that is a hard no. Cassie cooks, but only stuff that comes out of a box. "Not... really."

Lydia lets out a sigh. "I'd kill for one of Francesca's meatballs right now."

Cassie thinks back to her first date with Joel, when he'd reacted so strangely to her request for Italian food. Maybe that was why. "Oh, she... cooked a lot?"

Lydia gives her a look of disbelief. "You have to when you own a restaurant, don't you?"

Francesca owns a restaurant?

The question pops up on Cassie's lips, unbidden: "Where is the restaurant?"

Lydia and Anna exchange looks. Immediately, Cassie wishes she could take back the question. She doesn't need to know where Francesca works. It's better if she doesn't.

But at the same time, she's dying for some details about the wonderful Francesca. And Joel won't say a word about her.

"It's in the Village," Anna says. She glances at Lydia. "It's called Angela's Ristorante."

"The food is incredible," Lydia says. "I've been to Italy three times, so I can tell you how authentic it is. It's like being transported to a restaurant in Naples."

Lydia's been to Italy *three times*? Cassie's only left the country once. And that was to go to Canada.

She wonders how many times the wonderful Francesca has traveled out of the country. Or maybe she doesn't want to

know.

Angela's Ristorante. Cassie imagines checkered tablecloths and a candle on every table. She imagines a leather menu written in elaborate script. Dishes with Italian names that the waiters must translate for the customers. A list of specials that changes every night.

"Of course," Lydia adds, "Angela's Ristorante isn't the same anymore, now that—"

"What are you talking about?"

Joel is suddenly standing over them, balancing two hot dogs, a hamburger, and a soft drink in his arms. There's a smile on his lips that doesn't touch his eyes. It's clear he knows exactly what they were talking about, and he's not thrilled about them gossiping about his ex-girlfriend.

"Nothing," Lydia says vaguely. "Just getting to know your *lovely* new girlfriend, Joel. Nothing more."

"Glad to hear it," he says, lowering the food onto the table.

Cassie looks down at the plump hot dog in a bun in front of her and her stomach churns. Her appetite is gone. She'll have to force herself to take a bite.

"I told them to keep the hotdog separate from Violet's peanut butter and jelly sandwich," Joel says. "So it's safe for you to eat."

"You've got a peanut allergy?" Pete asks as he slides in next to Violet.

Before Cassie can answer, Joel says, "Yeah, she does. And when I asked to see her epi-pen a few weeks ago, *she couldn't find it.*"

Pete winces. "Ouch."

Cassie feels her cheeks burn. When Joel asked to see her pen a couple of weeks ago, she was mortified to discover it wasn't in her purse. She must have taken it out at some point and forgotten to replace it. He nagged her until she called her doctor to get a replacement pen. She didn't even tell him the

part where when she found out how much the pen would cost, she almost left the drug store without it.

“You’ve got the new one, right?” he asks her.

“I do,” she says defensively. And even though he doesn’t ask, she rifles through her purse until her fingers close around the syringe. She pulls it out and holds it triumphantly in the air. “Here it is.”

But when she looks up, she sees the judgment in the faces of Joel’s friends. Lydia especially is shaking her head like she can’t believe anyone with a life-threatening peanut allergy would be so dumb as to not carry around their epi-pen. And yes, it was dumb. But Joel didn’t have to bring it up in front of his friends. I’m sure they were all thinking that the perfect Francesca would never have done anything so stupid.

Cassie feels almost painfully stifled by the presence of Joel’s friends. She wishes she could leave. But if she took off suddenly, that wouldn’t make them like her better. She has no choice but to stick it out.

Hang in there. This will be over soon. Eventually, the sun will go down and the zoo will close.

She’s desperate to talk to Joel, but she doesn’t manage to get him alone until after lunch. They’re headed to the monkey exhibit, and she grabs him by the arm to hold him back. Everyone else heads inside, while they stay behind.

Finally—alone.

“Joel,” Cassie says. “I think... I’m going to head out.”

His eyes fly open. “What? Why? I thought we were having fun.”

“I’m just... I’m not feeling great.”

His brow furrows. “What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head.

He looks to the monkey exhibit then back at her. “Was Lydia giving you a hard time?”

He figured it out. He must know Lydia very well.

“Do I really look just like Francesca?” she blurts out.

He sucks in a breath. “Christ, no! Not at all. I mean, yes, you both have dark hair and eyes, but... that’s like eighty percent of the women in the city.”

Cassie isn’t sure if she believes him. After all, Violet thought she looked like Francesca. Little kids are brutally honest. “Do you have a picture of Francesca?”

“Are you asking me if I carry around a photo of my ex-girlfriend?” He snorts. “The answer is no. I don’t have a picture of Francesca. Lydia might have one.” He rolls his eyes. “The two of them used to take a lot of selfies.”

She can’t imagine going up to Lydia and asking to see a photo of Joel’s ex-girlfriend. But there must be a way to see what Francesca looks like. Especially now that she knows where Francesca works...

No. She shouldn’t go to the restaurant. That’s surely a mistake.

“Also,” Cassie adds, “Lydia was telling me how much you want kids... and... well, it freaked me out a little.”

Joel starts choking. He coughs for a good minute, despite not being in the middle of consuming any food or drink. “Jesus. She said that?”

She nods.

“Cassie.” He shakes his head. “We’ve been going out for *one month*. I’m sure as hell not thinking about kids.” He rakes a hand through his hair. “Someday? Well, yes. I’d like kids someday. But I promise you, it’s not at the forefront of my mind when I’m spending time with you.”

He reaches out to take her hand, and she allows him to take it. The anger and anxiety she’d been feeling minutes earlier slips away. He’s right—he’s never mentioned kids before or made her feel pressured in any way.

“Now,” he says, “can we please go see the monkeys?”

She nods. She’s going to do her best to enjoy the day and make the best possible impression on Joe’s friends. She’s not

going to think about Francesca anymore, that's for sure.

Chapter 14: The Ex

It's a beautiful day today.

It could be the last beautiful day of the fall, and I'm taking advantage of it to spend the day outside. Central Park is lovely this time of year, and even if I don't have an apartment overlooking the park, it's even better to be inside the park. Just taking a walk through the many winding paths is a refreshing experience. It's almost cathartic. Every breath I take feels like I'm expelling toxins from my soul.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'm here because Joel is here.

I've been seeing his avatar hovering in the vicinity of the park a lot lately. The fall is winding down, so he and Olive must be taking advantage of the last of the good weather before the depths of winter set in. Two weeks ago, his avatar was in the exact area where a folk music festival was being held. Last weekend, I saw him hovering over the jagged square marked off for the Central Park Zoo. And today he's here again.

It's easy to follow him around the park. It's a big, open expanse of space, but with lots of trees and shrubbery that I can quickly leap behind if need be. I'm getting quite good at tailing him—maybe I can get a job as a private detective.

I don't know why I'm doing this. Why am I torturing myself by watching Joel with Olive, and analyzing how much he likes her? Obviously, he likes her. He's out with her all the time, even though they've only been dating a short period of time. They hold hands. He stares lovingly into her eyes. He has moved on. I should move on too.

But I can't shake the feeling that Olive isn't right for him. She doesn't seem like a nice person. Granted, I've never interacted with her, but I can tell from looking at her. We may never have met, but I know a lot about her. I've watched her business—seen how she treats her customers. I've seen her go home to an apartment that must cost far more than she can

afford. There's something not right about this girl. Call it gut instinct.

He's making a mistake. She's not going to make him happy. Not like I could have.

Today I don't have to watch him with Olive. He's out with the boys. They're tossing around a football in a field, laughing when a throw goes too short or someone fumbles an easy catch. He's with two of his friends—Pete and another man I don't recognize. They're having a good time. I remember when he used to come home from a day out with his friends, looking flushed and happy.

My phone buzzes in my purse. I pull it out and see Nonna's name on the screen. I hesitate for a moment, because I have a bad feeling she's going to yell at me. But I also worry she's calling because she fell and is injured—she's very old, after all. In the end, I take the call.

“Hello?” I say.

“Where are you?” Nonna demands to know. Well, she clearly isn't sprawled out in our apartment with a broken hip.

“I'm... taking a stroll in the city.”

“No!” she snaps. “You are following that boy, Jo-el!”

Damn. How does she know that? “I'm not following Joel.”

“If you want a date,” she says, “my friend Tina from book club told me about her son, Antonio...”

“Nonna...”

“He's a very important man! Tina says all these club owners pay him for protection.”

I frown at the phone. “Are you saying... he's a mobster?”

Nonna is quiet on the other line. “Oh. Do you think that's what that means?”

Oh my God. “Look, I have to go.”

“*Patatina.*” Her tone softens. “You are so beautiful. Stop doing this to yourself.”

“I’m just taking a walk, Nonna.”

“Fine. In that case, you bring home a cannoli. You want to follow that fool around town, you have to bring home a cannoli.”

“Okay.” It’s a small price to pay.

While Joel and his friends are taking a break, the man I don’t recognize wanders over to the hot dog cart. I thought I knew all of Joel’s friends, but I’ve definitely never seen this man before. He has dark hair and eyes like mine and similar coloring to my own, but I don’t think he’s Italian like me—I can spot a fellow *paisano* a mile away. Maybe Greek? Before I can stop myself, I’ve wandered to the hot dog cart and gotten in line behind the man, trying to get a closer look.

“Mustard only,” the man is telling the hot dog vendor. That’s how I like my hot dogs too. “And a bottle of water.”

The vendor prepares the hot dog, and the smell of it makes my stomach churn. I skipped lunch today. I’ve been skipping a lot of meals lately. Even when I cook up a storm, I can’t eat any of it. But at least Nonna is putting on some weight. She was too skinny before.

“That’ll be ten dollars,” the vendor tells Joel’s friend.

His eyes widen, as they should. Ten dollars for a hot dog and water? “Ten dollars?”

The vendor nods.

Joel’s friend looks at the cart, searching for a price that isn’t there. “That seems like... a lot.”

The vendor shrugs. “That is the price, my friend.”

This guy is clearly not a native New Yorker, because instead of calling the vendor on his bullshit, he reaches for his wallet and pulls out a ten-dollar bill. He is going to pay ten dollars for a *hot dog and water*. I can watch no more.

“You are *not* paying ten dollars for a hot dog and water!” I speak up. I address the hot dog vendor, my arms folded across my chest. “Four dollars. That’s fair.”

The vendor narrows his eyes at me. “Five dollars.”

“Four dollars.” I square my shoulders. “Four dollars or else I report you for not having prices displayed on your cart.”

The vendor looks at me like he wants to wrap his fingers around my neck and strangle me. But he knows I’m right. “Four dollars,” he says grudgingly to the man.

The man is looking at me now, a smile playing on his face. Up close, he is much more attractive than he was from across the field. There’s a dimple on his left cheek when he smiles. “And I’ll pay for whatever this young lady wants,” he adds.

My cheeks grow warm. “I don’t want anything.”

“Of course you do,” he insists. “You were in line.”

I can’t tell him that I was only in line to get a better look at him. “You don’t have to pay, I mean.”

“Well, you saved me six dollars,” he points out.

“You want something or not, lady?” the vendor snaps at me.

They’re both staring at me, so I mumble, “Just a water.”

I accept the water grudgingly. I need to get out of here before Joel sees me. I don’t want him to figure out I’ve been following him. If he does, it won’t be good. At the very least, he’ll delete the WhereAmI app from his phone.

“I’m Dean,” the guy says before I can hurry away. He’s still smiling at me with that sexy dimple. Joel used to look at me that way.

“Oh,” I say.

He’s waiting for me to tell him my name. But if I tell him my name, he’ll report back to Joel, and he’ll know it’s me. And then Joel will wonder what I happened to be doing at that exact same place in the park as him.

But before I can figure out what to tell him, the guy Dean snaps his fingers and says, “Sophia Loren.”

I blink at him. “Excuse me?”

He fumbles with his hot dog. “Sorry. I was trying to figure out who you look like. I’m a sucker for old films and Sophia Loren was this great Italian actress from... well, a long time ago.”

“I know who Sophia Loren is,” I say. I love old films too, and *Marriage Italian Style* is one of Nonna’s favorite movies. I bought it for her on DVD several years ago. “I don’t think I look like her.”

“I disagree,” Dean says, his dark eyes serious even though he’s still smiling. “You’re a dead ringer.”

“Well, thank you,” I say, even though it’s not true.

His smile widens. “This is the best day ever. I got to meet a girl who looks just like my favorite actress. And she saved me six dollars on a hot dog and bottle of water.”

“Yes, but then you blew two of those dollars on a bottle of water for that girl.”

“Worth it.” He raises his eyebrows. “But you know what would really make this the best day ever?”

I’m afraid to hear.

“If that girl would let me have her phone number,” he says.

I swallow hard. Dean isn’t really my type, but even if he was, I can’t consider giving my number to a guy who’s friends with Joel. I don’t even know why I’m talking to him.

Dean takes a bite of his hot dog, waiting for me to say something. He’s watching me, and I can’t help but notice he’s got long eyelashes for a man. It makes his eyes look even darker than they are. Smoldering.

“I can’t,” I finally manage.

At first, I think he’s going to argue with me, but he doesn’t. “Okay,” he says. “I understand. But how about just

your name?”

I shake my head.

He clutches his chest with the hand partially holding the water bottle. “Ouch.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “Nothing personal, but...”

“You’ve got a boyfriend.”

“No,” I say. I don’t know why I was truthful about that. I should have told him I had a six-foot-four Navy SEAL boyfriend. That would have gotten rid of him quick. “It’s not that.”

“Then...” He smiles again, popping that dimple. “You’re saying I’m too ugly. Is that it?”

“No.” I can’t suppress the tiniest smile. “It’s not that. At all.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“It’s complicated,” I mumble. “Trust me.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Not even a name? A first name?”

I shake my head again.

“An initial? How about a syllable? I’ll take one syllable. It doesn’t even have to be the first syllable.”

He’s cute. I must be crazy to be turning him away. “I’m sorry.”

He sighs, his smile slipping slightly. “Okay, fine. I’ll have to be satisfied with knowing I got to see Sophia Loren’s doppelganger in the flesh today.”

“I don’t look like Sophia Loren,” I say, but I don’t think he hears me.

He takes one last bite of his hot dog and gives me a funny little wave. I watch him jog off to join his friends, but I duck out of sight before Joel knows it’s me.

Chapter 15: The New Girl

It's been two weeks since Lydia compared Cassie unfavorably to Joel's ex-girlfriend, and it's easy for her to forget it ever happened. Especially when Cassie and Joel are sitting together at a cozy round table in a dimly lit comedy club downtown, sipping on cold beers, his left arm encircling her shoulders. She feels safe with his arm around her shoulders. He's big and warm and she loves the muscles in his chest.

Cassie thinks she might be falling in love. Just a little bit.

But then she thinks about Grandma Bea and Grandpa Marv. The sweet and romantic story about their chance meeting on the subway platform. The way they loved each other for nearly fifty years—so much that Bea was convinced Marv had come back as a ghost to keep her company in the bookstore. Nobody could tell her otherwise.

She doesn't feel that way about Joel. If he were to die, she wouldn't ask that he comes back as a ghost. Just the opposite—the last thing she needs right now is to be haunted by some guy. She knows it's early in their relationship, but she wonders if she'll ever feel that way about him. If someday their grandchildren will say that Grandpa Joel and Grandma Cassie had the greatest love story of all time.

Right now, it's hard to imagine.

She needs to get to know Joel better. They need to take their relationship to the next level. And there's one very good way Cassie can think of to do that.

Cassie never told Joel how long it's been since she's had sex, but she hinted at the fact that it's been a while. He's been really respectful about it, but she knows he's waiting for her to say the word. If she waits another few weeks, he may start pushing. And honestly, she's not sure what she's waiting for anymore.

She's ready.

Joel laughs at a joke from the standup comedian at the front of the room. The comedian is picking on a couple at the front of the room, joking about how much younger the woman is than the man. The word “sugar daddy” is used, and also some less nice words. She’s glad they’re sitting all the way in the back, so the comedian doesn’t notice how much younger Cassie is than her date. She doesn’t want a comedian to pick apart their deficiencies.

“Hey,” she whispers to him.

“Hey,” he whispers back.

His breath smells like the Corona he’s been drinking. She leans forward and presses her lips against his. He’s surprised for a moment, then relaxes into the kiss. He’s a very good kisser. She’s not sure if she’s a good kisser or not, but he does seem to enjoy kissing her.

“Do you want me to spend the night tonight?” she asks when their lips part for air.

He sucks in a breath. “Yeah. Of course. That would be great.”

“Bookland doesn’t open until ten,” she says. “So I’ll have time to get home and change. Do you have an early shift tomorrow?”

“Eight.” He grins at her. “But I wouldn’t care if it started at five.”

She returns his smile. “Okay, then.”

They’re both slightly tipsy when they hop in an Uber, and they arrive at his apartment fifteen minutes later. His apartment is big, considering it’s just him living here—two bedrooms. Cassie wonders if Francesca ever lived here. One thing she can say for sure is there’s no sign of a woman’s touch in this place. The furniture is bare-bones, the bookcases stuffed with medical books—the only sign of luxury is the large, high-definition television in the living room.

“Drink?” Joel asks her as he flicks on the lights.

She kicks aside some old sneakers abandoned on the ground. She thinks they're the sneakers he wears at the hospital, and she imagines bacteria and viruses emanating from the laces.

“Sorry.” He smiles sheepishly. “I would have tidied up if I knew I was going to have company.”

“That’s all right,” Cassie says. She likes the slight disorder of his place. Sometimes Joel seems a little too perfect and put-together—it’s nice to see he can be a slob sometimes too.

“So that drink...?”

She smiles. “I’ll pass.”

He hesitates for only a moment before pushing her gently against a wall and kissing her. She had a feeling they wouldn’t make it to the bedroom before things got started. He can’t wait another moment.

As Joel kisses her, Cassie notices the blinds on his window are open. Even though the lights in the living room aren’t particularly bright, they’re much brighter than the darkness outside. Anyone outside could easily see inside their window.

“Joel.” Cassie pulls away from him. “Let’s shut the lights.”

He catches his breath, his face flushed. “What?”

“It’s just...” She reaches for the light switch. “I want to turn the lights off.”

“But I want to look at you...”

“Yes, but...” She glances at the window. “I feel like we’re on display in here...”

He laughs. “You think someone is spying on us?”

She doesn’t crack a smile. How can she explain to him the continued feeling she’s gotten that someone is watching her? He’d think she’s crazy.

But his eyes soften at the look on her face. “I’ll shut the blinds, okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees.

And she doesn’t feel comfortable until all three blinds in the living room have been lowered, the outside world shut off.

Chapter 16: The Ex

They've been in there for three hours.

I hate that I know that. I hate that I've been sitting at a twenty-four-hour diner right across from Joel's apartment building—the one with a great view of the front door. I hate that I've been sipping coffee, watching the door, waiting to see if she'll come out.

Knowing she won't.

It looks like Joel and his olive-skinned girlfriend are having a sleepover tonight.

I don't know how I ended up here. I was having a perfectly pleasant dinner with a friend on the upper west side. Unfortunately, this friend knows me better as me-and-Joel than just me. My career isn't doing great and I'm living with my grandmother. My whole life was the elephant in the room. We talked a lot about what was good on TV.

And then after it was over, because I couldn't help myself, I clicked on WhereAmI. Joel wasn't home, so on a whim, I went to his apartment building. Looking back, I'm not sure what I hoped to achieve. I was having a good hair day and I looked my best in my sleek black coat and leather boots, and I thought maybe if he saw me...

Well, all that went out the window when I saw Olive.

They looked so happy together. And she looked... well, even on a good hair day, there's no comparison. His arm was slung around her shoulders, and he was holding her close as they laughed over a shared joke. If I came over, it would ruin their night. For that reason, I was almost tempted to do it.

But instead, I watched them walk inside.

And then I waited out here. I thought maybe she'd stay for a little while, and then he'd walk her back down and bundle her into a taxi. But she's not coming down. She's spending the night. I'm sure of it.

“Would you like another cup of coffee, ma’am?”

I look up at the waiter standing over me. He’s young—early twenties at the most. I remember a time when twenty-three didn’t seem painfully young. And now the twenty-year-old just ma’am’ed me. As if this night couldn’t get any worse.

The waiter raises his eyebrows at me in a concerned expression. He’s cute—the sort of boy I might have dated in college. Okay, he’s young, but not *that* young. It’s not like I’m twenty years older. And aren’t young guys attracted to cougars?

Maybe Nonna was right. Maybe a little no-strings-attached fun is what I need.

“Maybe one more cup,” I say.

He nods and hurries off to get the coffee pot. He’s very polite and eager to please. Clean-cut with no piercings. And I like his smile. He’s not as handsome as that Dean guy—the friend of Joel’s—but he’s appealing in his own way.

When he returns with the coffee pot, he leans over me to pour the piping hot black liquid in my cup. I’ll have trouble sleeping if I drink this, but maybe that’s a good thing if there’s a chance I’m going home with this guy.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“My pleasure.”

I lift my eyes until they meet his. I study the gold nametag pinned to his chest. Luke. He looks like a Luke somehow.

“You know,” Luke says, “my shift ends in twenty minutes.”

I suck in a breath. Did he really just suggest what I think he’s suggesting? Even though I’d been idly fantasizing about him, his proposition freaks me out. I couldn’t really go home with a young boy like this, could I? And what if this is all a trick on his part to rob me?

Although it wouldn’t be too clever, considering I know where he works.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. “I’ll just have the check.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

Am I? Spending a night with this boy might help me to forget about Joel. But I have a feeling when I wake up in the morning, I’ll feel even worse than I do now. This isn’t the answer. I don’t know what the answer is yet, but it’s not this.

“Just the check, please.”

Luke’s face drops, but he recovers quickly. “Whatever you’d like, ma’am.”

Another “ma’am.” I was right to turn him down. This kid makes me feel about a hundred years old. I’m not young anymore. Not the way I was when I first met Joel.

There’s no point in sitting here and torturing myself anymore. I need to either do something to get rid of Olive or I need to get the hell over it.

Chapter 17: The New Girl

Technically, it was the Walk of Shame. Cassie had an unplanned sleepover at her boyfriend's apartment and is now traveling back home on the subway in the exact same clothes she wore last night, but she doesn't feel shameful. She had a great time last night—at least, after Joel closed the blinds. He was great, three times over. As she sits on the train between a dozing businessman and a girl with a bullring through her nose, she feels like she is glowing.

Joel left early for his shift, but stuck a note under her phone that said, "Can we get dinner tonight? Also, TAKE A CAB." And then a twenty-dollar bill underneath. She left it behind. She feels uncomfortable about taking any money from him, and in general doesn't like the idea of having sex with a guy and finding money left for her after it's over. He has no idea about the extent of her financial woes—it's not something she wants to talk about. She loves the way he looks at her, and she worries he might look at her differently if he knew the whole truth.

Cassie makes it to her apartment building in forty-five minutes. The gray-white building with the tattered green awning is not nearly as nice as where Joel lives, but it's much nicer than the tenement that Zoe lives in. This cozy one-bedroom apartment was also gifted to her by Grandma Bea in the will, and now she owns it, free and clear.

Grandma Bea and Grandpa Marv bought the apartment after their kids had all moved out. It was their retirement home. Cassie's mother would always remark on how tiny it was. *Don't you two trip over one another?* But Bea and Marv never got in each other's way. They loved their tiny little haven. Whenever Cassie came to visit, Marv would be reading a book in the living room, and Bea would be baking in the kitchen. The apartment still smells like chocolate chip cookies.

Cassie loves the apartment and all the memories she has here. In the next year, she will be forced to sell it. She should

have sold it a long time ago, but she stupidly clings to it. It's home to her. She'll wear the same jacket she's had since high school and eat ramen noodles every night, but she doesn't want to give up her home.

But if she doesn't, it will be taken.

Or worse.

When she gets inside, the first thing Cassie does is go to her mailbox. There was a time in the past when it used to be fun to get mail. Like, when she was ten. Now she holds her breath every time she opens that metal mailbox. The squeak of the door makes her heart jump, like a trained response. But today it's just the usual assortment of junk mail and only one bill for the electricity. There's nothing in the mailbox that spoils her glow from last night.

Mrs. Richards holds the elevator door for her, and she leaps in just before it slides shut, clutching her purse to her chest. Mrs. Richards gives her a pleasant smile, and Cassie can tell the elderly woman is eager to make conversation. She and Grandma Bea used to be friends.

"How are you, Cassandra dear?" Mrs. Richards asks.

"Fine." She pats her hair, hoping Mrs. Richards can't tell she spent the night at a man's apartment. She suspects her elderly neighbor wouldn't approve. "How about you?"

"Oh, the usual." Mrs. Richards rolls her eyes in a way that reminds Cassie of Grandma Bea. "The arthritis in my back is acting up. I'm telling you—don't get old."

Cassie laughs, but it's an expression that always makes her uneasy. *Don't get old*. How do you keep from getting old? Everyone ages, so the only way to keep from getting old is to die young.

The elevator lurches on the second floor like it always does. When Cassie first moved here, she'd have panic attacks in this elevator, which creaked and groaned with every turning of the gears overhead. On top of that, it's about the size of a coffin. Being this close to Mrs. Richards and sharing the small

amount of air in this tiny enclosed space is enough to shoot up her pulse every time.

Mrs. Richards, on the other hand, seems blissfully ignorant of the elevator's potential to be a deathtrap. "Do you have a beau?" she asks.

Cassie forces a smile. "Yes, I do."

"Very good." The older woman nods her approval. "Will you be getting married soon?"

She snorts, although maybe it's not so funny. Despite Joel's insistence that he's not thinking about marriage or kids this early in the relationship, he must be when all his friends are at that point. "We'll see," she says.

They both get off on the fifth floor, and Cassie lets out the sigh of relief she always does when she steps out of the elevator. Mrs. Richards lives in the apartment two doors down from her, so they must both go by Cassie's apartment. So Mrs. Richards is standing right next to her when they get an eyeful of what's written on Cassie's door in crimson paint:

SLUT.

Cassie stares at the word, her body frozen. Mrs. Richards clasps her hand over her mouth and murmurs, "Oh, dear." Cassie knows she needs to do something or say something, but she's not sure what. Someone called her a slut on her apartment door. Someone who knows who she is and where she lives and can get into her building.

And the worst thing is, it's the same color paint that was on the door to her store.

"How horrible," Mrs. Richards declares. "Who would do such a thing?"

Cassie has no idea. Given that until last night, she hadn't had sex in over two years, it's laughable that someone would call her a slut. But there's a part of her that wonders if the person who wrote this slur on her door knows exactly what she did last night. And isn't happy about it. There's only one person she can think of who might feel that way.

Francesca.

Francesca—the faceless but beautiful woman who occupied Joel’s heart before she did. Francesca, who is a great cook and clearly better liked by his friends. Francesca, who is *perfect*.

Mrs. Richards is looking at her differently now, perhaps noticing for the first time that she’s dressed in clothes to go out for the night, even though it’s early in the morning. Mrs. Richards must realize she’s doing the Walk of Shame. And for the first time, Cassie feels ashamed.

“You should call the police,” Mrs. Richards says.

Cassie nods. She needs to call the police. Of course she does.

Except if the police come, they’ll want to go into her apartment. They won’t just stand outside the door, will they? And if they come inside, they might find what Grandpa Marv left behind.

And that would lead to questions Cassie can’t answer.

Anyway, the police never figured out who threw that paint at the door to her store, so how likely are they to solve this crime? Really, Joel is the one she should call. Especially since she’s beginning to suspect Francesca could be the one behind all this.

Cassie reaches into her purse for her phone, prepared to call Joel and tell him what she suspects. But before she puts through the call, she hesitates. She’s suddenly not so sure she wants to share her suspicions with him.

Despite the fact that they’re broken up, Cassie knows that Francesca still occupies an important place in Joel’s heart. He’s oddly protective of her. That’s why whenever Cassie even hints about her, he quickly changes the subject. Not that it would be better if he trashed her—badmouthing the ex is a quality Cassie finds distasteful—but she doesn’t like the way his eyes soften when someone says her name. She would bet anything there’s a small part of him that misses her. She’s

scared that if there's any great love story here, it's the one between Joel and Francesca.

So Cassie puts her phone back in her purse. She doesn't call the police. She doesn't call Joel. She tells nobody.

Chapter 18: The Ex

I regret a lot about last night. I regret that after I left the café, I went to a bar. I regret the amount I had to drink.

I don't know quite how I ended up at Olive's apartment. At one moment, I was chugging a shot of bourbon, and the next, I was standing outside her door. A voice in my head was telling me I ought to go home. Before I did one more thing I would regret.

But a small part of me regrets nothing. I had a decision to make last night. Either to forget about Joel or try to get rid of Olive. And I made that decision.

But I do regret the way my head ached when I woke up this morning. I've been hydrating all day, but when I leave work, the throbbing is still there in my right temple. I'm not twenty anymore—when I drink, I pay for it the next day. All I can think of is going straight home and running a nice, hot bath. Nonna won't bother me.

“Well, well, well, if it isn't Sophia Loren...”

I whirl around at the sound of the voice right behind me on the street. It sounds familiar but I don't put it together until I see the face. It's that guy, Dean, who I met in the park. The friend of Joel's.

He flashes a smile at me that makes his one dimple pop. “What are the chances, right?”

“Right,” I mumble, thinking wistfully about the bath at home.

He arches an eyebrow. “I think fate could be bringing us together.”

“I don't know about that.”

He takes a step toward me. He's wearing a jacket, but underneath he's got on a pair of slacks that look expensive. A

tie peeks out from his collar. He doesn't have on scrubs, that's for sure. I wonder what he does for a living.

"I have to be honest," Dean says. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since that day."

I laugh despite myself. "Well, I'm sure you'll get over it."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

"No." He shakes his head sadly. "I think you should take pity on me. Let me take you out to dinner."

"I, uh..." I look down at my hands. "I'm sorry."

He winces. "All right. I had to try, right?"

He's staring directly into my eyes. His eyes are so dark and intense. In spite of the fact that I don't want to go out with him, I respect his perseverance.

"How about peanuts?" he says.

I blink at him. "Peanuts?"

He jerks his head at the cart a few feet away from us that's roasting up some peanuts. "Let me buy you some peanuts. Not dinner—just peanuts."

I hesitate. They do smell really good. But they never taste quite as good as they smell.

"Come on." He seizes on my hesitation. "It's not a big deal. It's literally just peanuts."

"Okay," I blurt out before I can stop myself.

"Yeah?" He looks surprised I agreed. "Well, great. Let me get them before you change your mind."

So he buys one large greasy bag of peanuts, then we sit down on the steps of a nearby building to share them. The step feels very cold when I first settle down, but the peanuts are warm when I reach my hand into the bag.

"See?" Dean says. "Isn't this great?"

"It's not so bad," I admit.

I reach into the bag to take more peanuts, and this time Dean's hand brushes against mine. I get a little tingle that goes through me, and when I raise my eyes, he's grinning at me. He's admittedly very cute.

"How are the peanuts, Miss Loren?" he says.

"Good," I manage.

"I don't think there's anything better than street peanuts," he says.

"What about street pretzels?"

"Nah, street peanuts win. Street pretzels are too salty."

"I don't think they're too salty."

He laughs. "Really? You don't?"

"Not at all. They're the perfect amount of salty."

"Geez, you have terrible taste then. I thought you're supposed to be some kind of great chef."

My head jerks up. "What? Who told you that?"

The smile vanishes from Dean's face. "Uh..."

I wipe the remains of the peanut dust on my slacks. "I'm going to go."

"No, wait!" He reaches out and puts his hand on my arm. "I'm sorry. Please don't go. I'll explain."

The irritation I'm feeling is outweighed by my desire to hear this whole story. So I stay sitting on the steps and focus my eyes on him. "Fine. Explain."

"After I saw you at the park the other day, I told Joel I met this great girl." He tugs at his collar, giving me another glimpse of his tie. "And he saw you standing there and... well, he told me who you are."

Oh God. I can't even imagine what Joel must have said about me.

"He said good things," Dean says quickly. "He said you were great, but just... not right for him. But he told me where you work, and he said I should..."

I suck in a breath. “So this wasn’t a coincidental meeting?”

He ducks his head down. “No. It wasn’t. I’ve been waiting here for like half-an-hour, hoping to see you.”

“So basically, you decided to stalk me, lie to me, and trick me into having dinner with you?”

He smiles sheepishly. “When you say it that way, it sounds really bad.” He sighs. “Look, I just really wanted to see you again. Is that so awful? I was going to tell you the truth over dinner. Then we were going to laugh about it.”

I let out a sigh of my own. It’s hard to throw stones at Dean for plotting to meet me here. “I’m sorry,” I finally say, “you seem like a nice enough guy, but... I’m going through a lot right now. It’s... it’s not a good time in my life. I’m kind of a mess right now, to be honest.”

Dean’s brow furrows. He’s quiet for a moment, just looking at me. “I could make you forget him.”

I clear my throat. “What?”

“If you gave me a chance,” he says. “I could make you forget all about Joel. Don’t get me wrong—he’s a great guy. But he’s wrong for a woman like you. He couldn’t have made you happy.” His dark eyes stare into mine. “I could. Give me one hour and I’ll have you saying, ‘Joel who?’”

I snort. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

I don’t know what to say to that. But as Dean stares into my eyes, a tiny part of me believes him.

“Listen.” He reaches into his back pocket and yanks out his wallet. He pulls out a little white rectangle, and scribbles something on it with a pen from his coat. “Here’s my card, and I wrote my cell number on the back. I promise I won’t stalk you anymore, if you promise you won’t throw this away in the nearest trash can.”

I can’t suppress a smile. “What if I throw it away at home?”

“Well, that’s okay. Because it’ll be in *your* trash, and when you get the desperate urge to call me at two in the morning, it’ll still be retrievable.”

I finger the card. The first thing I notice is his last name. Pourakis. He’s Greek, like I thought. And then I see the MD after his name.

“You’re a doctor,” I note.

He nods. “Joel and I were premed together in college. I just relocated here from Chicago. That’s why I don’t know what to pay for a hot dog. And I can’t even imagine what other ways street vendors are taking advantage of me without a beautiful native New Yorker by my side to save me.”

I turn the card around and see the number scribbled on the back. I contemplate the digits. “So,” I say, “is that last number a five or a six?”

His face lights up. “A six.”

“Good to know,” I say. I stand up from the steps. “Nice running into you again, Dr. Pourakis.”

He stands up too. He does a little bow with just his head. “The pleasure is all mine, Miss Loren.”

I put the card in the pocket of my coat. Dean Pourakis is a good guy—even though he deceived me, I can tell that much. If I called him, he really might help me to forget Joel. But as I’m walking away, I know I won’t call him.

Chapter 19: The New Girl

Three days after the word “SLUT” is painted over, Cassie passes Francesca’s restaurant on her way back from work. She pretends she’s taking the scenic route, but the fact that she has to take a different subway line and walk two miles to get back to her building belies the lie she’s told to herself. She’s here to catch a glimpse of Francesca.

Angela’s Ristorante is a tiny, hole-in-the-wall sort of place. In a way, it reminds Cassie of Bookland, the way it’s shoved between two larger stores. The awning juts out a couple of feet, colored green, white, and red to celebrate the Italian flag. There’s a space outside which could accommodate a few tables in warmer weather, but now is bare.

Cassie comes as close as she dares, peering through the glass windows. It’s as small as it looks on the outside—cozy and romantic and dark. There are plants on the windowsill, and the greenery nearly obscures her view of what’s inside. She squints, trying to make out a beautiful woman with long, dark hair.

Of course, if Francesca were to materialize, what would Cassie do? Would she march up to her and demand she stop writing slurs on her door? Would she coolly inform Miss Francesca that Joel is *her* boyfriend now, and she needs to move on?

It’s a moot point though. If Francesca is here, she’s out of sight. Probably in the kitchen.

Cassie gives the restaurant (or ristorante) one last look, then turns on her heel and walks away. She shouldn’t have come in the first place—it was silly. She’s embarrassed, but the “SLUT” on her door had shaken her. Then again, she doesn’t know it was Francesca. Cassie knows all too well there are other people who have good reason to lash out at her.

But as Cassie turns the corner of the block, she nearly collides into someone unexpected. Someone she never thought

she'd run into here.

It's Joel.

"Hi!" She feels suddenly breathless. "I... I didn't..."

He's blinking his blue eyes at her, as if he thinks she could be a mirage. "Cassie?"

She swallows. She doesn't want him to know what she's doing here. He can't know she came here to spy on his ex-girlfriend. That's not sane behavior. "Hi," she finally says. "I was just... shopping."

He narrows his eyes at her. "Shopping?"

He knows. Does he know? This certainly isn't a shopping district. But it's not out of the question. There are shops everywhere in the city—surely there are some here. "There's this great shoe store..."

Please don't ask what the name of the store is.

"Oh." His face relaxes. "Okay."

She spends about five seconds being relieved, but then the thought occurs to her: what is *he* doing here? He doesn't work anywhere near here. He doesn't live anywhere near here. Yes, it's suspicious she's here. But it's equally suspicious that *he's* here.

Is it possible he's come here to see Francesca? And if so, why?

Or maybe she doesn't want to know the answer to that question.

"What are you doing out here?" she asks as casually as possible.

His eyes widen. He rubs at his chin. "Also... shopping."

"Oh," she says.

Holy crap, he's *lying*. He knows better than anyone where Francesca's restaurant is, and it's clear he's come here to see her. But she can't accuse him. Because if she did, he'd discover she knows where the restaurant is. And her cover

would be blown as well. All she can do is try to stop it from happening.

“Do you want to grab some dinner?” she asks him.

Out of nowhere, a really sad look comes over his face. He lowers his eyes. “Okay.”

“Do you...” She clears her throat. “Do you know of any good restaurants around here?”

He doesn't hesitate. “No,” he says. “I don't.”

Cassie doesn't know what to think. But if she ever had any suspicion that Joel still has feelings for Francesca, they've just been confirmed.

Chapter 20: The Ex

I'm always in a terrible mood when I talk on the phone with my mother.

Nonna has been mostly supportive, but Ma has been the opposite. While I sit in the corner of Starbucks, we spend the first twenty minutes of the conversation talking about my sister, who has apparently decided to try for a baby. I'm happy for my sister, but at the same time, it's depressing how far away I am from being settled down to the point where I might try for a child of my own.

Joel wanted children. He wanted three, but I only wanted two. It was a disagreement we sometimes had, although he never seemed as bothered as I was by the fact that we wanted different numbers of children. Maybe because he knew we wouldn't be having them together.

Eventually the topic of conversation with my mother settles on me. Namely, on my love life. Or lack thereof.

"Nonna says you never go out on dates," Ma says.

Why can't Nonna mind her own business? "Yes, I do," I say.

"Really? Like when?"

Like never. Like in my dreams. No, not even then.

"You're not getting any younger," Ma reminds me.

"Really? I was under the impression I was aging in reverse."

"Don't be smart. Do you want to end up alone?"

I chew on my lip. "I'm okay, Ma."

"You need to get over Joel. It's over. You need to move on."

She's right. I need to move on. But I can't. Why can't I?

But then again, Joel and I were together for so long. He was my life. I thought he would be my life. I can't just forget the love we had for each other ever existed.

"I've got to go," I tell my mother.

"Okay, but promise me next time we talk, you'll have gone out on at least one date."

"I promise."

"Are you lying?"

"Ma! I gotta go."

"Fine. Love you."

"Love you too."

I hang up the phone, but I was also lying about having somewhere to go. I have nowhere to go.

And then *she* walks in.

Olive. In the flesh. Her cheeks are slightly tinged with pink from the cold and her dark hair is loose and beautiful. She's like the movie star version of me. Like, if they were to make a movie about my life, she could play me.

As she slides off her coat, several men in the room turn to look at her. Olive apparently has that effect on men. She seems oblivious to it, or maybe she's just used to it. I watch her purchase a drink, then go back and sit in her seat, slinging her purse on the back of her chair.

I've never been this close to Olive. I wonder if she would recognize me. Has she ever seen a photo of me? I can't imagine Joel carrying around a picture of me—he wouldn't have done that even when we were together. I was the one who took the selfies. I have dozens of them on my phone—Joel and me, my sister and me, Lydia and me. I even got Nonna in on one of them. It all seems so silly now.

I get up from my seat, daring to get closer.

Olive doesn't look up. She's entirely focused on her drink and her phone. I wonder if she's texting Joel. I draw closer,

hoping to catch a glimpse of the screen of her phone. But it's too hard to see.

I look down at Olive's Kate Spade purse slung over her chair. No, I don't think it's a real Kate Spade, but it's a good knockoff. Her purse is hanging open, and her wallet is sticking out. What kind of New Yorker leaves her purse unattended like that? And not only is her wallet sticking out, but her keys are right on top too. Anyone could take them and she'd never know it.

Anyone.

Hmm.

Am I really considering this? Am I really considering *stealing* Olive's keys right out of her purse? Of all the things I could do to her, it would definitely be one of the most unpleasant. There are a lot of keys on that ring, probably both for her business and her home. If I took them, she'd be screwed.

I look from side to side. Everyone in this store is distracted by their phones or laptops. Nobody is looking at me.

Before I can overthink it, I walk by Olive's purse and swipe her keys. I shove them quickly into my coat pocket before anyone can see. Then I stride out of Starbucks, before anyone knows what I've done. It's almost ridiculously easy.

I can't believe I just did that. The exhilaration is overwhelming. Once I'm safely out of the store, I take out the ring of keys and look at them. I wonder what I should do with them. Toss them in the trash? Into the sewer?

And that's when my eyes fall on the hardware store at the end of the block. There's a neon sign in the window: *We copy keys*.

If I throw them away, she'll change all her locks and get new keys. But if I copy them and slip the ring back into her purse...

I'm not really contemplating this, am I? Okay, I've done some pretty shitty things to Olive. But this crosses a line.

Yet I find myself walking over to the hardware store.

I'm holding my breath as I step inside the store. I don't know what I'm doing. This is really illegal. Stealing keys is bad enough, but now I'm copying them for the purpose of... well, I don't know what purpose yet. And I'm not absolutely certain nobody saw me swiping the keys. What if someone saw it and is calling the police right now? If that's the case, I shouldn't be lingering around the crime scene.

"You need a key copied, Miss?" the man at the counter asks me. He's as old as my father, with thinning hair on his scalp and glasses perched so far down the bridge of his nose, they look like a light breeze might send them flying.

"Uh..." I look down at the set of keys. Am I really going to do this? "Yes."

I guess I am.

"Which one?"

I frown at the keys. Which one is her home key? Is there a label on it?

"Or do you want the whole set copied?" he asks me.

"Yes, the whole set," I agree. "How long will it take?"

"Oh, I bet I can get it done in two minutes flat." He flashes yellowing teeth at me. "You want to time me?"

"That's okay." I slide the keys across the counter. "I'm sure you can do it."

My heart is pounding in my chest as he runs the keys through the cutter. He's very fast, but it almost feels like he's moving in slow-motion. He's on the third key when the door to the entrance jingles, and I look up.

A police officer has just entered the store.

If my heart was pounding before, now it's thumping erratically. Oh God, he knows I've stolen the keys. He's going to arrest me. Joel is going to think I'm a psychopath.

The officer looks at me with dark, penetrating eyes and adjusts the cap on his head. I squirm. I must look so guilty. He

must be able to take one look at me and know I've committed a crime. I'm *committing* a crime. I'm in the middle of committing it right now. Right in front of a police officer!

"Excuse me, miss," the officer says to me.

Oh God. I'm going to jail. He's going to snap handcuffs on me and haul me off to prison. What is my mother going to say about this in the yearly Christmas letter?

"Yes?" I squeak.

Is there any possibility I could just return the keys and wholeheartedly apologize?

"I think you dropped your hat back there," the officer says.

My eyes fall on the dark red hat lying on the ground right by the entrance to the store. It is, in fact, my hat. "Oh..."

"Here, let me get that for you..."

The officer rushes out to pick up my hat from the ground while I nearly drop dead of a heart attack. I thank him, and then he disappears into the store.

My hands won't stop shaking as I take the fresh set of keys from the clerk. He's put them on a ring for me and everything. I can't believe how easy this was. I have stolen and copied an entire set of keys. I will casually drop the originals back into Olive's bag, and she will be none the wiser.

And now I have a set of her keys.

Chapter 21: The New Girl

It's only a week before the end of October when Cassie is sitting at the front desk in Bookland and receives an email from Lydia:

We're having a party at our apartment next weekend. Costumes are mandatory.

Cassie frowns at the email. She's gotten many party invitations over the years, but this doesn't feel like a party invitation. It feels more like when her parents threw a party when she was a kid and she was expected to be there. Like costumes, the party seems to be mandatory.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asks her, looking up from her latest novel. This one has a picture of a shirtless man on it. Why do so many covers have shirtless men on them? Sometimes Cassie wants to scream at Zoe's book: *Put some clothes on, for God's sake!*

"I got invited to a Halloween party," Cassie says.

"Wow, how horrible. Sucks to be you."

Cassie rolls her eyes. "It's being thrown by that obnoxious wife of Joel's friend—the one I told you about. And I think I'm required to go."

She holds up her phone so Zoe can read the email. Zoe throws her head back and laughs so hard, Cassie can see a silver filling in the back of her mouth. Zoe always says she wants to get a gold or silver tooth someday.

"She sounds *lovely*," Zoe says. "What does Joel say about the party?"

Cassie winces. "They're his closest friends. I'm assuming he wants to go..."

Zoe folds a page in her book and puts it down on the counter. “Well, it’s not *so* bad. At least you get to dress up. That’s fun.”

“I can’t afford a costume right now.”

“Don’t be silly. Just go as a sexy cat. I’ve got a leotard you can borrow.”

“I can’t go as a sexy cat!”

“Why not?”

Cassie doesn’t have the energy to explain that when you go to a party with people ten years older than you, it doesn’t look good to put on your sexiest, sluttiest outfit. “I just can’t.”

“So what do you want to dress as?”

Cassie chews on her lip as she mentally reviews some of the costumes she’s worn over years. A sexy pumpkin. A sexy policewoman. Sexy Wonder Woman. She’s been a sexy cat twice.

None of these costumes would be appropriate for Lydia’s party. She needs to dress much classier than that. But what?

After agonizing about it for several minutes, she finally types a reply:

Any costume suggestions for me?

Cassie waits for a couple of minutes before Lydia’s reply pops up on the screen:

What about Cleopatra?

“Lydia says I should go as Cleopatra,” Cassie announces.

Zoe purses her lips as she considers it. “Yes, I like it. And you won’t have to spend much money. I’ve got a white dress that would be perfect. And this great gold belt. Ooh, and I can do your makeup!”

“All right.” Cassie is warming to the idea. “I guess I’ll go as Cleopatra.”

The door jingles as a customer enters the store. Cassie smiles, putting on her game face. But then her game face falls

when she sees a policeman wander into the store. For a moment, it feels like a fist is gripping her throat.

Maybe he's here to follow-up on the vandalism.

The officer is in his thirties, with tight black curls clinging to his skull. He walks right up to the counter and Cassie instinctively takes a step back. She glances at Zoe, who is still holding her book but has lifted her eyes. But unlike Cassie, there's no fear on Zoe's face. There's nothing for *her* to be afraid of.

Cassandra Donovan? You're under arrest.

"Hello there, ladies," the officer says.

"Hello," Cassie croaks.

"I was just wondering," he says. "You got any of those Junie B. Jones books? My daughter loves them."

Her shoulders sag in relief. He's not here to take her away. He just wants to buy some reading material for his kid. But she can't shake the feeling that one of these days, the policeman will be coming here with a warrant for her arrest.

Chapter 22: The Ex

Window shopping isn't working out exactly as I'd hoped.

The concept is that I try on clothing for fun, and then leave without buying anything. This is supposed to help me save money (or at least dig myself out of credit card debt) so that I can eventually *not* be living with my grandmother. But it's harder to do that than I'd thought. Whenever I try on something really sexy, I imagine the look on Joel's face when he sees me in it. And then a minute later, I'm at the cash register.

Why is clothing so expensive anyway? One could easily spend a month's rent at one of these stores without blinking an eye. Especially if you throw in shoes. And it's not like you can buy a dress without buying shoes too.

So that's why today I *will not* buy anything. I don't care how much this sexy green dress highlights my boobs. And I'm definitely not buying these pumps to go with it, no matter how long they make my stubby legs look.

As I hold the green dress in my hand, mentally forcing myself to put it back in the rack, I notice a woman is staring at me. She's wearing a stylish black leather coat and her hair is in a sensible bob, and she's got one hand on a stroller that holds an adorable little boy. The boy's soft blond curls make my ovaries eject three eggs at once. I can *feel* it happening.

I always wondered what the children Joel and I would have would look like. Not blond, certainly. I imagined they would have his blue eyes and my dark hair. Of course, at this rate, I'll be lucky if I find someone to marry in time to have kids. The dream of becoming a mother seems as out of reach as this horribly expensive dress.

The woman keeps staring at me, her brow furrowed, which is making me a bit uncomfortable. At first, I can't figure out why she's looking at me, but then something jogs my memory. From years ago.

“Are you...?” the woman starts to say to me.

“Hi, Melissa,” I say.

It all comes back to me now. Melissa was dating Joel’s med school classmate Greg. They started going out around the same time Joel and I did, actually. But we lost touch after Joel graduated and his classmates all went their separate ways. Melissa and I were always friendly, but not quite friends. Not the way Lydia and I used to be.

“I *thought* you looked familiar!” Melissa’s face relaxes in recognition. “God, it’s been ages, hasn’t it? You look great.”

“So do you.” Melissa is a good fifteen pounds heavier than she was back then, but it suits her. She looks pretty and happy. Whereas I’m too thin, in spite of all the cooking I’ve done lately. My cheekbones jut out so much, I might injure someone inadvertently during a routine hug. And lately, my lips feel like they’re pulled down into a permanent frown.

“So what’s new?” I ask her. I look down at the precious little boy in the stroller, who is currently peeling his socks from his tiny feet. “Other than the obvious, of course.”

Melissa laughs. “Well, you remember Greg, right? We got married a couple of years ago. And little Owen came along last year.” She ruffles the little boy’s hair lovingly. He blows a raspberry and my ovaries shoot out two more eggs. “How about you? You always talked about starting your own restaurant. Are you... did you...?”

I nod. “Yes, I did. A little Italian place.”

“Oh, that’s amazing!” Melissa claps her hands together. “And what about Joel? Are you two still together?”

My stomach sinks. I should have left this store the second I recognized Melissa. “Yes, we are. In fact...” I swallow. “We just got engaged!”

“Oh, that’s amazing!” Melissa’s eyes light up for a moment, but then they drop. I’m not sure what she’s looking at, until I see the line between her gaze and my left hand.

“I’m having the ring resized,” I say quickly, squeezing my left hand into a fist. “But honestly, I’m scared to wear it. The diamond is just *so* big.”

It’s not like Melissa will ever find out the truth. We haven’t seen Melissa and Greg in years. I may as well enjoy telling one person about the engagement I’ll never have. About my diamond that is just too damn big. It’s a victimless crime.

“Greg was just talking about Joel the other day, actually,” Melissa says. “We should have you guys over.” She glances at her towheaded little boy, who has somehow gone from undressing himself to being completely passed out in the last few seconds. “I’ll have Greg send him a text or something.”

My mouth suddenly feels like it’s full of paste. “Wonderful. We would love that.”

She glances down at the dress I’m still clutching in my hand. “I’m heading to checkout. Are you buying that now?”

I shouldn’t. I really shouldn’t.

Oh, what the hell.

I get in line just ahead of Melissa, because she’s still deciding between two pairs of pants. She holds up one of them and sighs. “This one is just the tiniest bit tight, but that will motivate me to lose weight. Right?”

“You don’t need to lose weight. You look great.”

She shakes her head. “I absolutely do need to lose weight. Unlike you. God, what’s your secret?”

Getting dumped so I completely lose my appetite. I don’t say that though. “Good genes, I guess.”

I lay the painfully expensive dress down on the checkout counter along with the shoes. I absolutely shouldn’t be buying these things, but they look so good. If Joel sees me in this dress, he’ll forget all about Olive. I’m sure of it. And you can’t put a price tag on love.

The girl at the checkout counter scans my items as she loudly chews on her gum. I hand over my credit card to swipe,

and she looks at the cash register, her eyebrows bunched together.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Mascolo,” she says. “It says here your card has been declined.”

My mouth falls open. I know I’d been charging a lot of things lately, but not that much. Have I?

I guess you *can* put a price tag on love. And I can’t afford it.

I glance behind me. Is there any chance Melissa didn’t hear that? But no. Her eyes are conspicuously avoiding mine.

“Do you have another payment method?” the girl asks me.

“I... I think I left my other credit card at home,” I mumble. I finger the card she’s handed back to me. “It’s got to be some mistake though. I can’t possibly...”

Well, I *could* possibly.

“I’m sorry,” the girl says again, shrugging helplessly. “But if you don’t have another way to pay...”

“Right.” I shove my useless credit card back into my wallet. “Well, I’ll have to phone the credit card company... figure out how they made such a bad mistake! *So* inconvenient.” I say this last one for Melissa’s benefit. She’s now made herself very busy looking through her diaper bag. “Anyway, Melissa... I better go. I have to call the credit card company and figure out how this could have happened.”

Am I talking too loud? I feel like I’m talking very, very loud. I can’t seem to control it though.

“Yes, of course,” she murmurs.

“Why don’t I have Joel send Greg a text message,” I say.

She nods. “Yes. Perfect.”

But her eyes are on my left hand. She gets it. She knows Joel and I aren’t engaged. She knows everything I told her is a lie. She’s not excited to see me again. All she feels is sorry for me.

Chapter 23: The New Girl

“You look smoking hot,” Zoe declares when she steps back to examine the makeup she’s been applying to Cassie’s face. “Really sexy.”

Cassie looks at herself in the vanity mirror in her bathroom. Zoe found a photo of Katy Perry in the music video for “Dark Horse” and has been using it as a guide for how to do her Cleopatra makeup. And Cassie has to admit that Zoe did a fantastic job. Her eyes are lined with black, with sparkly purple and gold on her eyelids. The dark purple lips complete the picture.

“You did a great job,” Cassie says.

“And the dress fits you perfectly.”

Cassie steps back to look at the white dress Zoe lent her to complete the look. It does fit very well—that’s not the problem. The problem is the huge slit in the side of the dress that goes nearly up to her hip. This is most definitely a sexy Cleopatra costume. It wouldn’t have been what Cassie would wear if she could afford to buy her own costume, but nothing in her own closet fits the bill. If she doesn’t wear this dress, her only other option is sexy cat.

Zoe’s eyes light up. “This gives me a great idea for the bookstore.”

“What’s that?”

“An erotica section!”

Cassie nearly starts choking. “An... erotica section?”

“Sure! Why not? People would love it.” She taps her long black fingernails against Cassie’s sink. “You could have mostly books but maybe also some artwork. I would be happy to paint the artwork.”

Cassie imagines the look on Bea and Marv’s faces if they discovered Bookland had an erotic literature section. Then

again, maybe they'd be okay with it. You could never tell with Grandma Bea. It's certainly not the worst thing that's been done to keep Bookland afloat.

Cassie tugs at the slit on the side of the dress. "It disturbs me that when you look at this dress, the first thing you think of is erotica."

"Don't be such a square, Cass," Zoe says as she draws a square figure in the air with her fingers. "Anyway, I better take off before your Hot Doctor gets here. And remember..."

"Don't do anything you wouldn't do."

"No. I was going to say try to nip a bottle of wine from those rich snobs. Something red, okay?"

After Zoe leaves, Cassie examines her costume one last time in her full-length mirror. Okay, the slit in the side is a little bit high, but it does look great on her. She got a cheap gold crown at the dollar store, and Zoe's gold belt completes the costume. And the makeup is absolutely perfect. With her straight dark hair, she really looks like Cleopatra.

The intercom buzzes to signify Joel has arrived. She buzzes him up, giving her hair one final pat. They agreed not to tell each other about their respective costumes, figuring they would surprise each other. He tried to get her to tell him, joking about how awful it would be if their costumes clashed, but she resisted the temptation... and now she's glad.

He's going to be blown away.

The doorbell rings and Cassie rushes to answer it. She rests one hand on her hip in what she hopes is a sexy Cleopatra pose as she throws open the door.

Joel is dressed as Indiana Jones. She hadn't noticed a resemblance between him and Harrison Ford before, but between the brown hat, the lasso, the brown leather jacket, and the day's growth of a beard, he really looks like Indy. It's super sexy. She's glad he kept his costume a secret. She's going to have trouble keeping her hands off him tonight. She only hopes he likes her costume as much as his.

Joel's eyes go wide at the sight of what she's wearing. At first she thinks he's thrilled, but there's no smile on his face. He stumbles backwards a step, then utters a single syllable: "Oh."

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. All the color has left his face.

"Joel, what's wrong?"

"You..." He rubs at his forehead. "I... I didn't realize..."

Cassie's heart speeds up. "What's going on? You don't like my costume?" She frowns. "Is it... inappropriate?"

"No." He stares down at his brown boots. "That's not it."

She frowns. "So what's wrong? I can't change at this point. It's too late."

Not to mention all the hours Zoe spent getting her makeup perfect. She's going as Cleopatra, period. Unless Joel has a damn good reason to tell her otherwise.

He lets out a long sigh, his eyes still pinned to the ground. "Nothing. Never mind."

It's obvious whatever is bothering him is far from nothing. She's worried he's lying and he thinks maybe the dress is too slutty. But it is what it is at this point.

By the time their Uber reaches the party, Cassie has worked herself up into a panic over her dress. She can't believe she took fashion advice from a woman who apparently paints erotic artwork. This dress is a little *too* smoking hot. She's not going to a college party. She's going to be with a bunch of professionals a decade older than she is. Screw Cleopatra—she should have gone as a librarian. A *non*-sexy librarian.

Oh well, too late now.

It doesn't help that Joel will barely look at her during the entire ride. In the elevator going up to Lydia and Pete's apartment, she tries to hold his hand and he jerks away from

her. She's tempted to hike over to a clothing store and get something new.

But Joel would think she's out of her mind if she did that. The dress isn't that bad. And Lydia will like that Cassie took her costume advice. Maybe Lydia and Cassie will be new BFFs.

The smile on Lydia's face when she throws open the door for the two of them almost convinces Cassie that the worry was all in her head. Unlike at the zoo, Lydia seems thrilled to see them.

"Joel!" Lydia grins at him. Then she flashes an even wider smile for Cassie. "Cassie! *So* glad you could make it."

Lydia looks stunning in an ice-blue Elsa costume that compliments her pale skin tone and blond hair. It's like she was made for that costume. Lydia—the ice queen. Lydia's eyes flicker over Cassie's dress, and she arches an eyebrow.

"Please come in," Lydia says.

Joel practically shoves the bottle of wine he brought into her hands, then makes a beeline for the table with the alcoholic drinks. He pours himself a shot of something before Cassie has even crossed the threshold into the apartment, then downs it in one gulp. And then he pours himself a second.

What the hell?

Lydia tugs Cassie into the apartment. "Let me give you the grand tour," she says.

Joel's apartment is nice, but Lydia's apartment is nothing short of spectacular. It's big and airy with a balcony that gives a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Every piece of furniture is a beautiful antique, and Cassie wonders how Violet manages. But there are signs of the little girl all over the apartment, from the photos of her at every age displayed on nearly every surface to the entire bookshelf carefully organized with children's books. And of course, there's the giant dollhouse in the corner of the room that is close to the dimensions of Cassie's bathroom. When she was a little girl,

Cassie would have given her right arm to have that dollhouse—or that bookcase.

“This is a great apartment,” Cassie murmurs.

“Isn’t it though?” Lydia beams. “It was a steal. Only four million.”

Only four million? Jesus Christ.

Pete wanders over to them, swaying drunkenly on his feet. He’s dressed as somebody from Star Wars—maybe Obi Won Kenobi. When he catches sight of Cassie, his eyes widen much the same as Joel’s did. “Whoa,” he says. Then he laughs nervously.

Cassie isn’t sure what’s so damn funny, but she doesn’t want to be as rude as he’s being. “Hi, Pete,” she says.

She glances over at the table with the alcohol and Joel is still there. Still drinking. What is going on with him tonight?

“You look... nice, Cassie.” Pete’s slurring his words very slightly. He’s drunk. But not as drunk as Joel will be shortly. “Interesting costume.”

“Uh, thanks,” Cassie says.

Lydia shoots Pete a look. “Didn’t I tell you, Peter: only *three* drinks! No more.”

“Sorry, Mommy,” Pete slurs.

Lydia flashes Pete a dirty look, but doesn’t say anything more, which is a wise move on her part. In Cassie’s experience, men who are that drunk are not great people to engage in serious discussions. It’s clear Pete has already surpassed the three drink limit.

Now that they’re done with the grand tour, Lydia leads Cassie over to the drinks table. Joel has finally wandered off, which is a relief. She isn’t sure how much he’s had to drink, but she’s sure it’s a lot. She doesn’t think she can carry him home.

Con’s wife Anna is standing by the drinks, eying the alcoholic beverages somewhat longingly. She looks adorable

in a dress that is essentially a snowman, with the face painted on her upper chest and the bulge of her pregnant belly making up the snowman's belly. Anna starts to smile, but it vanishes instantly when she gets a good look at Cassie.

“Oh,” Anna says, “hi... um, Cassie, right?”

Cassie frowns at her reaction. “That’s right. Cute costume.”

“Oh,” she says again. She puts a hand protectively over her abdomen. “Thanks.”

Cassie waits a beat for a compliment from Anna but it never comes. “How are you feeling?”

“Good...” Anna flips her hair over her shoulder. “But... um, would you excuse me?”

And then Anna gets out of there like Cassie’s got the plague.

Well, that was weird.

Cassie studies the various bottles of alcoholic beverages. She needs a drink like five minutes ago. Lydia picks up a bottle of champagne, pours it into a glass, and shoves it into Cassie’s waiting hand. “That’s a Billecart-Salmon champagne.”

“Oh?”

“It goes for three-hundred dollars a bottle,” Lydia says.

Three-hundred? That means each sip is five bucks.

“It’s a dry wine with a high finish and long intensity,” Lydia explains.

She may as well be speaking in another language. Cassie takes a sip. “Oh.”

“Can you taste the hint of raspberry and almond?” Lydia asks.

Cassie takes another sip. It takes like every other champagne she’s ever tried. “Yes?”

Lydia laughs. “No, you can’t.”

Lydia's laughter cuts into her like a knife. But Lydia's been so nice to her until now... is it really such a big deal she's making fun of her for not thinking this fancy three-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne tastes exactly like the ten-dollar bottle she got for New Year's last year? Yes, it's insulting. But it's not the most pressing problem of the night.

The most pressing problem is how much Joel's had to drink and where the hell he went off to.

Chapter 24: The Ex

Tonight is the night Lydia has her annual Halloween party. In celebration, I am getting drunk.

I'm sitting on the sofa, watching television and drinking vodka and orange juice from a mug. If Nonna walks in on me, I don't want her to know I'm drinking hard liquor. She already thinks I'm a mess.

Lydia's Halloween party is infamous. It's funny because she never calls it a Halloween party, but it always takes place the weekend before Halloween. She calls it a "festive party," which is vague enough. One thing you can count on is there will be lots of expensive hors d'oeuvres and lots of wine. So much wine.

I didn't get an invitation this year. Even after Lydia's little speech about how our friendship needed to cool off, I thought she'd still invite me. But nothing ever came in the mail.

I told myself maybe there's an issue with my mail forwarding. Maybe she wanted to send it but she wasn't sure of the new address. But I was kidding myself. Lydia knew she could only invite one of us, and she chose Joel. And his new girlfriend.

I've been holding onto Olive's keys for two weeks, but I haven't done anything with them. I have these fantasies about trashing her apartment, but would I really do it? That doesn't seem like me. Then again, I've done a lot of things that haven't seemed like me in the last few months.

The truth is that every time I think about Olive, I want to wring her pretty little neck.

Nonna pads into the living room in her pink housecoat and fuzzy slippers. She is wrinkled all the way down to her feet. It's hard to imagine ever being that old. "What are you doing home on a Saturday night?"

"I don't need to go out every Saturday night."

“You don’t go out *any* Saturday night!”

Somehow, I think of Dean’s business card, nestled inside my wallet. I had intended to toss it when I got home, but I didn’t. I didn’t call him either though.

“I have the perfect boy for you,” Nonna declares. “My friend Esther’s grandson.”

I roll my eyes. “What’s wrong with him?”

“There is nothing wrong with him. Why do you say that?” She hesitates. “Well, he is a little bit on the short side. That’s all.”

“How short?”

“Just a little bit.”

“*How short*, Nonna?”

“*Tutto bene*, forget it,” Nonna sighs. Which means he is about four feet tall. “I am just saying, *patatina*, that you need to get out of the house. It’s not healthy for you to be here every night.”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Isn’t there anywhere you can go tonight?”

Well, I’m not invited to Lydia’s party, so that’s off the table. I grab my purse and rifle around until my fingers close around a set of keys. Olive’s keys.

Maybe there’s something I can do tonight.

Chapter 25: The New Girl

Cassie makes an attempt to locate Joel. Presumably, he's somewhere nearby. They're in an apartment, after all, not a museum. But upon scanning the vast living room of this four million dollar apartment, she doesn't see him. Maybe he's disappeared into a bedroom. Would it seem pathetic if she went searching?

Instead, she decides to look at Lydia and Pete's photos. They've got at least a dozen of them on their mantle over what looks like but couldn't possibly be a real fireplace. There's a photo of Lydia and Pete on their wedding day—Lydia radiant in her bridal gown, and Pete looking slightly bewildered next to her. Then one of Lydia pregnant with Violet, followed by a second where she's clinging to a newborn Violet in what appears to be some sort of park.

Where *is* Violet, anyway? Cassie hasn't seen her the whole night. Is she stashed away somewhere? Cassie could imagine Lydia closing the little girl in a room and firmly telling her not to come out under any circumstances. Violet would absolutely listen. Cassie had never met a more well-behaved child.

Cassie's eyes fall on the next photo, which is a group picture that looks like it was taken at a recent Halloween party. Lydia looks stunning as Rapunzel, which seems to suit her just as well as Elsa—there's something about Lydia that screams out beautiful blond princess. Pete is dressed as Han Solo—definitely a *Star Wars* theme with this guy.

And then there's Joel, grinning at the camera, dressed as a policeman. He looks as happy as she's ever seen him. And his arm is around a beautiful brunette who is dressed as...

Cleopatra.

Cassie's mouth falls open as she studies the Cleopatra in the photo. The woman in the costume is absolutely stunning. Really, really beautiful. Dark hair cascading down her

shoulders. An absolutely perfect body. Even her teeth are perfect as she smiles for the camera. She's the most beautiful Cleopatra who ever was. Elizabeth Taylor, eat your heart out.

"That's Francesca."

Cassie backs away from the photo, her cheeks growing warm. Of course, Lydia would catch her ogling this photo, which she suspects may have been put here for her to see. Lydia has a tiny smile playing on her lips.

"Have you never seen a photo of her?" Lydia asks.

"I..." Cassie tries to swallow but her mouth is too dry. "I haven't..."

Lydia shrugs. "Well, that's not surprising. I'm sure he put them away."

Cassie looks from the photo to her own costume. No wonder everyone was so shocked by what she was wearing. Who shows up to a costume party dressed identical to the way your boyfriend's ex dressed? She can't even imagine what was going through Joel's head when he saw her.

She raises her eyes to glare at Lydia. "You told me to dress as Cleopatra."

Lydia lifts an eyebrow. "Did I? I don't recall that."

"I asked you what costume I should wear..." Cassie's trying to sound angry, but to her own ears, her voice sounds pitiful. "And you told me Cleopatra!"

"Perhaps I did." She shrugs. "Well, you have to admit, it's a good idea. Francesca looked so stunning, didn't she?"

Cassie doesn't know what to say to that.

"But then again, she's so gorgeous." A smile plays on Lydia's lips. "She could have been a model if she wanted, but she said cooking just called to her. I must have subconsciously been thinking about how stunning she looked in that costume. Such a great choice."

Cassie tugs at the slit in her dress, feeling more and more self-conscious. She glances around the room and everyone

seems to be staring at her. And whispering. *She's dressed up just like Francesca, Joel's ex.* Two women she doesn't recognize are staring at her, and they simultaneously burst into laughter. Anna and Con are sitting on the couch, and Anna shakes her head in disbelief as she stares at Cassie.

They all think she's crazy.

"Where did you get that dress anyway?" Lydia's lips twist into a smirk. "It's... interesting."

As Cassie looks into Lydia's face, she realizes the truth. The suggestion of the Cleopatra costume was no accident or oversight. Lydia doesn't want Cassie here. She wishes Francesca was here instead. Cassie's not good enough for Joel, and she's not good enough to be in their circle. This act was meant to sabotage her relationship and possibly remind Joel of his last girlfriend, who looked—let's face it—a million times better in her Cleopatra costume.

Cassie's eyes fill with tears. She is done looking for Joel. Before Lydia can get the satisfaction of seeing her cry, she spins around and marches out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

It's only when she gets downstairs that she realizes how weak her exit was. She left without Joel, who is still up there, probably drunk, and will now only hear Lydia's side of things—the crazy girlfriend who inexplicably dressed as his ex-girlfriend, started crying randomly, and left the party for no reason. Moreover, she forgot her coat. And it's far too cold to be traipsing around the city in a sleeveless dress that may as well be made from tissue paper.

Damn it.

Cassie stands in the lobby, contemplating her next move as the doorman frowns at her. She can't take the subway home because she'll freeze to death walking there. She doesn't have the money for a cab or Uber. Her only option is to text Joel and hope he comes down to save her. God only knows what he's doing up there. Maybe if she leaves, they'll invite Francesca and the two of them can have a grand reunion.

“Cassie?”

Cassie whirls around when she hears the voice call out her name. She notices the baby bump first and then the snowman face, and that’s when she realizes it’s Anna. The last person she wants to see right now. Well, not the *last* person, but certainly up there. Along with everyone else at that party.

Except then she notices Anna is holding her coat.

“You forgot your coat,” Anna says, holding it out to her. Now that Lydia isn’t with her, Anna seems much more innocuous. There’s something sweet about her heart-shaped face. Maybe it’s the impending motherhood. “I wouldn’t want you to catch a cold.”

“Thank you,” Cassie mumbles as she yanks the coat out of Anna’s hands.

Anna hesitates, chewing on her lip. “Don’t feel bad about the costume thing. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Yes,” Cassie says tightly, “it was.”

“Okay, fine,” Anna says. “It was... weird. I was shocked when I saw you. But in the scheme of things...”

“Lydia told me to dress as Cleopatra.”

Anna blinks, clearly thrown by this piece of information. “Oh...”

“She wanted to humiliate me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Cassie lowers her eyes. “I’m not so sure.”

“You have to understand.” Anna puts a hand on her round abdomen. “Lydia has nothing against you. She just hates seeing Joel with anyone besides Francesca. Lydia’s very loyal to people she cares about.”

“I’ll say,” Cassie mutters.

“It’s a good quality,” Anna says. “Except when it makes her act like a bitch.”

Cassie looks at Anna in surprise. She thought Lydia and Anna were really tight, and she didn't expect to hear Anna badmouthing her friend. But it oddly makes her feel a lot better about the whole thing.

"Anyway," Anna continues, "don't concern yourself with Lydia. The whole world doesn't revolve around her. You make Joel happy, and that's good enough for me."

Cassie manages a smile. "Thanks. You didn't see Joel, did you? He sort of disappeared the second we got to the party."

Anna throws her head back and laughs. "You don't know? He and Pete got bored of the party, and they went to watch football in the bedroom. My husband's probably in there too. Hell, half the men will be in there by the end of the night."

"Oh..."

Anna raises an eyebrow. "Would you like me to get him for you?"

"No, that's okay."

"You can come back to the party, you know," Anna says. "If you lose the makeup and the crown, you can be... um, a brunette Marilyn Monroe."

Cassie laughs for the first time all evening. "If only I'd thought of that."

"Come on," Anna says. "It'll be fun. And I told Lydia she had to quit being a bitch. She'll be nice to you now. Nicer. She's never nice—I've given up on that one."

"I think..." Cassie pulls on her coat, grateful for the warmth. "I may head out, actually."

Anna's face falls. "Well, okay. I'm sorry to hear that."

Cassie looks at Anna and decides she means it.

"You work at a bookstore, right?" Anna says. "Or... you own it?"

Cassie nods. "A used bookstore."

Anna grins. “You got any books for freaked out mothers-to-be?”

“I think we’ve got a few,” Cassie laughs. “I’d be happy to put some aside for you.”

“That would be great.” Anna beams at Cassie. “I’m glad Joel started dating you. Not that I didn’t like Francesca, but... well, it’s nice to have someone new in our group, that’s all.”

Anna rests a hand briefly on Cassie’s arm, then smiles and pulls away. There’s no way Cassie would consider going back to that party, but it’s good to know at least one of Joel’s friends’ wives is on her side.

Chapter 26: The New Girl

Cassie sleeps fitfully after the party, tossing and turning all through the night. She texted Joel that she wasn't feeling well and decided to head home, and although he did call her to make sure she was okay, she was disappointed he didn't ask to come over to check on her. They've been spending more and more nights together lately, and she finds she misses him on the nights they aren't together. Joel even cleared out a drawer for her last week to fill with her stuff so she doesn't have to feel as much like a nomad.

Of course, then she wondered if the drawer used to belong to Francesca.

At nine in the morning, Cassie is awakened by a text from Zoe. She fumbles for her phone, and stares blearily at the words on the screen. It takes a moment for her to make sense of it, but then she's wide awake.

The store has been trashed. Call me.

Cassie grabs her phone off the nightstand and calls Zoe, her heart slamming in her chest. *The store has been trashed.* She imagines the rows of books, painstakingly arranged, mostly by Cassie but many by Grandma Bea and even Grandpa Marv, shredded and burned.

"Zoe," Cassie gasps into the phone. "What happened?"

"The place is a mess," Zoe says. "Books everywhere. Paint on the carpet. I called the cops."

"Shit," Cassie breathes. "How'd they get in? Did they break the window?"

Zoe is quiet for a moment. "That's the crazy part. The windows weren't broken. The lock wasn't damaged. They just... got in."

Cassie shivers. She feels the same way she did when she found the writing on her door. Someone is targeting her.

Someone who knows where she works. And where she lives. And now can somehow get into her store.

“I’ll be right there,” she tells Zoe.

She’s tempted to hop in a taxi to get there as fast as possible, but she’s thinking about the cost of getting the store cleaned up, so the last thing she should be doing is springing for a taxi. She doesn’t need any unexpected expenses right now.

When Cassie arrives, the sight of the store makes her stomach turn. Just as Zoe described, there are books everywhere. Half the contents of the store have been ripped from the shelves. They are lying on the ground, pages ripped and bent. Cassie steps over volume after volume, a lump growing in her throat. She keeps walking until she gets to the spot where Grandpa Marv keeled over from a heart attack all those years ago. She looks up and sees the word scrawled in black ink on the back of the empty shelf:

SLUT

No. Not again.

The police officer—this one named Rogers—had been taking a statement from Zoe when Cassie arrived. He looks just as young as the last one did—not even old enough to grow a beard yet. And he’s just as jaded and disinterested in finding the culprit.

“Lots of break-ins in this neighborhood,” Officer Rogers says.

Zoe is infuriated. Her entire face turns as pink as the streak she added to her hair a few weeks ago. Well, maybe not quite that pink. “But this wasn’t a break-in. There was no sign of forced entry.”

Officer Rogers raises an eyebrow. “And you’re sure you didn’t leave the door unlocked?”

“I did not!” Zoe says indignantly, although truth be told, a couple of times Cassie has arrived in the morning to find the door hadn’t been locked the night before. “They had a *key!*”

“Well, who else has a copy of your key?” the officer asks them.

“Nobody,” Cassie says. She looks at Zoe.

“Nobody,” Zoe says. “Just the two of us.”

Yet somebody must.

“And look at what they wrote!” Zoe points at the word scrawled on the bookcase. “This is clearly a personal attack. It’s a judgment on our sexual habits.”

Cassie doesn’t appreciate the tiny smile on the policeman’s lips at Zoe’s assertion.

“Listen,” the officer says. “I’ve got all the information. We’ll do our best. But if you never gave out a copy of your key, I’m not sure how someone got in. My advice is to change the locks.”

“Thanks a bunch, Officer Obvious,” Zoe grumbles.

Cassie lifts her eyes and that’s when she sees her peering through the door to the bookstore. Maureen the Homeless Lady. Watching them. An unreadable expression on her filthy face.

Cassie nudges Zoe. “Hey, Maureen is staring at us.”

Zoe tosses a glance behind her shoulder. “Oh. What—you think she might have seen something?”

“Maybe,” Cassie says. She averts her eyes from the door. “Or...”

She doesn’t say what she’s thinking, which is that it always makes her uncomfortable to pass Maureen every morning. She doesn’t like the way Maureen looks at her and occasionally laughs at her. Surely it’s mental illness or possibly drugs, but it still makes Cassie uncomfortable.

Zoe explains about Maureen to Officer Rogers, who obligingly goes out to talk to her. Cassie lingers at the entrance to the store, once again certain Maureen won’t have anything helpful to add. But not *absolutely* certain.

“Ma’am,” Officer Rogers is saying to Maureen. “Did you see anyone enter the bookstore during the night last night?”

Maureen hugs her giant coat closer to her body. “Nope,” she says. “Didn’t see nobody!”

And then she cackles hysterically.

“But you were here all night, weren’t you?” the officer persists. “You must have seen *something*.”

“I didn’t see nothing,” Maureen says with a smile.

Officer Roger does what he can, but it’s obvious this crime won’t be solved today or ever, and definitely not with the help of Maureen. When he’s gone, Cassie gets that now familiar rush of relief every time a police officer leaves her store without snapping handcuffs on her. She had been right not to call the cops about the incident at her apartment—there’s nothing they can do.

Cassie keeps the store closed the rest of the morning, while they try to clean up. It will take ages to get the books organized the way they were before, but they try to at least get the books back in the correct sections. As for the word “SLUT,” Zoe scribbles over it with permanent marker, but Cassie can still tell what it says.

“I wonder if it’s my roommate,” Zoe muses as she toys with the new ring she just got in her lower lip last month. That one looks painful—but they all sort of look painful. “Lindsey totally could have swiped my key and copied it.”

Cassie picks up a sports almanac from the ground. “I think it was aimed at me.”

“You?” Zoe laughs. “You’re not a slut. You’re practically a nun. At least, before Joel.”

Cassie shakes her head. “There was... another incident. At my apartment.”

Zoe’s mouth falls open. “Seriously? What happened?”

Cassie tells her about the paint on her door at home. And how it was the same paint smeared on the door to their shop the other day. Zoe’s eyes widen as she hears the story.

“Holy crap,” she says. “Why would someone do that to you?”

Cassie hesitates. “I have an idea, but... you promise you won’t say anything to Joel?”

“Sure, of course.”

Cassie sighs. “I think it could be Joel’s ex-girlfriend.”

“You think so?” Zoe pulls a face. “Didn’t you say she was some sort of gorgeous successful chef or something? Why would she still be pining over him all these months later?”

“I don’t know, but...” Cassie chews on her lip. “Joel acts really weird about it whenever I bring up her name. I really don’t want to start accusing her of anything to him.”

She doesn’t say what she’s really afraid of, which is that Joel might take Francesca’s side.

Before Zoe can say anything else, they’re interrupted by a rapping at the door. Cassie goes to tell their potential customer that they’re closed for the day, but then she sees Joel peering into the store. She suddenly remembers they agreed to have lunch together. Before.

She opens the door for him after a beat of hesitation. His eyes widen as he takes in the disarray of the store. “Christ, what the hell happened here?”

“We had a break-in,” Zoe says before Cassie can shush her.

“Wow.” He looks around. “The vandals sure did a number on this place.”

“I know.” Cassie’s shoulders sag. “It’s pretty bad.”

“This neighborhood isn’t great,” Joel points out. “Lots of crime. You literally have a homeless woman living a few feet away from your store.”

Cassie’s cheeks burn. It’s not like she chose this neighborhood. Back when Grandpa Marv’s parents opened the store, it was a fine neighborhood. Those were the exact words

he always used. *A fine neighborhood.* “Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Right, of course.” Joel frowns. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” She nods, pushing away her frustration. “Anyway, it’s taking us forever to get it cleaned up.”

Joel is looking at something. She doesn’t know what it is until she follows his gaze to the front desk. She isn’t sure how they missed it before, but the word “SLUT” is written on top of the desk, in the same black marker.

“Jesus,” Joel says.

“We’ll get it cleaned up,” Cassie says, ignoring the tears suddenly pricking at her eyes. “But lunch probably isn’t a good idea.”

“I disagree,” he says. “If you’ve been dealing with this shit all morning, you need a break.”

She just looks at him.

“Come on,” he says. “If you come to lunch with me, I’ll help you guys clean up after we get back. I’ve got nothing to do this afternoon anyway.”

“Your boyfriend is way too nice, Cassie,” Zoe says. “I think you should take him up on his offer.”

Cassie looks around the store, at the mess still on the ground. It would be nice to take a break. And even nicer to have Joel’s help while they’re cleaning this up all afternoon.

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 27: The Ex

I'd like to talk to you.

I spend far too long staring at the text message from none other than Joel Broder. I haven't exchanged words with him since that engineered meet-up at Starbucks. He's been dating Olive for a while now, and I figured I was the last thing on his mind. But apparently, I'm wrong.

I write back: *Sure. When/where?*

He names a location in the city that will be convenient for me to get to after work. It's a bar. He wants to have a drink with me. After all these months, he's asking me out for a drink. This is a very good sign.

I spend hours picking out just the right outfit. I'm not as pretty as Olive and definitely not as young, but I clean up good. I pick out a dark red skirt that shows off my legs and my favorite Wonderbra, and I sock away some makeup in my purse so I can touch up my face right before we meet. At the last second, I spot a gray hair in my right eyebrow, which freaks me out more than I'd like to admit. I had resigned myself to the sprinkling of gray hairs on my scalp that are now concealed by my color treatment. Do I need to start dyeing my *eyebrows* too?

For now, I'll take care of this with a tweezers. But I certainly can't let my eyebrows continue sprouting gray hairs. I have to look my absolute best if I even want to *try* to compete with Olive.

I wonder what happened with Olive. Did they break up? Or did he simply realize how much he misses me and is testing the waters?

When I show up, Joel is already waiting at the bar, clutching a Guinness in his right hand. That's his favorite beer. I still remember all those little details about him. His favorite beer is Guinness. His favorite song is "The Distance" by Cake.

His favorite dessert is apple pie. Does Olive know those things about him? I doubt it.

He's got his phone out, and he's typing something. There's a smile playing on his lips. He looks... well, great. I hate to say dating Olive agrees with him, but something does. He's wearing his green scrubs and his dark hair is tousled, but there's something more youthful about him than I've seen in a long time. Years, maybe. *He* certainly doesn't have any new gray eyebrow hairs sprouting.

He looks so good. So good it makes my chest ache. This is why I haven't been able to date. I can't get this man out of my head.

"Hi." I wave excitedly as I approach the table. "How are you doing?"

Joel lifts his eyes from his phone. The smile drops abruptly off his lips, but then returns. But it's a different kind of smile. Unreadable. "Hi."

He stands up, and suddenly, we're hugging. My body is pressed against his, my face in his shoulder, and his arms are wrapped around me. I haven't hugged Joel in so long, and it feels so damn good. It's like the last eight months just melt away. I want to cling to him and never let go.

"It's good to see you again," I whisper into his shoulder.

"Yeah," he breathes.

When he finally pulls away, we both drop into our respective seats. He flashes that unreadable smile at me again. "How have you been?" he asks.

"Good." I signal the waiter for a drink. "How about you?"

"Good," he says. "Same old."

"Right," I say. "And how's the hospital?"

"Good. The usual."

"Masterson still counseling all the old people about sex?"

Joel flashes me a tired smile. "Yep."

God, it's good to talk to him again. When we're together, the conversation just *flows*. It's like we've never been apart. It can't be like this with him and Olive. It *can't*.

"I heard it's going to snow this weekend," I say.

"Oh yeah?" Joel rubs at the back of his neck. "Wow. That's crazy."

"Yeah, snow in November!"

"Yeah..."

I wonder if we'll be living together again by Christmas. It's not so bad living with Nonna, but there's nothing like sharing a bed with the man you love. And one thing I can say for sure, now that I'm here with Joel, is that I still love him.

The waitress deposits my beer on the table. I take a long swig and get a nice, warm feeling through my whole body. This will be a night I'm going to remember. I'm sure of it.

"Listen." Joel traces a line on the table with a stray droplet of beer. "The reason I asked you here tonight is..."

I lift my eyes, my heart leaping in my chest. Here it is. The words I've been longing to hear. "Yes..."

"It needs to stop."

My eyebrows bunch together at his cryptic message. "What needs to stop?"

Joel lets out a long sigh. "Quit the games. I know what you've been doing. I spent all of yesterday cleaning up the mess you made." He pauses. "I know it was you."

I get a horrible, sinking feeling in my stomach. This isn't what I expected at all. "Joel..."

"She called the police, you know." He lifts his blue eyes now. There's no love in those eyes anymore. How could I have been so stupid—again? He doesn't want me back. Not when he's got *her*. "I didn't tell them your name. But if it happens again..."

"You'll have me locked up."

He rubs his temple with his fingertips. “That’s not what I want. I just want you to stop. *Please.*”

“Do you love her?”

I didn’t mean to ask him that. That’s the last question I wanted to ask. But now it’s out there, and I can tell from his face what the answer is.

“It’s early,” he says. “But... I think... yes. I do. I love her.”

He probably hasn’t even said it to her yet. But now that he’s saying it to me, he might tell her as well. I just helped move their relationship to the next level. You’re welcome, Olive.

“It’s over between us,” he says. “We weren’t right for each other. You’ve got to move on.”

That’s easy for him to say. *He* didn’t have to move in with his elderly grandmother. His life just keeps getting better and better.

“I want you to be happy.” He reaches out to almost touch my hand, but pulls away at the last second. “I really do. But it can’t be with me.”

“Is that why you got your buddy to ask me out?”

Joel blinks a few times. “What are you talking about?”

Either he’s telling the truth or he’s a fantastic actor. I study his face, searching for a flicker of jealousy. There’s none.

“Never mind,” I mumble.

I reach behind my chair, yanking my purse from where it’s hanging behind the seat. “I’ll leave you alone,” I say. “I won’t bother you again.”

Joel’s eyebrows bunch together. “Don’t be angry. Look, stay for dinner.”

“Don’t do me any favors.” I stand up so abruptly, the chair nearly tips over. “Have a great life.”

I feel his eyes on my back as I walk out. He doesn't call my name or tell me to stay. Not that I ever expected him to.

Chapter 28: The New Girl

With one week before Christmas, business at the bookstore is at its peak and things are looking up. Even Maureen the Homeless Woman is looking more cheerful. You wouldn't think a used bookstore would be a place where people would shop for presents, but you'd be wrong. Cassie applauded Zoe's idea to make gift cards. They've sold enough in gift cards that they're in the black for the month of December.

Of course, that doesn't change the overall situation. Not even close.

Cassie is sitting at the front desk in the store, watching the customers milling about, when she hears her cell phone ring within the pocket of the coat hanging off her seat. She pulls it out and checks the number—it's unfamiliar. She hesitates then shoves it back in her pocket.

Ever since the break-in at Bookland, Cassie's been getting phone calls from a blocked number with only silence on the other end. Because the numbers are blocked, she has no way to block the calls. She's been getting at least one every day, sometimes more. A few days ago, a call from a blocked number woke her up at two in the morning. She took her phone to the Apple Store to ask about it, and they said the numbers were probably from a burner phone, which is untraceable.

Zoe says she gets calls like that too, but Cassie can't help but wonder if the calls are related to the break-in. And if Francesca could be responsible for all of it.

"Excuse me?" A boy in his teens with a face full of acne has approached the front desk to speak to her. "Can you help me find a book?"

"Sure!" Cassie loves being asked for help. "What book are you looking for?"

"It's for school," the boy says.

“Okay...”

He scratches at his chin. “It’s yellow, I think?”

“Is it fiction?”

“Yes...?”

Okay, this is going to be a challenge. “Do you know what it’s about?”

The boy shakes his head. “The teacher told us to get it.” He chews on his lip. “I think it has a vegetable in the title.”

“A *vegetable*?”

He frowns. “Or a fruit.”

Cassie wracks her brain, trying to think of titles with a fruit or vegetable in them. *James and the Giant Peach? A Clockwork Orange? The House on Mango Street?*

“Wait!” the boy says. “It was a raisin, I think!”

“*A Raisin in the Sun?*”

“No, that’s not right...”

Damn, she thought she had it that time for sure.

“Something else...” His brow furrows. “*The Angry Raisin?* Is that a book?”

Cassie’s eyes light up. “*Grapes of Wrath?*”

“That’s it!”

Cassie locates a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the back of the store, and the kid goes off happy. She’s about to make another set of rounds to see if any of the browsing customers need assistance when she hears a familiar voice say, “Cassie?”

She turns to find Anna standing behind her, looking extremely pregnant but still stylish in a black knit maternity dress. In the last month, Anna really popped. Cassie remembers how kind Anna was the night of the party. Lydia is absolutely horrible, but Anna is the sort of person she could imagine being friends with.

“Hi, Anna,” Cassie says.

“I told you I was going to bug you for books about impending motherhood, didn’t I?” Anna smiles. “What have you got for me?”

Cassie looks down at her bulging stomach. “I better find something short. You don’t look like you have much time.”

Anna laughs. “More than you think. I’m just abnormally gigantic. And no, I’m not having twins. Thank God.”

Cassie leads her to a small section in the back where they’ve got a volume of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and some other similar books. Anna flips through a few of them, not looking particularly excited. “I’ll take them all, I guess.”

“Oh, great.” Triple sale. And the maternity books aren’t cheap. This has been a great day for the store. “I’ll go ring you up.”

Anna pays for the books with a gold credit card. Cassie recalls that Anna’s husband Con is a doctor, just like all of Joel’s friends. She can’t quite recall what Anna does—hair stylist maybe? But it’s clear from the way she dresses and her credit card that she’s not hurting for money. She can afford to buy three books she might never read.

“By the way,” Cassie says as she slides Anna’s credit card back across the counter to her, “thanks for being nice at the party last month. That meant a lot to me.”

Anna rolls her eyes. “Don’t thank me. Lydia was acting ridiculous.”

“She was, wasn’t she?”

“I think she put up that photograph of Francesca just for your benefit,” Anna says. “It was the first time I’ve seen it up there, anyway.”

Cassie’s frowns, remembering the photograph. “Francesca really was very beautiful in that picture.”

Anna is quiet. “Well... yes. That’s true.”

Cassie’s stomach sinks. She’d been hoping Anna might say it was a spectacular photograph of Francesca and she

really looks like an ugly cow. But it's obvious that's not the case. It's stupid to even think it.

"Does he talk about her much?" Cassie blurts out before she can stop herself. "I mean, when I'm not around?"

Anna's eyes fill with sympathy. "Not anymore. You shouldn't... I mean, that's all in the past."

"Yes, but... how do you compete with someone that perfect?"

"Well, he did break up with her, so..."

Cassie raises her eyes. All this time, she'd been under the impression that Francesca ended the relationship. "I didn't know that. Do you..." She lowers her voice. "Know why?"

Anna puts a hand on her belly. "No. I mean, that was between the two of them. He was vague about it." She hesitates. "But I remember he said he felt like she was dishonest with him about certain things. Things she hid from him. That really bothered him."

Things she hid from him.

What will Joel think when he finds out what Cassie's been hiding from him?

She sighs. "I'm sorry. Is it completely inappropriate that I'm pumping you for information?"

"A little." Anna laughs lightly. "But I can't blame you." She's quiet for a moment, holding her palm against her abdomen. "Look, I shouldn't say this, but the truth is, I never liked Francesca."

Cassie's heart speeds up. She can see a customer trying to get her attention out of the corner of her eye, and Cassie *never* ignores customers, but she needs to hear more about this. Now. "Why not? Why didn't you like Francesca?"

Anna hesitates. "I... I shouldn't." She bites her lip, her eyes darting around. "She wasn't a nice person though. And honestly? Sort of nuts."

Is she the sort of person who would call me over and over, and then hang up?

Cassie is suddenly desperate to tell Anna everything. About the crimson paint. The slur written on her door. The break-in at the bookstore. Everything. She has a feeling Anna will know what to do. Or maybe she can offer some advice on what to tell Joel.

“I always thought she was a little off,” Anna admits. “Even before she—”

“Miss, I need help!” An old woman has approached the counter, looking peeved at being ignored. Unfortunately, Zoe is on lunch break.

“Okay, sure,” Cassie says hastily. She can’t afford to upset any customers, especially when business is finally on the upswing. “Just one second.”

“I better get going anyway,” Anna says. “I’ll see you later, Cassie. Thanks for the books.”

Cassie curses to herself as she watches Anna leave. All Cassie has heard for the last several months is how wonderful Francesca was. Anna is the first person who had a negative word to say about her. But she has a feeling Anna isn’t going to have time to get coffee in the near future, considering she’s got a baby about to pop out of her.

Cassie’s phone rings one more time. She doesn’t have to check the screen to know it’s a blocked number.

Chapter 29: The Ex

It's a Friday evening, and I'm sitting on the sofa, eating chicken parmigiana with Nonna and watching the news.

The good news is the chicken parm came out perfect. The breading is crispy and the chicken is moist.

The bad news is... well, I think it's fairly obvious. A woman my age should not be spending all of her evenings hanging out with her elderly grandmother, cooking chicken.

"That ABC news anchor is very handsome, isn't he?" Nonna announces out of nowhere.

I look at the screen, where a man with golden blond hair and gleaming white teeth is delivering a story about a deadly five car collision in the Bronx.

"I guess so," I say.

She nods at the television. "You should go out with *him* maybe."

I stare at her in disbelief. "Him? The *ABC news anchor*?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Uh, because I don't know him?"

"You just camp yourself outside the news station until he comes out," she says, rubbing her palm over her chest. "Girls do that all the time. Nothing wrong with it. How else are you supposed to find yourself a husband?"

I've already nearly gotten the police called on me for stalking Olive. I don't need to throw a news anchor into the mix.

"I think I'll pass," I mumble.

Nonna rubs at her chest. "I am just saying, *I* have a more exciting social life than you do."

I can't disagree with her. Nonna has spent her retirement joining clubs and socializing. Everyone loves my grandmother.

“I’m taking a break from dating. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Tomorrow night, I am inviting Mary from my knitting circle and her son.”

“Then I won’t be here.”

Nonna rubs her chest again. “So stubborn.”

I frown at her. “Why do you keep rubbing your chest?”

“I’m not rubbing my chest.”

“Yes, you are.”

She rolls her eyes. “Just some heartburn from your delicious dinner. Nothing to worry about.”

I sit up straight. From my many years of dating Joel, I’ve heard him describe enough stories of heart attacks that my radar immediately goes up. He told me once that women don’t have typical heart attack symptoms, so sometimes it’s harder to identify.

“Are you short of breath?” I ask her.

“No.”

“Is there pain radiating down your left arm?”

Nonna gives me a look. “It’s just heartburn. Stop worrying.”

But then she rubs her chest again. And winces.

“We should have it checked out,” I say. “Does your doctor have an after-hours line?”

“Doctor?”

I stare at her. My mother mentioned that Nonna didn’t like going to the doctor, but I’m shocked that she doesn’t even have one. How do you live to be so old without having a doctor? “Nonna! You don’t have a doctor?”

She waves a hand at me. “I don’t need a doctor. I lived this long without doctors. They just give you medicines that make you sick.”

“That’s the opposite of what a doctor does.”

“Says you.”

But then she winces again. I’m not sure if it’s my imagination, but she seems to be breathing a little fast. I don’t know what to do. Nonna is so damn stubborn—she could be having a heart attack in front of me, and she wouldn’t let me take her to a hospital.

“I’m going to call 911,” I decide, reaching for my phone on the coffee table.

“If a paramedic comes into my home,” she says, “I am going to hit him over the head with a frying pan.”

I don’t doubt that she would.

If I were still dating Joel, I would call him and ask him to examine her. She would let him, because he’s my boyfriend. But that’s off the table now, obviously. After our conversation last month where he accused me of terrorizing his girlfriend, I can’t even ask him as a friend. Especially not on Friday night, when he’s surely with Olive.

But there’s one person who might come.

I reach into my wallet and pull out the white card. I never got rid of Dean’s card with his phone number scribbled on the back. Although at this point, I’m sure he’s assumed I’m not calling him. And on a Friday night, he’s surely busy.

I look up at Nonna. She’s still rubbing her chest. Does her face look flushed?

Screw it. I’m calling Dean.

The second I punch in the number, my heart leaps in my chest. It rings once, twice, three times... I’m about to give up when I hear Dean’s familiar voice on the other line: “Hello?”

This is so awkward. I never should have called him. He probably won’t remember me at all. “Um... so... I’m sure you don’t remember, but we met at the park a couple of months ago when you were buying a hot dog and—”

“Sophia Loren!” He sounds thrilled. “I can’t believe it’s you! I’d nearly given up hope.”

“Yes, well...” I clear my throat. “The thing is...”

“You haven’t been able to get me out of your head and you want me to rush over right now and ravish you.”

“No.” I cough and look over at Nonna. “I’m sorry, I know this is awkward, but... my grandmother is... well, she’s having chest pain and she doesn’t have a doctor... and she says if I call 911, she’ll hit them on the head with a frying pan...”

Nonna has been watching me this whole time without comment, but at the mention of her, she pipes up, “Who are you calling? Who is that?”

“Just a second, Nonna,” I hiss at her.

“No doctors,” she says firmly.

“Fine!” I sigh and return to my conversation with Dean. “Anyway, I was just hoping... well, I thought maybe...”

“You want me to come to your house and check out Nonna.”

My cheeks grow warm. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Not at all,” he says. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Where do you live?”

“Bensonhurst.”

He groans. “Okay, give me thirty minutes.”

I give Dean directions to the apartment and hang up the phone. Nonna is still watching me, but she doesn’t say anything until I hang up.

“Who was that?” she finally asks.

“A friend of mine.”

“A friend who’s a doctor?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

Nonna considers this. “Is he handsome?”

This time I don’t have to hesitate. “Yes.”

“Well, he’d better be.” She shakes her head. “Or else I’m hitting him on the head with a frying pan.”

Thirty-one minutes later, there’s a knock at the door. I’ve been so worried about Nonna that it didn’t even occur to me to doll myself up for the handsome doctor showing up at my door. And honestly, I don’t care. I called him here because I don’t want my grandmother to have a heart attack and die. Not to flirt with him.

But on the other hand, I wish I weren’t wearing sweatpants and a tank top.

Dean’s face lights up in a grin when he sees me, in spite of my attire. Or maybe because of it. “Miss Loren,” he says. “A pleasure, as always.”

“Come in,” I mumble, barely able to look him in the eyes.

“Where’s Nonna?”

I jerk my head in the direction of the living room. “She’s in there. She looks okay, but she keeps rubbing her chest. I’m really worried.”

“Let Dr. Pourakis take a look.”

Dean strides past me into the living room, where Nonna is still in her chair. She hasn’t keeled over yet, and she took the time to get a frying pan from the kitchen. It’s lying next to her on the chair. She raises her eyes when Dean approaches her, and in spite of everything, a smile spreads across her face. “Okay,” she says. “I won’t hit you on the head.”

Dean cocks his head, confused. “Mrs. Mascolo?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Dean.” He sits down on the sofa next to her. “Your granddaughter asked me to come by because she’s a little worried about you.”

“She worries too much.”

“Maybe. But she’s right to worry when it comes to chest pain.”

Nonna’s shrewd eyes look Dean head-to-toe. “You Italian?”

“Greek.”

She smiles. “Does your family call you Dino?”

He laughs at that. “Not too often. Sometimes. But you can call me Dino if you want. If you’ll tell me how your chest is feeling.”

“Burning. Just a little heartburn. Like I said, nothing to worry about.”

He asks her a few more questions, which she answers with surprising cooperation. She must think he’s really handsome. I watch Dean’s face, trying to figure out how worried he is. He finally reaches into the black bag he brought with him and pulls out a stethoscope.

“Can I have a listen to your chest?” he asks.

She looks between the two of us. “You can listen if you ask my granddaughter on a date for tomorrow night.”

Dean laughs while I avert my eyes. “I’ve been asking her, Mrs. Mascolo! She won’t go out with me.”

“Well, she will if she wants you to listen to my chest.”

Both Dean and Nonna are staring at me now. I feel like my face is on fire, but I quickly nod my head. I’ll do anything for Nonna to go along with this exam.

Dean listens to Nonna’s chest for what feels like forever. When he pulls the stethoscope off his ears, he’s smiling. “Mrs. Mascolo, you’ll outlive us all.”

She snorts. “Who wants that?”

“Good point.” He puts the stethoscope back in his bag. “Listen, the pain in your chest might be heartburn, but I can’t be sure without doing some tests.”

“No tests.”

“Mrs. Mascolo...”

“No tests, Dr. Dino.”

“Okay,” he sighs. “How about this. Come to my office Monday morning. Let me hook you up to our EKG machine and that’s all we’ll do. It’s like a snapshot of your heart. It won’t hurt and it will take less than five minutes. What do you say?”

Nonna lifts her eyes to look at me. “And you’ll go out with him on a date?”

“Yes!” I wrap my arms around my chest. “I will! Nonna, please just go!”

“Fine.” She nods. “I’ll see you Monday morning, Dr. Dino.”

They iron out a few more details and then shake on their agreement to meet on Monday. It sounds like he’s going to come in early just to see her. I don’t know why he’s being so nice to some old woman he just met, but he’s charming as hell around her. If I don’t agree to go out with him, I’m pretty sure she will.

I walk Dean out of the apartment and over to the stairwell after he’s done. I’ve given up on being embarrassed about my sweatpants and the fuzzy slippers I put on. It is what it is.

“So...” Dean says when we get to the stairwell. The dimple on his cheek pops as he offers a crooked smile. “I think she’s right. Probably just heartburn. But we have to check it out.”

“Thank you so much for rushing over,” I say. “I mean it. I can’t thank you enough. I was terrified.”

“Well, that’s the benefit of knowing a cardiologist.”

I frown at him. “You’re a cardiologist?”

He laughs. “It says it on my card, you know.”

I didn’t notice that. All I remember is his name. “Well, thank you. Again.”

I can't help but think of how Nonna insisted I should say yes if he asked me out again. I agreed because I wanted her to cooperate. But the thing is, if Dean asked me out right now, I'd be very tempted to say yes either way. I should be head over heels for a guy like him. I don't know what's wrong with me.

"You don't owe me," Dean blurts out.

I blink a few times. "What?"

He clears his throat. "What I mean is, you don't have to go out on a date with me just because your grandmother said you had to. And you don't have to go out on a date with me because you feel like you owe me for helping you."

"Oh." Disappointment jabs me in the chest. "So does that mean you don't want to go out with me?"

It must be the sweatpants

He snorts. "You've *got* to be kidding me. You think I'd come all the way to Brooklyn on a Friday night for a girl I don't like? I'm a nice guy, but not *that* nice."

"But..."

"But I don't need Nonna to force you to go out with me." He sets his dark brown eyes with the long eyelashes on my face. "I can win you over without resorting to blackmail."

I manage a smile. "Awfully confident, aren't you, Doctor?"

"Hell yeah." He returns the smile. "Call me when you finally realize how awesome I am, okay?"

"Okay."

As he pushes through the door to the stairwell, I feel a pang of regret. I should ask him to stay. I should tell him I want to go out with him tomorrow, and it has nothing to do with what he did for Nonna. I should tell him to kiss me right here, right now, in the hall of my grandmother's apartment building in Bensonhurst.

But I don't.

Joel has really done a number on me.

Instead, I watch Dean leave. I watch him sprint down the stairs, only turning once to wave goodbye. And he calls out to me, “Make sure Nonna comes to see me on Monday!”

Chapter 30: The New Girl

Two weeks ago, Joel's friends Anna and Con announced the birth of a baby boy named Andrew. When Joel called to tell Cassie about it, he sounded more excited than the new parents were.

It worries Cassie. When she first brought up the prospect of kids with him, he acted like she was being silly—they were only together a month, after all. But now they've been together nearly six months. And furthermore, Joel made an offhand comment about wanting to be a dad before he turned forty. Except he's now thirty-seven. That means he's got three years to get engaged, get married, knock his wife up, have her spend nine months pregnant, and then have a baby. Working backwards, that means he's got to get engaged...

Like, now.

Maybe he's flexible on the whole forty thing.

Right now, they're at Con and Anna's apartment, paying a visit to the baby. Cassie likes their place better than Lydia and Pete's four million dollar apartment—this place is cozier and the furniture looks like you can use it without having a panic attack that it could be damaged. Anna herself looks tired. She usually seems so put together—it's surprising to see her in a camisole and leggings with two milk stains on her blouse that match those on the sofa. There are purple circles under her eyes and new white hairs are threaded through her messy ponytail.

"How are you doing?" Cassie asks her. "Are you sleeping?"

"I sleep when the baby sleeps," Anna recites, as if it's her mantra.

Joel grins at her. "I'd be happy to take him off your hands for a little while."

Anna obliges by gently handing him the bundle in her arms. Joel is so careful with him, settling down on the couch and peering down at the little face. “Look how tiny he is, Cassie.”

Anna giggles. “Somebody’s got baby fever.”

God, no.

Con comes out with a bowl of popcorn and sodas for everyone. He rests a hand on his wife’s shoulder, “Anna, if you want to go lie down, I’ll keep Cassie and Joel company.”

Anna yawns. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. You’ve been up with Andrew since four. Go to sleep—it’s my shift now.”

But just before Anna leaves the room, Con reaches for her hand, and for a moment, the two of them hold hands and look into each other’s eyes. What Cassie sees pass between Anna and Con in that moment reminds her of the love she used to see between her grandparents. Lydia and Pete are always bickering, but Anna and Con never do. They’re always staring at each other like they’re the only two people in the world. They have a *Wuthering Heights* sort of love.

Cassie looks over at Joel. *Do I feel that way about him?*

She has no idea. All she can think about is that watermelon-sized baby coming out of her orange-sized hole.

“She really needs some sleep,” Con tells us once Anna’s disappeared into the bedroom. “Andrew barely sleeps at night... it’s like hour-long stretches. And because I work during the day, she’s been taking on most of it.”

“How about a night nurse?” Joel says.

“That’s what I said.” Con frowns. “I tried to insist, but she wants to do it all on her own. But... well, I’m glad she’s taking a nap now, at least.”

Cassie makes a fuss over baby Andrew. He is awfully cute, after all. It’s fun to hold him without all of the responsibility of taking care of him. When he poops his diaper, she just hands him over to Con, who takes care of it expertly,

before handing him back with a fresh diaper. She's having a great time when the doorbell rings, and when Con goes to answer it, she hears Lydia's voice in the hall.

Great.

"You didn't tell me Lydia was coming," Cassie hisses at Joel. She looks down at the infant in her arms and suddenly wants desperately to pass him off to someone else. And get the hell out of here.

Joel, who is messing around with his phone, looks up and shrugs. "I didn't know they were coming."

It's been awkward around Lydia, to say the least. Cassie has socialized with her once since the night of that horrible Halloween party, and the two of them barely looked at one another. Cassie cringes as the clip-clop of Lydia's heels grows louder.

Lydia seems equally surprised to see Cassie and Joel sitting in the living room when she comes into the room with Violet in tow. She gives Cassie a look. "Oh... it's you."

Given everything, that's the best Cassie could have hoped for.

"Hi, Lydia," Cassie says tightly.

"Hi, Francesca," Violet says.

Oh God.

"No, Violet," Lydia says. "This is *Cassie*. Not Francesca. Definitely not Francesca. Not even close."

Glad she clarified that.

Lydia eyes Cassie, her eyes sharp. "What are you *doing*?"

Cassie looks around, baffled. What *is* she doing? She's holding Andrew. She's not dangling him by one leg. She's not feeding him beer.

"You're not supporting the baby's head," Lydia snaps at her. "Haven't you ever held a baby before?"

Cassie glances around, searching for Con, who seems to have vanished. He's probably napping with his wife. The two of them both looked like they could use it.

Lydia lets out a sigh and shakes her head. "Here, give him to me. Before you seriously hurt him."

Lydia sits down next to Cassie on the sofa and practically yanks little Andrew out of her arms. It wasn't like Cassie desperately wanted to hold him, but she doesn't appreciate the insinuation, especially in front of Joel. She's certain she was holding the baby's head. After all, Con saw her hold the baby and didn't say she was doing anything wrong.

Andrew had been fussing in her arms, but now that Lydia's holding him, he seems to settle. She picks up the pacifier on the table and slides it between his lips. "There," she coos to the little boy. "Isn't that better?"

Cassie's cheeks burn. "I thought he was okay."

"Don't worry about it," Lydia says. "Not everyone is maternal."

Violet sits down next to her mother, snuggling up against Lydia's slim arm as she peers down at the baby. She's wearing another one of her beautiful but completely impractical dresses, but she doesn't seem to mind—she's not itching or pulling at it. "Mommy," Violet says. "May I hold him?"

"Yes, you may," Lydia says patiently. "But you have to be very careful. Can you do that?"

Violet nods solemnly.

The little girl sits back on the sofa and Lydia gently hands her the little bundle. Violet treats the baby reverently, cradling him in her arms.

"You are doing a fantastic job, Violet," Lydia coos. "You are supporting his head perfectly."

Lydia flashes Cassie a pointed look when she says it. To emphasize the point that a five-year-old is able to hold a baby more competently than Cassie can.

Cassie looks at Joel to see if he's caught any of Lydia's veiled insults. He's still busy on his phone. He looks like he's texting someone. And as his phone vibrates with a received message, a smile plays on his lips.

Could he be texting Francesca?

She's not sure why that thought pops into her head. Except that somehow, Francesca is everywhere. She can't even visit one of his friend's apartments without being mistaken for her.

But he's done with Francesca. For a long time.

Isn't he?

Chapter 31: The Ex

I am in extended family hell.

Nonna has invited her younger sister for dinner, who came with her two children (both of whom are my parents' age), and we've also got *their* kids here. I didn't approve any of this—Nonna simply announced they were all coming this morning. I was pretty annoyed. Just because Nonna is a social butterfly, that doesn't mean I want to be. Why won't she just let me wallow in my own loneliness and misery?

Then again, it's her apartment, so what can I say?

I've spent the entire afternoon cooking. I've got three pots going on the stove, while my cousin Nick is running his mouth off and also getting in my way.

"I wanna see the great chef at work," Nick says.

I shoot him a look. "I don't usually have an audience."

"Right. Isn't it great?"

Nick is a couple of years younger than me, with greasy, close cropped black hair, a perpetual five o'clock shadow, and a New York accent several orders thicker than mine. He was a cop for several years, but I heard from the Mascolo grapevine that he left the force.

"Well, it smells good," Nick says. "Your boyfriend is a lucky guy."

I stare down into the pot of red sauce. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"No? Weren't you always with that Joe guy? The doctor?"

"Joel," I mumble. "And... we broke up."

"Aw, that sucks. Sorry." He pulls a face. "My girl dumped me a few months ago. But I always say, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone new. Am I right?"

"Maybe," I sigh.

I still haven't called Dean. I've picked up his card a hundred times, but I never manage to dial that number. And now it's been long enough that I worry he's moved on. A guy like that doesn't stay single long.

But he is taking good care of Nonna. She's had a few appointments with him, and he's basically acting as her primary care doctor, since he's the only one she'll see. He even convinced her to take a medication for her blood pressure.

I don't know what's wrong with me.

"...and the business seems to be picking up, but a lot of it is word of mouth, ya know?" Nick is saying.

I lift my eyes. "Huh?"

Nick pauses mid-sentence and laughs. "You okay there? You seem a little spaced."

"I'm fine. Sorry."

"I was just saying," Nick says, "being a private detective is great work when I can get clients. But it's been slow so far. So if you got any friends who need someone investigated..."

My heart leaps in my chest. "You investigate people?"

He grins at me, showing off his one gold incisor. Classy. "You got someone you need investigated, cousin?"

I chew on my lip. I've had a bad feeling about Olive from the moment I first laid eyes on her. There's something... off about her. I don't have any proof aside from a gut feeling, but I just can't shake it. I *know* there's something going on with her. I'm not imagining it.

Also, if I have Olive investigated and she's clean, it will help me to move on.

"Yes," I say. "I do. But... I can't really afford..."

"Hey, we're family." Nick holds up his hands. "I wouldn't charge you nothing. But if you think I do a good job, you spread the word. We got a deal?"

I nod. "Deal."

“Okay, so who’s the broad you want me investigating?”

“How do you know it’s a woman?”

“Just a feeling I got. Am I right?”

“You’re right.”

And then I tell Nick everything. It’s difficult, because it’s not like Nick is the most sensitive guy on the block. But if he can help me, he’s got to have all the information.

On his part, he’s a real professional. He gets out a mini-pad from his jacket and scribbles down all the information I tell him. He doesn’t crack a smile or make any smartass comments. Little Nico’s really grown up.

Except right as we’re wrapping things up, Nonna walks into the kitchen.

“What is going on here?” she demands to know. “What are you talking about?”

I duck my head down. “Nothing.”

“Is this about Jo-el and his silly girlfriend?” she asks.

“No,” I say quickly, although Nick’s face gives it away.

“This has gone too far!” Nonna rants. She gets up in my face, pointing a wrinkled finger at me. “That wonderful Dr. Dino wants to take you out, but you only obsess about Jo-el. I have had enough! Enough!” She glares at Nick, who cowers by the refrigerator. “And you do not encourage this. She needs to move on!”

With those words, she spins on her heel and marches out of the kitchen. Leaving me and Nick in awkward silence.

“Uh,” he says.

“I’m sorry about that,” I mumble.

“Not the craziest outburst I’ve ever seen in this family. Don’t worry.”

“She’s probably right.” I lower the burner before my sauce gets scalded. “Everything I told you... just forget it. I need to move on.”

“You sure? Because I’ll still do it.” He grins at me. “I’m not afraid of Aunt Angela.”

I lean against the counter, considering his offer. I’ve been so paranoid when it comes to Olive, maybe hearing she’s clean is just what I need to move on. Nonna’s wrong about this one.

“Okay,” I say. “Do it.”

Chapter 32: The New Girl

“You’re really not going to tell me where we’re going?”

Joel is being super secretive about where he’s taking Cassie. He picked her up at Bookland, then said he had this brilliant idea but wouldn’t say what it was. At first, it was sweet and romantic. But ten blocks later, it’s getting old.

He gives her hand a squeeze. “One more block.”

“You said that last block.”

“I was off by a block. But it’s definitely on the next block.”

“This better be good, buster.”

Cassie’s phone rings within her purse. Joel doesn’t say anything while she fumbles around, searching for her phone. Her stomach sinks when she sees the blocked number.

For a while, it seemed like the calls had stopped. For almost two weeks, she didn’t get any. But then they started again with a vengeance.

The silence on the other end of the line was bad enough, but a few days ago, that changed. She picked up the phone and a husky female voice hissed in her ear: *Whore*.

Cassie knows she should change her number. But that will cost money she doesn’t have. And she’s already spent enough changing the lock on the door to the bookstore.

“Who is it?” Joel asks her.

“Nobody important,” Cassie says as she silences the phone and shoves it back in her purse.

Zoe insists she needs to tell Joel about the phone calls. And about her suspicions about Francesca. He might be able to talk to Francesca and get her to stop. But Zoe didn’t see Joel’s face when they were near Francesca’s restaurant. Zoe doesn’t see the way he reacts every time Francesca’s name comes up.

“All right!” Joel announces. “Here we are!”

And it’s...

A hardware store?

“Why are you taking me to a hardware store?” Cassie asks. She doesn’t understand this at all. Does he want to build something with her? Like... a coffee table? Or a dog house? Why on earth would they be going to a hardware store?

He tugs on her hand. “Come on.”

She follows him inside, thoroughly perplexed at this point. The smell of sawdust hits her and she lets out a sneeze. It doesn’t start to become clear what he’s thinking until they get to a counter in the back with a sign over it that says, “Copy Keys Here.”

Hang on a minute...

“Joel?” Her heart skips in her chest. “Are you...?”

“I want you to have a copy of my key,” he says with a grin. “Because... I love you.”

He just said he loves her. No man has ever said that to her before, and she hadn’t imagined it quite like this—right in the middle of a hardware store with sawdust tickling her sinuses.

Ever since they visited Anna’s baby the other day, she senses Joel has been eager to ramp up their commitment. Even if he denies it, he wants to get married. He wants to have a baby. Maybe not this year or next year, but soon. Very soon. Before he’s forty. And he’s thirty-seven. So.

Is she ready for that? And is Joel the man she wants to do those things with?

She likes Joel a lot. Hell, she loves him. Kind of.

Joel notices the look on her face, and his smile falters. “We don’t have to move in together,” he says quickly. “I mean, if that’s what you wanted, then... but anyway, that’s not what this is. I just want you to have my key because...”

I love you.

He's not going to say it again without her saying it. But the message is clear: he wants this relationship to move forward. Now she has to figure out if that's what she wants too.

"I love you too," Cassie says.

His shoulders sag with relief. He pulls her close to him and kisses her. "I know you're at my place a lot, but I want you there even more."

Cassie feels a smile tugging at her lips. "And I suppose you want a copy of my key too."

"Only if you want me to have it."

"I do."

Actually, it's exciting. She's given out her key before, but usually just to a friend like Zoe in case she got locked out. Moving in with Joel would have terrified her, but this feels like the right level of commitment. They're moving forward, but not too fast. She loves him, but that doesn't mean they're making babies yet.

Within minutes, Cassie has a copy of Joel's key. She digs into her purse to get out her keyring, but out of the corner of her eye, she sees a face at the door to the hardware store.

It's Maureen the Homeless Lady. Dressed in her usual puffy coat with two scarves. Her face nearly pressed against the glass.

Cassie startles, taking a step back. Her heart is beating fast in her chest as she steps behind a display of wood, trying to conceal herself. What is Maureen doing here? They're really far away from the bookstore—far from Maureen's home. Doesn't she need to stay by her stuff, to guard it?

And why is she staring into the hardware store?

"Are you okay?" Joel squints down at her. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No, I just..." Cassie peeks out at the door to the hardware store. Maureen has vanished. "Nothing. Never mind."

As Cassie digs her keys out of her bag, she decides she's been letting her imagination run wild. There's no reason why Maureen shouldn't be allowed to take a walk around the neighborhood. She's just feeling paranoid after everything that's happened lately.

Chapter 33: The Ex

I don't know what I'm doing here.

It's a mistake. I sense it's a mistake as I walk through the glass doors to the cardiology practice where Dr. Dean Pourakis is employed. I've waited too long—Dean won't want to see me. At the very least, I should have called. I don't know what I was thinking, showing up like this.

I didn't plan it. I was walking by the practice, where I've escorted Nonna once before, and I was seized with the urge to see Dean. It isn't until I get to the front desk, where a blond girl ten years younger than me and far prettier is manning a computer that I entirely lose my nerve.

"I'm sorry," she says to me. "We're closing for the day."

"Oh, I'm not..." I clear my throat. My cheeks feel suddenly warm. "I'm not a patient. I just... but if you're closed..."

I glance behind me at the vacant waiting area. It's clearly been the end of a long day, judging by the way every chair in the room is slightly askew and magazines litter the seats. Still, the room gives off a sterile air that I appreciate in a cardiology practice.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Miss Loren."

I jerk my head up and see Dean standing at the door to the back. He's wearing a white dress shirt paired with a dark blue tie, and he looks so freaking handsome, my knees feel weak. I cinch my coat tighter around my waist. "Hello, Dr. Pourakis."

He takes a few steps toward me, his dark eyes trained on my face. He isn't quite smiling, but he doesn't seem upset either. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The attractive secretary is staring at us, waiting to see what I'll say. The whole room has gotten very quiet all of a sudden.

“My grandmother forgot her glasses,” I blurt out.

He raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, at her appointment yesterday,” I say. Even though Nonna’s glasses are almost certainly perched on her nose as we speak. “We’ve been looking for them and she thinks she left them behind.”

“I see.” Dean looks at the blonde. “Taylor, did you find any glasses yesterday?”

So Taylor lugs out a paper box she’s got under the desk that apparently serves as their Lost and Found. There’s quite a lot in there, including a scarf, an assortment of non-matching gloves, a bracelet, a hearing aide, and *five* pairs of glasses. After all this, I’m tempted to claim one of them as Nonna’s, but I would feel bad if someone came here to retrieve their glasses and couldn’t because I took them.

“Do you want to take a look in the examining rooms?” Dean asks me.

Oh God, I don’t want to prolong this charade any further. But if I don’t look, he’ll know this was all a big farce. So I force a smile and nod gratefully, and follow Dean to the back.

He takes me into his first examining room, where he says he spends most of his time. It’s bright and clean, and smells vaguely of his aftershave. I crouch down near the examining table to search for the missing glasses while Dean watches me.

“Did Nonna really lose her glasses?” he says.

I straighten up, glad my skin tone prevents red from showing up on my cheeks. “What? You think I’m making this whole thing up?”

“A little. Yeah.”

How dare he? Even though he’s absolutely right. “So why would I come here and search for glasses that don’t exist?”

“Maybe you’re nuts.” He grins crookedly and that dimple makes an appearance. “Or maybe you couldn’t stop thinking about me and wanted to see me again.”

“Please,” I snort.

“You know,” he says, “I’m free tonight...”

My heart gives a little leap. “You are?”

That warrants a full-on grin. “Oh, so you *are* interested...”

I shrug. “Well, I don’t have anything to do, so...”

“Actually...” He snaps his fingers. “I do have plans tonight.”

I glare at him. He did that on purpose. I can tell by the way he’s grinning at me. “Well, whatever.”

“Would you like to come with me?”

I narrow my eyes. “To do what?”

“Dancing lessons.”

Say... what?

“My little sister is getting married in a few months,” he explains. “And I’ve been informed my dancing skills leave something to be desired. So Phoebe has been kind enough to purchase a ballroom dancing lesson for me and threaten me with what will happen if I fail to show up.”

I laugh. “You let your baby sister boss you around?”

“Hey, it’s her big day. I don’t want to ruin it with my inferior dancing skills.” He straightens out his tie. “So what you do say? You in?”

“Will they let me join at the last minute?”

“Sure. Why not?”

I hesitate.

“Come on,” he says. “You don’t want all this time you spent pretending to search for Nonna’s glasses to be for nothing, do you?”

He has got a very good point.

An hour later, Dean and I are at a dance studio in midtown. He had to sweet talk them into letting me join in—apparently, they already had a professional partner lined up for Dean. But after he slides a couple of bills across the table to them, they seem happy enough to let me participate.

“You’re very smooth,” I murmur to Dean as we join the other couples on the dance floor. A giant mirror lines the far wall, so we can observe how terribly we’re dancing.

“You may not be saying that after you see me dance.”

Our teacher is a woman named Oksana with an East European accent. She’s wearing a skintight black shirt and short skirt and has a tiny, perfect body. I wouldn’t have blamed Dean for checking her out, but he doesn’t. He keeps his dark eyes focused on me as we stand facing each other, awaiting further instructions.

“Now, ladies!” Oksana barks at us. Wow, she has a loud voice for someone so tiny. “Put your left hand on your partner’s shoulder and hold his hand with your right.”

I step toward Dean. God, he smells nice. And the way he’s smiling at me is making it slightly hard to breathe. I put my left hand on his shoulders, feeling his firm muscles under my palm—he must work out. My right hand slides into his. His hand is large and warm in mine—touching him makes my heart beat faster.

“Men!” Oksana says. “You put your right hand on your partner’s back.”

And now his hand is on my back, warm against the thin fabric of my shirt. We are so close right now. I can see the dark hairs of his five o’clock shadow. Our eyes meet briefly and he winks at me.

God, he’s really sexy.

Oksana strides over to the stereo and flicks on a song. *Every night, I hope and pray, a dream lover will take me away...*

“Now,” Oksana announces, “we learn to cha cha cha.”

Dean wasn't joking—he's not a great dancer. He doesn't have a natural sense of rhythm, but he's trying really hard. He's counting the beats under his breath to keep in time with the music. But at the same time, we're having a great time. I wouldn't have thought ballroom dancing lessons could be this fun.

“One... two... three...” he recites to himself.

I giggle. “You are such a nerd.”

“Of course I am,” he says. “I'm a cardiologist. We're all nerds. But at least I'm a cool nerd.”

“What makes you cool?”

Dean reaches out his arm and spins me. “I like hip hop music. Is that cool?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I have a Twitter account. I've forgotten the password, but I've got it.”

“Not cool.”

“I've got a tattoo.”

I lean my head back so I can look at his face. “Do you really?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Where is it?”

“Ah.” He grins at me. “Now, that's a secret. You'll have to go out with me again to find out.”

“Sorry then,” I say. “I'm still not convinced you're cool.”

“How about this?” He leans forward slightly so that I can smell the mint on his breath. “I am a fantastic kisser.”

“Well, that's what you *say*...”

“That is God's honest truth.” His eyes meet mine. “I'd be happy to prove it to you if you'd like.”

“Maybe,” I say enigmatically. And he winks at me.

For the entire rest of the class, all I can think about is kissing him. The way he's looking at me, I suspect he feels the same way. We manage to fumble through the last twenty minutes, then he asks me if I want to go grab a bite to eat.

"That would be great," I tell him. "I'm starving."

"Anything in particular you like?"

"Anything is fine."

Except when I get outside, I realize I wore the wrong shoes for a two-hour dance class. Blisters have formed on my toes and every step has become painful. I don't want to seem like a wuss though, so I don't say anything. Physical pain is easy to deal with.

"You okay?" Dean squints at me at the end of the first block.

"Yeah, fine."

"You're limping."

He caught me. "My feet are killing me," I admit. "But... I want to go with you to eat."

He takes a step back, looking me over thoughtfully. Then he turns so his back is facing me. "Okay, hop on."

I laugh. "What?"

"Your feet hurt, and it's another three blocks."

"You don't have to carry me!"

"I want to."

"I'm not light, you know."

"Are you suggesting I'm not strong enough to carry you?"

I remember the feel of his tight muscles under his shirt when I had my hand on his arm. He's perfectly capable of carrying me. "Okay, fine."

So he does. I ride on his back the rest of the way to the restaurant. He barely grunts as he lifts me—this guy is *strong*. At some point, I lean my head against his back. This could be one of the nicest nights I've ever had.

When we get to the restaurant, Dean lowers me carefully to the ground. My feet throb as they touch the ground, but it's not too bad. I'll be fine as long as I'm not walking anymore.

"Thank you," I say.

"My pleasure," he says.

Chapter 34: The New Girl

Cassie is dreading going out to dinner with Lydia and Pete. She's hinted to Joel multiple times that Lydia is not her favorite person, but she suspects that's part of the reason he set up the dinner. Pete is his best friend, and he wants them to all get along.

Fat chance. But fine, she'll try.

Lydia picks the restaurant, which is a French place on the west side. Cassie has never eaten French food in her entire life. Unless French fries count, which she suspects they don't. She takes a peek at the menu online and her heart skips a beat when she sees the prices. She can't even pretend to offer to pay.

"Listen, Joel..." Cassie rubs her nose in the taxi on the way to the restaurant and snuffles loudly. "I'm feeling kind of sick. Maybe I shouldn't go. I don't want to infect them."

He rolls his eyes. "Nice try, Cassie. Come on, it won't be that bad."

In response, Cassie tugs at her skirt. This one is black and falls below her knees, but she's still worried it's too short and Lydia will find a way to belittle her. Although even if she were wearing the perfect outfit, Lydia would still find a way.

The French restaurant is one of those hole-in-the-wall places that you might miss if you didn't know exactly where it was. The cab deposits them right in front, and Cassie feels like a woman walking to her own execution as she heads to the door. It doesn't even help when Joel takes her hand. Well, it helps a little.

Lydia and Pete are already sitting at a table in the back of the French restaurant when they arrive, although the place is so dark, it's hard to tell. The lighting is mostly by candle—their table has three candles on it of varying heights. But Cassie is still able to see Lydia's stunning light blue dress that perfectly complements her skin tone.

Pete offers a crooked smile as he rubs at his already messy dirty blond hair. The first two buttons on his shirt collar are undone, and Cassie suspects those two buttons are driving Lydia crazy. “Good to see you again, Cassie.”

Cassie wonders how Lydia lets him get out of the house like that without brushing his hair. “Hi, Pete,” she says. “Lydia.”

Lydia simply nods and takes a sip from her wine glass.

There’s already a bottle of wine on the table, ordered by Lydia prior to their arrival, and Cassie helps herself to a heaping glass. It’s the only way she’ll make it through this evening. She picks up the menu to study it and finds the prices are even higher than they were on the online menu. She gasps at the dollar figure next to the steak.

“The foie gras mousse appetizer is supposed to be incredible here,” Lydia says as she eyes the menu with her sharp eyes. “We can get it for the table if you’d like.”

Foie gras? That sounds familiar, but Cassie isn’t entirely sure what it is. But she likes mousse, and she wants to be agreeable. “That sounds fine,” she says.

Lydia raises an eyebrow. “Do you like foie gras, Cassie?”

Cassie squirms. “Yes...?”

A smile plays on Lydia’s lips. “What is it?”

A horrible silence descends on the table. Cassie has no clue what foie gras is. She can’t even begin to guess. It could be absolutely anything from a fruit to snails to some other mystery animal she’s never heard of that lives only in France. She eyes Joel, hoping he’ll save her by supplying the answer, but he’s looking at his own menu.

Fortunately, Pete breaks the silence. “It’s duck liver,” he says. “And *I* think it’s disgusting.”

“That’s because you have unrefined taste,” Lydia sniffs.

“Be nice, Lydia.”

Cassie is glad Lydia has redirected her snootiness in another direction, but it's equally painful to listen to Lydia and Pete snipping at each other. They were going at it the whole time they were visiting Anna's baby.

Cassie's phone chirps with a text message from within her purse. She dares to sneak a peek at it, and sees a sympathetic message from Zoe, who had gotten an earful about this impending dinner at work this afternoon.

"It's amazing," Lydia comments, "how some people can't go through even half a meal without looking at their cell phone."

Cassie's cheeks burn as she lifts her eyes from her purse. "I—I wasn't..."

"Don't mind me." Lydia shrugs. "Attend to your business on your phone. Please."

Oh God.

"By the way, Peter," Lydia says. "Can you bring Violet to her lesson tomorrow? I've got to work late."

He groans. "That kid goes to too many lessons. She's only five! What the hell has she got tomorrow?"

"Violin."

Cassie stifles a laugh. "Violet plays the *violin*?"

Lydia lays down her menu to glare across the table. "What's funny about that?"

"Well, because... her name kind of sounds like..." Cassie sputters.

Joel cracks a smile though, and Pete lets out an appreciative belly laugh. "It *is* funny," Pete agrees. "Violet. Violin. Violet violin."

Lydia whips her head around to glare at her husband this time. They haven't even placed their orders yet, and this dinner has already become unbearably uncomfortable. Joel owes Cassie big time for dragging her here.

“The violin was a gift when Violet was born,” Lydia says. “A gift from Francesca.”

Francesca again. Is it possible to interact with Lydia without her bringing up Joel’s ex-girlfriend?

“Who gives a newborn baby a complex musical instrument?” Pete mutters under his breath. Cassie notices his words have gotten slightly slurred. She squints at the wine bottle and notices for the first time how close it is to being empty.

“It was the most thoughtful gift we received,” Lydia says, now addressing Cassie. “We got loads of onesies and toys, but this one was from the heart. You see, it used to be hers.”

Cassie tries to catch Joel’s eye, but he’s staring down at the dark blue tablecloth. “Oh,” she says.

“It was the violin that decided me,” Lydia says. “It’s because of that incredibly thoughtful present that we made Francesca Violet’s godmother.”

Francesca is Violet’s... what?

Chapter 35: The Ex

The restaurant Dean has carried me to is a Greek diner. It's not the dark, candlelit spot I'd imagined—the fluorescent lights on the ceiling are garish and the tables in the booths are too wide for an intimate discussion. But Dean seems to like it, and he has bonded with the host over their mutual Greek-ness within thirty seconds of walking in the door. They shake hands, exchanging a few words in a language I don't understand (Greek?) and then the host leads us to a table in the back. He gives us one last look before walking away, winks at Dean, and says, "*Omorfo korítsi.*"

"What does that mean?" I ask Dean.

"He's promising the waiter won't spit in our food."

I roll my eyes. "Are you fluent in Greek?"

He tilts his head thoughtfully. "Sort of. Not really. My mother says I speak Greek like a kindergartener. But I get by."

"Have you been to Greece?"

He nods. "My grandparents used to live in Alexandroupoli."

"Alexand...?"

"Alexandroupoli." He flashes his white teeth at me. He has really nice teeth—the perfect size for his mouth, and clearly well-cared for but not artificially white. I've always respected a man who takes good care of his teeth. "It's a small city, especially compared to... well, New York. But it's right by the water. Used to be a fishing village. I loved it there."

"You don't go anymore?"

His dark eyes grow slightly distant. "My grandparents died when I was in college, so... no, not since then. I miss it."

I get a sudden image of a future with Dean in which he takes me to this tiny city in Greece and we gaze together out at the expanse of beautiful, shimmering blue water. It's silly

though. This is our *first date*. Why am I imagining trips to Greece?

“How about you?” he asks as the waiter drops glasses of water on the table between them. “Are you fluent in Italian?”

“*Sì*,” I say. “Nonna speaks better Italian than English, and I spent a lot of time with her growing up. She’s the one who taught me how to cook.”

“Ah, yes,” Dean says. “The great chef. I have to admit, I’m curious to taste one of your creations.”

A smile spreads across my lips. “That can be arranged.”

“What’s your favorite thing to cook?”

“My favorite?” I consider the question as I play with my napkin. Dean’s shoe touches mine under the table, but I’m not sure if he realizes it or not. An accidental or intentional touch? “Probably *pasta e fagioli*.”

“What’s that?”

“Pasta and beans.” I grin at him. “It’s a poor man’s dish—I mean, it doesn’t even have any meat—but the way my grandmother taught me to make it, it tastes better than anything in a restaurant. It’s my ultimate comfort food.” I hesitate. “I could make it for you... next time.”

He arches an eyebrow. “So there will be a next time?”

His foot is deliberately touching mine now. There’s no mistaking it. “Yes, I believe so.”

“Good.” He flashes that great smile at me again and his dimple pops. “Also, you need to show me around the city. You’re a native New Yorker, aren’t you?”

I nod. “You said you moved here from Chicago, right?”

“That’s right—the Windy City,” he confirms. He sounds like he has more to say about that, but instead he says, “It was time for a change.”

Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “Bad breakup?”

He blinks a few times, flustered for the first time since I showed up at his office. “Busted.”

Of course, I’m curious to know every detail. Who is this mystery girl in Chicago who gave up a great guy like Dean? Or was he the one to pull the plug on the relationship? Does he ever think of her? Does he stare at her number on her cell phone screen, resisting the urge to place the call?

But I can’t say any of that. Instead, I murmur, “I can relate.”

Dean lifts his water glass in the air. “To something better?”

I clink my glass against his. “To something better.”

Chapter 36: The New Girl

After the revelation that Francesca is Violet's godmother, the dinner goes from bad to worse. Pete and Lydia won't stop bickering. On top of that, they order a second bottle of wine and Pete proceeds to get increasingly smashed. At one point, it gets so bad that Joel reaches for Cassie's hand and gives her a squeeze under the table, because he can see how upsetting it is to her.

Also, it turns out Cassie does *not* like foie gras mousse. It takes all her self-restraint not to spit it out into her napkin.

Just as they're finishing up their meals, Lydia gets a call on her phone. In spite of her snippy comment when Cassie took out her phone, it isn't the least bit surprising when Lydia takes the call.

"Hi, Lucy," Lydia says into her phone. "Is everything okay with Violet?" She listens for a moment. "What about her bedtime story?" Another pause as Lydia clucks her tongue. "*No*. Violet is supposed to read her *own* bedtime story. She knows how to read!"

Lydia rolls her eyes dramatically at the table. "Put her on. I'll talk to her."

With those words, Lydia hops out of her seat and goes to the front of the restaurant to talk to her daughter without the three of us staring at her. It's a relief to have Lydia gone, even temporarily. The tension noticeably lifts.

"It's impressive that Violet can read already," Cassie says brightly.

Pete seems to sober up slightly at Cassie's comment. "Yes, well... Lydia taught her. She worked really hard at it."

Lydia is a big shot lawyer and impressive in her own right, but she never talks about her own career. It seems to Cassie that the biggest source of pride in Lydia's life is her little daughter.

“Anyway,” Pete says, “I’m sorry Lydia was such a bitch tonight.”

“Pete!” Joel glances at Cassie. “Christ. It’s fine. She was fine.”

“Not really.” Pete rubs his eyes with the balls of his hands. “My parents had a brutal divorce, and I never wanted that for my kids. But...”

Cassie realizes at that moment what he’s saying. He’s been trying to make it work for Violet’s sake, but he’s clearly reached the end of his rope. Easygoing, fun-loving Pete will not stay married to a woman like Lydia. Their marriage will dissolve and they’ll share Violet. She feels sorry for Pete, even if it means she won’t have to endure another awkward dinner like this one.

Later that night, Joel escorts Cassie back to her apartment. It’s a long walk back to her place from the French restaurant, but the meal was heavy and it’s nice to walk it off. The night is cold, but not frigid, and Cassie’s leather boots crunch in the soft snow with each step.

“How do two people like Lydia and Pete end up together?” Cassie wonders aloud.

“I never thought they were right for each other,” Joel says. “But he was so infatuated with her. I mean, there are a lot of great things about Lydia. She’s smart as hell, successful, and gorgeous. But their personalities just clash.”

“That’s for sure.”

“I feel sorry for Violet,” he sighs. “It’s going to be a messy divorce, and they both love that girl to pieces. I hope they can figure out a way to work it out.”

Cassie looks at Joel, in his black coat and green hat with the scarf wrapped around his neck. Most of the time, she wonders if they have a future together in terms of marriage and children. But for the first time, she wonders what a breakup with Joel would be like. Would he be cruel? She can’t imagine it, but people are different when they’re angry. She’s never seen Joel very angry.

She wonders if she will in the near future. She wonders how he'll react when and if he learns her secrets. She remembers what Anna said about Joel's motivations for breaking up with Francesca.

Things she hid from him. That really bothered him.

No, Joel can't know the truth.

Chapter 37: The Ex

“I’m sorry, but we close in ten minutes.”

The host sounds regretful as he comes to our table to break the news. I startle and look at my watch. Oh my God, it’s nearly midnight. How did we spend so much time talking? I can’t even remember what we’ve been talking about.

And when we weren’t talking, we were staring at each other.

“I didn’t realize how late it is,” I murmur. “I should get home.”

“I’ll take you home,” he says.

“That’s okay. It’s a straight shot on the D train.”

“The train?” His mouth falls open. “At this hour? No way. I’ll drive you home.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Of course I do.” He snorts. “What am I doing paying five hundred dollars a month in garage fees if not to have a car to drive my date home late at night?”

I didn’t want to say it, but I wasn’t thrilled about taking the subway at this hour. But I can’t spare the cost of an Uber back to Bensonhurst. So now that I’ve politely protested once, I’m going to let him drive me home.

Dean pays the check without letting me look at it, then we head back to his sensible green Toyota Camry, which is still parked by the dance studio. I’m glad he doesn’t have a Porsche or Ferrari or some other vanity car, even though I’m sure he could afford it. My feet are feeling better now, and I walk close to him, our shoulders nearly touching. The street is dark and deserted, but I feel absolutely safe with Dean next to me.

“Are you going to take any more dance lessons?” I ask him.

“No,” he says thoughtfully. “I think I’ve humiliated myself enough, haven’t I?”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Liar.”

“You just need a little practice, that’s all.”

He stops short on the street, and I stop too. He’s standing very close to me—as close as he was when we were dancing together. “So now that you’ve seen what I’m bad at...” He raises an eyebrow. “Can I show you what I’m good at?”

I lift my head toward him. “Confident, aren’t you?”

“About things I’m good at? Yes.” He takes a step closer to me. “I’m a damn good doctor. And I’m a damn good kisser. And a shitty dancer.”

“I’ll say.”

“Is that a yes?”

I hesitate for a split-second, then nod and tilt my lips up toward his. It’s almost imperceptible, but he takes the cue, lowering his own lips nearly only mine, stopping a hairbreadth short. And then I lift my head to bridge the gap.

I had thought Dean must have oversold himself, but he has not. He puts one hand on my back to draw me closer, his other laces into my hair, and his lips and tongue do fantastic things to me. It is the best kiss I’ve ever had. No, that doesn’t express it strongly enough. It’s the best kiss I’ve ever had or could imagine ever having again for the rest of eternity. It’s the sort of kiss that makes me wonder what all those other things I’ve been having until now were, because they weren’t kisses. *This* is a kiss.

When our lips finally part, I’m shaking. My knees are rubber underneath me, but when I look at Dean’s face, it’s a mirror of my own. “Wow,” he breathes.

“Yeah,” I manage.

“That was...”

“Yeah.”

He brings his lips over to my ear and whispers, “There’s one other thing I’m really good at. I’d love to show you sometime.”

I’d love to see. Although if the kiss is any gauge, I’m afraid it might kill us.

I could have woken up the next morning with Dean in my bed, but he was absolutely a gentleman and didn’t even suggest it. But before I left his car, I got one more incredible kiss. It took all my self-restraint not to drag him upstairs by his collar. Nonna would have cheered me on.

“I’ll text you tomorrow,” he promised.

“You better,” I said.

Now last night is a just a lovely memory as I rub the sleep from my eyes and stretch my arms over my head. I look over at the empty space in the bed next to me, wishing Dean were there. I imagine him with his dark hair mussed from sleep, his muscular chest barely concealed by a thin sheet. And that tattoo, wherever it is...

Oh my, I need a cold shower.

I sit up in bed and grab my phone off the nightstand. Even though it’s still early, I’m hoping Dean has sent me a text already. He told me last night that he doesn’t play games. *If I like a girl, I’m not waiting three days to call. You kidding me?* I loved that about him.

Of course, that means if he doesn’t text me like he said he would, he’s not interested.

The thought of not going on another date with Dean gives me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. But no. He’ll text me. He said he would, and there was no mistaking the way he looked at me last night. That kiss wasn’t one-sided.

Before I have a chance to stress about it any further, my phone buzzes. It’s a message from Dean:

When can I see you again?

It's not even nine o'clock in the morning. He must be as excited to see me again as I am to see him. My lips tingle at the thought of it.

I hesitate, unsure if I should text him back right away. I don't want to seem overeager. Even though Dean said he doesn't play games, it's hard not to feel the obligation to play them.

Maybe I'll shower and get dressed, *then* I'll text him.

I'm buttoning up my blouse when my phone starts ringing. My heart leaps, assuming it's Dean. But when I pick up the phone, the name Nick Mascolo pops up on the screen.

Why is my cousin calling me?

I tap on the green button to take the call. "Nick?"

"Hey! Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Uh..." I look down at my watch. "No, it's okay. What's up?"

"Sorry to bother you so early," he says. "But it's about that girl. Your ex's new girlfriend?"

"What about her?"

"You gotta listen to this," he says. "You won't believe it."

Chapter 38: The New Girl

Cassie is waiting in line at Starbucks to get her morning coffee. She's fiddling with her phone, when a familiar voice cuts through her thoughts:

“One cappuccino filled to the brim—make sure it's *to the brim*—in a to-go cup. And make sure the foam is good. If the foam isn't good, I'm sending it back.”

It's Lydia. Ordering a drink from the barista. There are only two people separating them in the line. Cassie considers slipping out, but decides Lydia shouldn't get to be the boss of whether or not she orders a drink at Starbucks. If she wants a latte, she's going to get a latte.

“And I would also like a raisin bran muffin,” Lydia continues, her voice sharp as if they'd already gotten her order wrong. “Lukewarm. Put it in the microwave for exactly fifteen seconds.”

The cashier's lips are valiantly straining to hold her smile. “Will that be all?”

“Repeat it back to me,” Lydia demands.

“One cappuccino to-go and—”

“One cappuccino filled *all the way to the brim*. With good foam.”

“Filled all the way to the brim,” the cashier says dutifully. “And a raisin bran muffin.”

“Microwaved for fifteen seconds.”

The cashier bows her head. It's clear her patience is running thin. “Microwaved for fifteen seconds.”

Lydia is lucky they prepare the drink in front of her. Or else there would definitely be spit in it.

She's standing right by the counter when Cassie orders her drink. Cassie is certain Lydia will notice her and say something, but Lydia is doing something on her phone that

completely absorbs her. Cassie is no more than an ant on the pavement to her.

Cassie watches her for a moment, safe in the knowledge that Lydia doesn't notice her. She's wearing a dress suit that looks achingly expensive, even from across the room. Her blond hair is pulled back into a severe French knot, and her keen eyes scan the contents of the screen of her phone. Lydia is very beautiful, although not as beautiful as Francesca. But apparently, that was never a source of resentment. Lydia has never seemed one to be obsessed with her looks, but Cassie gets a vibe that Francesca spent a lot of time maximizing her appearance.

Francesca. Why does that woman keep invading her thoughts?

“Lydia?”

Lydia jerks her head up at the sound of her name being called. She sees her drink on the counter along with her muffin. She touches the muffin with the tip of her finger. “It's still cold,” she says impatiently.

The girl who brought out her order frowns. “We microwaved it for fifteen seconds.”

“Then you did it incorrectly because it's still cold.”

The girl shakes her head. “I don't know if it's possible to microwave incorrectly.”

“Yet somehow you still did.” Lydia slides the plate back across the counter. “Please microwave it for another fifteen seconds.”

The girl would have, in Cassie's opinion, every right to throw the muffin back across the counter at Lydia. But instead she dutifully goes back to the microwave and heats up the muffin a second time. She brings it to Lydia.

“Better?” she asks.

Lydia touches the muffin with her fingertip. “Yes.”

“I'm sorry about that.”

Lydia shrugs. “That’s why you’re the one wearing the apron, isn’t it?”

The girl’s mouth drops open. At first, Cassie is certain she’s just going to take it, but it seems like the girl’s had a rough morning with one too many picky customers, because she pulls the muffin off the counter, throws it on the floor, and says to Lydia, “Get out.”

Lydia stares at her. “*Excuse me?*”

“You’ve been nothing but rude since you walked in here and we don’t want your business,” the girl says. She opens up a cash register and hands over a few dollars. “Here’s a refund on your muffin.”

Lydia’s pale eyelashes flutter. “I’d like to speak with the manager.”

“*I’m* the manager,” the girl says. “And I want you out.”

“Fine,” Lydia hisses. “The owner will hear about this. Believe me.”

She yanks her cappuccino off the counter and walks out so abruptly that she knocks down a chair with her giant purse. Cassie watches her go, unable to believe her eyes. Surely that’s not the worst thing a customer has ever done at Starbucks. There’s just something about Lydia that rubs people the wrong way.

She sure rubs me the wrong way.

Cassie retrieves her own latte from the counter, and then leaves to head back to the bookstore. Too late, she wonders if she should have offered to get Zoe a drink too. *Oh well.*

She’s barely rounded the corner when she nearly collides with a woman absorbed by her phone. Once again, Cassie lifts her eyes to discover the woman is Lydia. This time Lydia notices Cassie though. She has no choice.

“Oh,” she finally mutters. “It’s you. Hello, Cathy.”

Cathy. Lydia has shared meals with Cassie, she’s humiliated her at a Halloween party, and she’s fought with her

husband in front of her. Yet Lydia still hasn't bothered to remember her name.

"Cassie," Cassie says, although she's not sure why she cares. Cathy is close enough.

"Right." Lydia lowers her eyes and that's when Cassie notices her eyes are rimmed with red. Like she's been crying. "How are you?"

Cassie feels some of her irritation with Lydia fade away. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," Lydia snips at her.

"They're very high strung at that Starbucks," Cassie says in her most gentle voice.

Lydia rolls her eyes. "You think I'm upset about *that*?"

"Well, I would be. In the same situation, I mean."

Not that Cassie would ever be in a situation where she belittled the Starbucks barista until she got kicked out. But still.

"I couldn't care less about that." Lydia swipes at her eyes briefly. "Trust me."

"Oh." Cassie chews on her lip. "Well, in that case... is there anything... I mean, do you want to talk?"

Please say no. Please say no.

Lydia stares at her for a moment, as if considering her offer. She hesitates, her eyes growing sadder by the second. "No," she finally says. "But... thank you."

"Any time," Cassie says.

Cassie hurries back to the store, but she's still thinking about Lydia. The woman always seems so together, but in that moment, she seemed like she was falling apart. Then again, Lydia doesn't need Cassie's help. She's got plenty of her own friends—namely, Francesca. And Anna, of course. But in that moment, Cassie would have thought Lydia didn't have a friend in the world.

Zoe is perched at the door when Cassie returns. She's already got her coat on as well as that funky pink hat with the brim. Zoe got the whole outfit at a thrift shop last week. She invited Cassie to come along, but Cassie didn't have any money to spare. Even thrift shop money.

"You mind if I grab an early lunch?" Zoe asks.

"Sure," Cassie says. "It's not like we have any customers."

Zoe's eyes suddenly light up. "You know what would bring in customers?"

Cassie frowns. "No erotica." They had discussed it several times and Cassie wasn't going to budge.

"No, I've got an even better idea." She pauses to build the drama while Cassie braces herself. "We should have a petting zoo."

Cassie's mouth falls open. "A... petting zoo?"

"Just a small one," Zoe quickly amends. "Like, a few rabbits, a chicken... maybe a small goat."

"A *goat*?"

"We'd put a diaper on the goat, of course," she says, rolling her eyes. *Of course.*

"Zoe." Cassie dog-ears a page in her book and puts it down. "I'm not letting a goat in our store. It will make a giant mess."

"No, it won't. That's what the diaper is for."

Cassie doesn't know what to say to that. "We're not having a petting zoo in the bookstore. That's a terrible idea."

"Fine." Zoe sniffs. "But at least I'm coming up with ideas. You're just sitting there, reading..." She peeks at the cover of Cassie's paperback. "*Wuthering Heights*? God, how many times can you read that book?"

"It's my favorite book. It's the greatest love story of all time."

Zoe crinkles her nose. “What’s it about?”

“It’s about this man named Heathcliff,” Cassie says. “When he’s a child, he falls in love with a girl named Catherine. But they can’t be together, so he spends his life getting revenge on everyone who belittled him and kept them apart. And then when she dies, he begs for her spirit to remain on Earth—she may take whatever form she will, she may haunt him, drive him insane—just as long as she does not leave him alone.”

Zoe looks just as horrified as Cassie did by the idea of a goat in a diaper. “*That* is the greatest love story of all time? It sounds like a story about a psycho who gets obsessed. Sounds like my ex, Jack.”

“You have to read it to understand.”

Zoe shrugs. “Maybe I should write a story about how Jack followed me into the ladies’ room at that bar. Maybe that’ll be the new greatest love story of all time.”

Cassie rolls her eyes and doesn’t try to convince her further. Zoe just doesn’t get it. She doesn’t know about Bea and Marv meeting at that subway platform and bonding over the lost copy of *Wuthering Heights*. She doesn’t understand that kind of love. And while Cassie has never experienced that kind of love herself, she knows it exists. She longs for it.

When Zoe goes out for her lunch break, Cassie finds herself distracted from her favorite book. She’s thinking about Joel. If someone told the story of their courtship, would they call it the greatest love story ever told? Yes, he bought *Wuthering Heights* from her, but it was a gift for his mother. Then he asked her out on a date, and... well, they find each other attractive. They have a good sex life. They exchanged keys. He’s a Hot Doctor. He’s sweet, funny, responsible, and intelligent. He ticks off every box.

No, it’s not the greatest love story ever told. There have been no great romantic moments in their love story. It’s nothing like the greatest love story of all time—the book that brought Grandma Bea and Grandpa Marv together. But they’re good together. They’ve exchanged “I love you’s,” even though

every time Cassie says it, she's never quite sure if she means it.

The store is quiet now. Not one customer—that's the whole problem. And now she's in a bad situation, without many options.

"Tell me what to do," Cassie whispers to the silence bookstore. "Grandma Bea?" She pauses. "Grandpa Marv?"

There is no response. The bookcase doesn't open up a giant mouth and start dispensing wisdom. She still doesn't know what the hell to do.

"Excuse me? Miss?"

Cassie hadn't even heard the customer come into the store. She wipes her hands on her jeans and flashes her most friendly smile. She needs to make a sale. Selling anything would make her feel better. Since the New Year, things have been abysmal. And those gift cards that seemed like such a great idea back in December mean people are coming in here and leaving with books but not giving her any money.

"Can I help you?" Cassie asks the young man at the door.

He rubs at his red nose. "I hope so. Do you have a copy of Lippincott's *Microbiology*?"

She should have known. When she saw this kid, she should have assumed he was just another med student looking for textbooks.

"Does this *look* like a medical bookstore?" she snaps at him.

"Uh..." He looks around. "It looks like a bookstore."

She shoots him a look. "Do you want any *actual* books?"

He takes a step back. "I guess... not?"

The kid leaves the bookstore without buying anything. Her one customer of the day and she managed to yell at him. Great.

And then Cassie's phone starts to ring. She pulls it out of her purse and looks at the number.

Her heart races. She shouldn't take this call. She definitely shouldn't. This is not a joke—she could end up behind bars. But what else can she do? If she doesn't go through with this, the store is done.

She presses the green button to take the call.

Chapter 39: The Ex

It's about that girl. Your ex's new girlfriend.

What is Nick talking about? I'd always thought there was something sinister about Olive, but I didn't expect his investigation to actually turn up any information. I was half-kidding when I told him to investigate her. And especially now that things were starting to happen with Dean, I had been considering telling him to forget the whole thing. It's time to move on.

This is the last thing I expected.

"What's going on?" I say.

"You sitting down?"

What is he talking about? Is Olive a man? Because that's where my mind is going right now. Unless he tells me otherwise. "Nick! Just tell me!

"Okay, okay..." He chuckles darkly. "So you know she's got that business of hers, right?"

"Yes..."

"You may have noticed that the place isn't exactly *successful*."

I'm not going to lie. I walked by about a million times since Joel started dating Olive. And yes, it never looked like business was jumping.

"Well, it's worse than it looks," he says. "That girl owes a ton of money to every bank in town."

That's not good, for sure. And it confirms my suspicions that Olive sees Joel as a meal ticket. But it's not "sit down because you're not going to believe this" kind of bad. I'm disappointed. Olive being a man would have been much better.

"Is that it?" I ask.

“Shit, no, that’s not it,” he says. “You think I’d have all this buildup to tell you she’s going to declare bankruptcy? Who cares?”

I sigh. “So what is it then?”

“So she was going to lose everything,” he says. “But instead of declaring bankruptcy and taking the hit, she got herself in deeper. She borrowed money from... some not so good people.”

“Like...?” I whisper.

“Like people who will break your kneecaps or shoot you in the face if you don’t pay them back.”

Oh my God. *That* is bad.

“A hot girl like that... they probably won’t ice her—at least, not right away,” he says. “But they’re definitely putting the squeeze on her. God knows what they’re making her do to buy some time.”

I try not to picture what he means by that.

“The bigger worry,” he continues, “is that the people she cares about could be in danger.”

I sink down onto the bed before my legs give out. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Nick says, “if you care about your ex, you might want to warn him. He needs to watch his back.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” I mumble.

I feel numb as I end the call. A few minutes ago, Joel was the last thing on my mind. I was finally ready to move on, for God’s sake. I had the best date ever last night. I should never have opened up this can of worms—Nonna was absolutely right.

But now that I know Olive’s secret, I can’t un-know it. Joel’s life could be in danger. I have to warn him. I’m just not sure he’ll believe me.

Chapter 40: The New Girl

Cassie puts down the phone, her heart pounding. *I am making a horrible mistake.* Things have gone from bad to worse. How did she let herself get in this situation? It was so stupid. And now it just keeps getting worse and worse.

All she wants to do is lay her head down on the desk and sob. Or throw herself off the Brooklyn Bridge. The former wouldn't solve her problem, but the latter would.

Maybe she should level with Zoe. Confide in her how bad things have gotten. But what can Zoe do? She's in worse financial shape than Cassie is.

Well, no. That's not true. Zoe is poor, but she's not in debt.

The door jingles again, and this time, an elderly woman with a puff of white hair and glasses makes her way to the counter. Cassie squares her shoulders—this feels like a sale. At the very least, this woman isn't buying medical textbooks. If she is, Cassie will definitely burst into tears.

"Hello, young lady," the woman says. "I was just wondering... do you buy used books?"

Cassie hesitates. Usually the answer is yes. But she has no expendable cash right now. So unless these books are very cheap, the answer will be no.

"I've got two boxes in my car," the woman says. "I don't want much for them. Really, I just want them to have a good home."

"Okay," Cassie says. She has a hard time saying no to people. "Let me take a look."

She likes the idea of books having a good home too. That's why she wonders what will happen to the books in the store if Bookland were to close. The bookcases might get sold, but the books probably wouldn't—that's the whole problem.

So what would happen to them? Would they end up in a dumpster somewhere?

She cringes at the thought.

Cassie pushes those terrible thoughts aside as she follows the woman outside to where the old white Chevy is parked at the corner. The car looks almost as old as the woman. She waits patiently as the woman pops open the trunk and reveals two boxes stuffed with books.

“Please have a look,” the woman tells her.

Cassie bends down over the first box, prepared to thumb through a few volumes and offer a token price. But the second she looks at the first title, her mouth drops open.

These aren’t just books. These are Easton Press books. Easton Press books are like the classic cars of the book world. And these books have been *very* well preserved. She picks up a volume of Huckleberry Finn that is in mint condition. She’d guess the book is worth at least a hundred dollars, if not more.

“My husband used to collect books,” the woman explains. “He died in June and now I’m moving out of our house in Long Island to a senior community. I don’t have room for his books, but I know he’d want someone to have them. He loved his books.”

“Yes,” Cassie breathes. Her heart is pounding in her chest.

“How about twenty dollars for both boxes?” the woman says. “Or is that too much?”

Cassie can’t believe her luck. If she sells these books online, she could make... well, not enough to get out of debt, but enough to fix the worst of it. It’s like an angel was sent from heaven to answer her prayers.

But then she lifts her eyes to look at the old woman. She’s got this beat up car and a coat with a large rip in the fabric. This woman is not rich. If Cassie takes these books from her without telling her what they’re worth, she could never forgive herself.

“I...” Cassie’s voice cracks. She knows once she tells this woman the truth, she can’t take it back. She’ll have missed her chance. “I have to tell you, these books are worth a lot of money.”

The woman’s eyes widen. “But they’re just old books!”

Cassie slowly explains about collectible Easton Press editions. When the woman realizes what she’s got on her hands, her face lights up. Cassie was right—money is tight for her too.

They work out an arrangement. Cassie takes the books and agrees to sell them online for a ten-percent commission. She didn’t want to take even that, but the woman insisted.

The ten-percent commission will be nice, but it won’t change Cassie’s situation. Things are still just as bad as they ever were.

No, she has to go through with this.

Chapter 41: The Ex

Joel won't answer my calls.

It's not surprising. Well, it's a *little* surprising. I knew he was upset with me, but I didn't think it had gotten to that point. The point where I leave messages begging him to call me back and he won't.

So I do what I have to do: I open up the WhereAmI app.

I haven't tracked Joel down at a Starbucks in a long time, but I do it today. I have the app alert me when he leaves work and then I watch his avatar move in the direction of the coffee shop.

Before I can head over there, my phone starts to ring. It's Dean's number on the screen.

I suck in a breath when I see it. After my date with Dean, he was all I could think about. But the minute I got that phone call from Nick, everything changed. Finding out the truth about Olive has made me realize my feelings for Joel are more complicated than I had thought. It's not that I don't want to go out with Dean, but... I'm confused.

I know I've got to figure this out, but I know if I answer Dean's call, he's going to ask me out again. And I'm not sure if I should be going out with him when I'm this preoccupied with Joel.

So I keep dodging his texts and calls. I'm not blowing him off. I just need a little more time to think.

When I reach Starbucks, Joel is sitting at his usual table in the back, wearing his green scrubs, drinking his Caffe Mocha. Joel's favorite drink—some things never change. Also, he still looks really good. If he ran up to me, told me how much he missed me, and said he wanted to get back together, I'm not sure what I'd say.

Of course, I don't think I ever felt the way about him that I felt about Dean the other night.

God, I'm confused.

This has nothing to do with getting back together with him. I care about him, and I need to warn him about his girlfriend. That's absolutely the only reason why I'm here.

"Joel?" I feign surprise as I casually walk by his table. "Hi!"

He lifts his eyes from his phone. His lips form a straight line. "Oh. Hi."

Well, it's clear I'm not his favorite person right now. But still, it's a shock to see him looking at me with such obvious distaste. I mean, we used to be...

Well, never mind. This is important. I'm not going to be deterred that easily. "How are you doing, Joel?"

"Fine..." He heaves a breath as he forces out the barest nicety: "And you?"

"Good!" I say. "But, um... I was hoping we could talk..."

He averts his eyes, looking at the garbage can behind me. "I don't think that's a great idea."

"Just for a minute?"

He sighs and his shoulders sag. "Fine."

He doesn't tell me to have a seat, but I take one anyway. I sit across from him, wondering how in less than a year we could go from practically engaged to... this.

"It's about your girlfriend," I say.

He lifts his eyes sharply. "No. We are *not* talking about her."

"This has nothing to do with me. I swear."

"I don't understand. What could you possibly have to tell me?"

He's getting really upset. I wonder if on some level, he already knows.

"Listen," I say. "I'm sorry I have to be the one to tell you this, but you deserve to know. She's been keeping things from

you.”

“*Keeping* things from me?”

“She’s in debt,” I push on, before he can walk out on me. I sense he’s about five seconds away from marching out of here. “Like, really deep in debt.”

He frowns and shakes his head. “So what? She’s got a business... it’s natural to have to borrow some money...”

“She doesn’t just owe money to banks,” I blurt out. “She owes it to... you know, bad people. Money she can’t pay back. Joel, your life is in danger.”

His jaw drops open. “*What?*”

“She’s in really deep,” I say again. “They might try to kill you.”

His eyes flash. “That is,” he says, “the most ridiculous lie I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth... and I’ve heard some whoppers from you. Are you *joking*? Do you *hear* yourself?”

“It’s true!” I insist. “I swear to you.”

“Uh huh.” He folds his arms across his chest. “And how, pray tell, do you know this?”

“Because...” I chew on my lip. I didn’t want to tell him this part, but it’s the only way to get him to believe me. “My cousin Nick investigated her. He’s a private detective.”

Joel’s eyes are bulging. “You got your cousin to...”

Hmm. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him that part.

“Jesus Christ...” He rakes a hand through his chestnut hair. “This is... I mean, I knew you were having issues with jealousy, but... this goes above and beyond...”

“It’s true though.”

“And you tracked me down to warn me,” he says dully.

“Well, I didn’t track you down, exactly...”

“Then how...” He narrows his eyes at me. Something finally hits him, and his head snaps back as if I punched him.

“That stupid app I put on my phone! Are you still using that?”

Before I can answer, he pulls his phone from his pocket and loads the app. I get a sinking feeling in my chest. “Joel...”

“You are!” When he looks up again, his face is full of disgust. “I can’t believe you! You’re stalking me using this app?”

“No, it’s not like that...”

He stands up so abruptly, his chair nearly overturns. “I’m deleting it from my phone. I should have done it a year ago.”

“Okay,” I say in a tiny voice.

“And you,” he says, his voice dripping with venom. “You need serious psychological help. We have been broken up for a year. A *year*. I was trying to be nice, but enough. *Enough*. You need to get the fuck over it already.”

“That’s not what this is about.” I stand up too, trying to reach for his arm but he shrugs me off. “I’m worried about you. You could be in danger...”

“Please,” he says, “just stay away from me. Okay?”

He pulls on his coat. I feel utterly helpless as I watch him leave. He doesn’t believe a word I say. There’s no way to convince him his life could be in danger.

“Just ask her,” I plead with him. “Ask her about her debt. You’ll know she’s lying.”

He shakes his head at me. He’s not going to ask her. He’s too infatuated.

As he walks away, I realize there’s a chance this could be the last time I ever see him.

Unless I do something about it.

Chapter 42: The New Girl

As Cassie unlocks the door to her apartment, she hopes Joel is happy with eating leftovers for dinner. She's exhausted from work today, including an unexpected errand she had to run during her lunch break. She definitely doesn't feel like cooking. And there's nothing wrong with the Chinese food from last night. Everyone knows Chinese food is better the second day.

Her phone buzzes in her purse. She pulls it out and sees a text message from Joel:

On my way! Will be there in 10.

She smiles. Maybe he isn't her Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* but he's a great guy and she likes him a lot. That's enough.

Cassie tosses her purse on the table by her front door. She does this every night of the week, but tonight, something is different. She hears a crash.

A blue ceramic vase toppled to the floor when she put her purse on the table. It's lying in pieces all over the hardwood floor. Cassie winces, not eager to clean up the mess. The pieces have gone absolutely everywhere.

But that's not the worst part.

Cassie doesn't keep that vase on the table by the door. She's ninety-nine percent sure that vase is always on top of the short bookcase. And it's not like she's got a roommate here who might have moved it.

So why is the vase now by the door?

She stares at the pieces of the vase, her brow furrowed. Maybe Joel moved it. She doesn't have a roommate, but he's here so often, he may as well be. She's not sure why he'd do such a thing, but who knows? Certainly, it's the most likely explanation. The only other explanation is...

Someone else was in her apartment.

Cassie's breath catches in her throat. Is that possible? Could someone have been in here? And if so, how? And why would they have moved her vase?

Zoe also has the key to her apartment. Maybe it was Zoe. Maybe she wanted a little privacy with a guy and decided to use Cassie's apartment. Cassie wouldn't be happy about that, but it would be a relief to discover it was just her friend taking advantage and nothing more nefarious.

Cassie pulls her phone out of her purse. She sends off a text to Zoe: *Were you in my apartment recently? I won't be upset, just want to know.*

Just as she sends the text, Cassie jerks up her head. Was that a noise?

Is someone in here right now?

Cassie's heart is pounding. She shoves her phone into her pocket and backs up into the kitchen, searching for a weapon. Her fingers close around the handle of one of her carving knives. She doesn't use it much so it's surely sharp, although she's having trouble figuring out what she'd do with it. That is, she knows you stab people with a knife, but she's having trouble imagining herself stabbing another human being.

And what is she doing grabbing a knife in the first place? If she truly thinks someone is in her apartment, she should call 911 and get the hell out of here.

But she's embarrassed. What is she going to tell the police? *I'm afraid because a vase wasn't where I left it.* And of course, she doesn't want the police nosing around her apartment.

Just check the bedroom and the bathroom, then you'll feel better.

Cassie creeps down the hallway to her bedroom and bathroom. The door to the bedroom is open and she peeks her head inside. It seems empty. She clutches the knife in her hand, as she walks slowly over to the closet. The door is slightly ajar, and before she loses her nerve, she yanks it open.

Her clothes are hanging up, just as they had been this morning. And at the bottom of the closet is Grandpa Marv's little dresser. She opens one of the drawers, checking the contents, and lets out a sigh of relief that everything is just as she'd left it.

Now she just needs to check the bathroom.

She pushes the door ajar. It's empty, although the curtains are drawn on the shower. Did she leave them drawn this morning? She can't remember. But she doesn't think she did. She hates drawn shower curtains because they scare her.

Cassie's phone buzzes inside her pocket. She pulls it out with a trembling hand and sees the text from Zoe:

Nope. Haven't been over in ages. Want to have a movie night?

So it wasn't Zoe who moved the vase. It was someone else.

Oh my God, is something rustling behind those shower curtains?

Cassie backs up, her heart slamming in her chest so hard that it hurts. She should run. If she has any inkling there's a person in her shower, she needs to get the hell out of here. But she feels frozen. And then...

The doorbell rings.

The noise makes Cassie jolt nearly off the ground. But after her initial startle, she feels flooded with relief. It's Joel. Joel is here. Thank God.

She races over to the door to open it for him, even though he's got the key. When she sees him standing there, dressed in green scrubs like always, she throws her arms around him. He laughs and hugs her back.

"What's that for?" he says.

"I think there could be someone in my apartment," she whispers.

He pulls away. That's when he notices the knife she's still clutching and his eyes grow wide. "*What?*"

"I heard something in the bathroom. A noise..."

"Jesus," he says. "You think it's an intruder? Did you call the police?"

She shakes her head. "I don't want to overreact. I mean, it could be... a mouse."

Joel looks at the knife in her hand. "Give me that. I'll go look."

"Are you sure you don't want to call the police?"

He raises his eyebrows at her. "So *you* were going to go check it out with a knife, but you're scared to let *me* do it?"

Hmm. Good point.

Joel strides in the direction of the bathroom so quickly, she can tell he's not scared there's actually someone in there. When they get to the bathroom, the curtain is still drawn as it was before. It doesn't look any different. He hesitates for a split-second, then yanks open the curtain.

There's no one there.

Cassie's knees are weak with relief. "Sorry. I guess I got carried away."

"It's okay." He puts down the knife and hugs her again. "Why did you think there was someone in here in the first place?"

"The vase that's on my bookcase," she says. "It was moved to the table by the door. And I wasn't the one who moved it."

Joel drops his head. "Oh. That was me. I moved it."

"You?" She frowns at him. "But... why?"

"I kept almost knocking it over on the bookcase." He shrugs. "I didn't want it to break. I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal."

“It isn’t.” Cassie manages her first smile since she got home. “Except I just broke it.”

“Damn.” He returns her smile. “Well, sorry again. I’ll help you clean it up.”

So the two of them spend the next fifteen minutes cleaning up the shards of the broken vase. They talk about their days while they clean, and it’s really nice. She loves being with him. Maybe they don’t have a great love story like *Wuthering Heights*, but she does love him.

“Are you okay with leftover Chinese for dinner?” she asks him as they clean up the last of the ceramic pieces.

“Of course,” Joel says. “It’s always better the second day anyway.”

Cassie pulls out the container of chicken with broccoli and the second container of shrimp lo mein while Joel gets out the plates. He already knows his way around her kitchen.

“Can you spend the night?” she asks him as they scoop food onto their plates.

He nods. “Yeah, but I gotta bring over more scrubs. I think I’m down to my last pair here.”

“I could wash them for you?”

“No, you don’t have to do that...” He frowns. “Listen, I don’t want to put any pressure on you or anything, but... this going back and forth between our apartments is kind of a pain, isn’t it?”

Her heart speeds up. Not as fast as when she thought there was someone in her bathroom, but not slow either. “Yes...”

“So... how would you feel about moving in with me?”

Cassie takes a bite of chicken, chewing thoughtfully. Moving in with Joel makes sense. The cash she’d get from the sale of this apartment would improve her financial situation—it might be the answer she’s looking for. She’s not sure what he’d expect her to contribute to rent, considering his rent is certainly considerable given how nice his place is. But he

wouldn't ask her to pay anything she can't afford—she knows that much.

Of course, if they moved in together, she'd have to level with him about her financial problems. She should have told him already. She hates keeping secrets. That was what broke up his relationship with Francesca.

Of course, she can't tell him everything.

“You can think about it,” Joel adds. He puts a hand on hers. “But I would love to live with you.”

Cassie opens her mouth to say something, but she's finding it hard to get the air to speak. In fact, she realizes all of a sudden that breathing is becoming increasingly difficult.

“I know this is a little sudden,” he says quickly, when he sees her face. “Don't feel pressured at all. If you don't want to, it's fine.”

She wants to tell him that the reason she's not saying anything has nothing to do with his proposal to move in together. But all she can manage is a hoarse gasp. Her airway feels like it's closing up. She hasn't felt this way in years. Not since the last time...

Peanuts.

Oh my God, are there peanuts in this food?

But there couldn't be. She ate the exact same meal last night. It doesn't make any sense.

“Cassie?” Joel looks alarmed. “Are you okay?”

She can't get out the words to answer him. As she gasps for air, she manages to get to her feet and find her purse on the table by the door. Thank God Joel pushed her to get that Epi-pen. She searches for it within her bag and...

Where is it?

The situation is becoming increasingly urgent. She barely can get in any air with each breath. She fumbles through the contents of her bag with trembling hands. The pen must be in

here somewhere. She put it in there. And she definitely never took it out.

And then she can't look for it any longer. Her airway is closing off and her vision is going black. The purse falls from her fingers, and she sinks down to the floor as Joel stands over her, telling her to hang in there. As if she could...

Chapter 43: The New Girl

“Cassie...” Joel’s voice is clearer all of a sudden. “Cassie, please open your eyes. Please...”

The tightness in Cassie’s throat is still there, but it’s not as bad as it was when she blacked out. She gulps for air and it’s the best feeling in the world. She blinks her eyes and sees Joel’s face over hers, his eyes filled with concern.

“Joel,” she gasps.

His shoulders sag with relief. “Hang in there. I called 911. The ambulance is on its way.”

A minute ago, “hanging in there” felt impossible. But now she is able to get in air again with each breath. Something has changed. “You found my Epi-pen,” she manages.

He shakes his head. “No, I didn’t.”

“But...” She coughs. “Then how...?”

He hesitates. “I used my own Epi-pen.”

“You need an Epi-pen?”

His hesitation is longer this time. “Well, no. But when you told me you stopped carrying one, I got nervous and I wrote myself for one so I could have it... just in case.”

She could be angry with him for not trusting her, but she isn’t. The fact of the matter is this man just saved her life. He’s been carrying that pen around just in case because he was worried about this exact situation, and if not for that, he’d probably be attending her funeral in a few days. *He saved her life.*

It is the most romantic thing she can imagine. It’s more romantic than *Wuthering Heights*. It’s more romantic than Marv and Bea.

“I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you too,” he whispers back.

Chapter 44: The Ex

Joel has turned off the WhereAmI app, just as he promised he would. When I open it up, the app reports his location as not found. I wonder if Olive has access to the app now.

He's head over heels for her. I can see it in his eyes. He can't listen to one negative thing about her. It goes in one ear and out the other.

She is going to get him killed.

The lock turns in the door to the apartment. Nonna is home. She shuffles into the living room, the wrinkles in her face even deeper than they were this morning. In the last few months, she's slowed down a lot. It occurs to me that maybe she should be using a cane. Joel used to tell me about all the elderly women he'd get who came in with hip fractures. And how a large percentage of those women went on to die.

"How are you feeling, Nonna?" I ask her.

"I just had an appointment with Dr. Dino," she tells me.

My stomach sinks the way it always does when I think of Dean. For three days after our date, he was texting and calling me. I answered a few texts and none of his calls. Since then, the communications from him gradually tapered, and now I haven't heard from him in two days. I know I'm royally screwing this up, but all I can think of right now is Joel and Olive.

Dean deserves someone better than me. Someone who isn't obsessed with another man. He's a great guy, and I'm a train wreck. Can't he see that?

"I told him he needs to call you," Nonna says. "But he says you do not return his calls. Is this true?"

I don't know what to say. "It's complicated..."

"Not complicated!" She looks so furious, I want to duck. "What are you looking for? Why do you want Jo-el so much?"

He doesn't want you! Dr. Dino—he wants you! He's in love with you!"

"No, he's not," I mumble. "I hardly know him, Nonna."

"It doesn't take long to know, *patatina*." My grandmother's voice softens. "With Nonno, I knew the moment I saw him. I knew we would get married and have children and spend our lives together. And we did."

"I don't feel that way about Dean."

"Maybe not." Her dark eyes look sharply at me. "But he feels that way about you. So if you do not want that wonderful man, you tell him the truth."

She's right. I owe Dean that much.

Chapter 45: The New Girl

“I can’t believe you’re back at work.” Zoe gazes into her compact as she applies a fresh layer of lipstick, even though there was absolutely nothing wrong with her last layer of lipstick. “You were just in the hospital yesterday, for God’s sake.”

“I’m fine,” Cassie insists.

And she *is* fine. Thanks to Joel’s quick thinking, at least. They whisked her to the hospital and kept her overnight, but the swelling in her face and throat has gone away completely. But the whole incident served as a scary reminder that her peanut allergy isn’t gone after all, and she can’t go anywhere without her Epi-pen. She can’t count on Joel to save her life at all times.

After all, what if he hadn’t been there? What if she had decided to have her leftover Chinese without him? It’s a terrifying thought.

He was wonderful at the hospital. She was impressed and a little turned on by the way he took charge when the paramedics arrived. He never left her side through the whole thing. He traded his ER shift the next day so he could be with her.

Cassie’s phone rings within her purse. She reaches for it, expecting it to be a call from Joel. He’s picking her up for a quick lunch and should be here any minute. Cassie doesn’t want to spend much time away from the store today because it was closed half the day yesterday because of her hospitalization. She can’t afford for the store to ever be closed.

But it’s not Joel. It’s a blocked number.

She picks up the phone and hears only silence on the other line. And then the female voice that hisses: “Slut.”

Something inside her snaps. Isn’t she dealing with enough without Francesca harassing her? Joel broke up with her—

doesn't she get it? What is wrong with that woman?

"Listen to me, *Francesca*," Cassie barks into the phone. "Joel is not your boyfriend anymore. You need to get that through your thick skull. *He does not want you*. And if you don't leave me alone, I'm calling the police and telling them exactly what you're doing to me."

As she hangs up the phone, Zoe whistles and applauds. "Wow, Cassie. Bravo, my friend. I didn't think you had it in you."

She shrugs, although she does feel sort of proud of herself. She's never snapped at anyone like that in her whole life. "I'm going to tell Joel about this. He needs to know what she's been up to."

In the past, she's been scared that if Joel went to talk to Francesca, it might rekindle old feelings. But she doesn't feel that way anymore. She feels secure about Joel's feelings for her. He loves her. He's not getting back together with Francesca. He broke up with her for a reason.

An hour later, Joel walks into the store to pick her up for lunch, his cheeks pink from the cold. He rips off his black wool hat and grins at Cassie. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Perfect," she says. Better than ever.

"Are you ready to go out to lunch?"

She nods. "Yes, but..." She glances at Zoe, then nods at the back of the store. "Could we talk a minute first? In private?"

His brow furrows. "Of course."

He follows her to the back of the store. They go to the classics section, where Grandma Bea died years ago. Joel turns to face her, his eyebrows still bunched together. "Is everything all right?"

"Sort of." She takes a deep breath. "There's something I need to tell you."

He takes a step back. "Uh oh. Should I be worried?"

“No, not at all, it’s just...” Why is this so hard? She’s not the one at fault. *Francesca* is. That woman is out of her mind, and Joel should know the truth. “I think you should know that... that...”

He raises his eyebrows.

“Your ex-girlfriend Francesca has been harassing me.”

Joel’s mouth falls open as all the color drains from his face. “*What?*”

“I think she’s the one who broke into my store,” Cassie says, before she loses her nerve. “She threw paint on the door. She wrote ‘slut’ on the door to my apartment. And... she’s been calling me on the phone and hanging up. Or worse.”

Joel’s mouth is still hanging open. “Cassie...”

“I can’t take it anymore, Joel.” Tears spring to her eyes. “I’ve been through so much lately. She needs to stop. You’ve got to talk to her.”

“Cassie, listen to me,” he says. “Francesca didn’t do this.”

Cassie’s cheeks burn. After everything that happened in the last few days, she didn’t expect this response from him. She expected at least a little support. He doesn’t even give her a reason. *Francesca didn’t do this*. Case closed. No room for argument. Of course, the perfect Francesca could never be responsible for such a thing.

“I know you still have feelings for her,” she says, trying to keep her voice even. “But believe me, she did this. She’s... unstable.”

“I’m telling you.” His voice is louder now, almost angry. “She didn’t do those things to you.”

“Why not? Because she’s too perfect?”

“No.” He shuts his eyes for a moment before opening them again. “Because she’s dead.”

Chapter 46: The New Girl

Francesca is... dead?

How could that be?

Francesca is beautiful, she's perfect, she's young, she's a great chef. She's not dead. She can't be. People like that don't die.

"Are you sure?" Cassie blurts out.

Joel's eyes darken. "Am I *sure*? Yeah, I'm pretty damn sure."

"But..." Her mouth feels very dry all of a sudden. "Was she sick?"

"No," he says simply.

Cassie's head is spinning. All the time they were dating, she had a picture in her head of Francesca as the beautiful but jealous ex. She can't wrap her head around this new revelation. "I thought you broke up with her."

"I did." He lowers his eyes. "I mean, I had. It... it was complicated, Cassie."

She frowns at him. "Complicated how?"

He shakes his head. "I... I didn't realize..." He takes a shaky breath. "I broke up with her, yes. And then two weeks later, she... she killed herself."

She clasps her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God."

"I found her." He swallows and his Adam's apple bobs. "She was in her bathtub, her wrists slit and... she was cold by then."

He squeezes his eyes shut again. He sways slightly, and for a moment, Cassie is scared she's going to have to catch him. But then his eyes open again.

"It messed me up for a long time," he sighs. "I had to take time off from work. I had some awful thoughts after that. I felt

responsible because I...” He rubs his fingers into his temples. “Yes, I broke up with her, but I was angry at her. I didn’t expect it was over forever. I was coming to see her because I’d been hoping...”

“Oh God,” Cassie whispers. “I’m so sorry, Joel.”

“I should have told you the whole story,” he mumbles. “But I didn’t realize you didn’t even know Francesca was dead. I thought for sure...”

He rubs at his face. This explains a lot. It explains why Joel always looks so sad and distant whenever Francesca’s name comes up. He isn’t still in love with her—he blames himself for her death.

And maybe he’s a little bit still in love with her too.

“I’m sorry, Cassie.” He’s looking behind her instead of at her. “I don’t really feel like eating right now. Maybe... I’ll call you later, okay?”

But for the first time, she isn’t entirely sure he will.

She watches him walk out of the store, his shoulders hunched. She looks down at her own hands and sees they’re trembling. Francesca is dead.

Francesca is *dead*.

This changes everything.

The good news is this means she doesn’t have to worry about this Italian beauty stealing back her man. The bad news is now Cassie has no clue who has been harassing her. Or how to make them stop.

Chapter 47: The Ex

When I'm coming out of work and I see Dean standing there on the sidewalk like he was that day when we first met, my heart leaps with automatic pleasure before I notice the look on his face. He isn't smiling.

"Well, well, well," Dean says, "if it isn't Miss Loren."

"Dean," I gasp. "I..."

I don't know what to say. I have been horrible to him. I haven't returned any of his calls. He deserves so much better.

He holds up a hand. "I'll keep this quick."

"Dean, I'm so sorry..."

"Stop." He shakes his head. "I'm not going to stalk you. If you don't want me—fine. I get it."

"It's not... that's not..."

He shakes his head. When he's not smiling, there's no trace of that dimple, but he's still so handsome. "I had a great time with you the other night. I feel like there's something between us—something real. I just wanted to tell you that. But you won't return my calls, so here I am. Telling you."

I want to cry. That night we had together was one of the best nights I've ever had. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm such a mess. Dean is better off without me.

"I told you, I don't play games," he says. "I like you, and I'm telling you so. I like you. A lot." He pauses. "Even if that makes me an idiot."

"You're not an idiot."

He smiles crookedly. "I'm not so sure."

"You have to understand that I—"

He holds his hand up again. "Save it. I don't want the excuses. If you're interested, give me a call. If not, well, I hope you have a good life."

He means it. Even as awful as I've been to him, he doesn't wish me any ill will. It makes me think of the things I've done to Olive. I was petty and horrible. I hate myself.

But things are different now. After what Nick told me, I have to take action. This isn't a matter of getting revenge for having been wronged.

I don't promise Dean I'll call him. He doesn't want an empty promise and I won't do that to him. I watch him walk away with a sinking feeling in my stomach that I'm making the worst mistake of my life.

Chapter 48: The New Girl

Joel doesn't contact Cassie at all after he leaves the bookstore.

It's unusual to not even get one text from him in an entire afternoon when he's not working. She tries to push away the sick feeling in her stomach, but it's hard. He's obviously gutted over what happened to Francesca.

When Cassie gets out her phone for the tenth time to check for a missed text, Zoe gives her a look. "Quit being needy. He'll call you soon."

"He was really upset..."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Zoe says.

"I accused his dead girlfriend of stalking me."

She lets out a huff. "It's his fault for not telling you she's dead. What the hell is wrong with him?"

Cassie wracks her brain for missed cues that Francesca was gone. She always seemed so *present* in their lives, even when she wasn't actually there. Even her restaurant is still open. How could a woman like that be dead?

"Go home," Zoe says. "You're hurting our sales with your bad attitude."

Cassie snorts. They've only had two people come into the store all afternoon, both of them looking for medical books. It's time for Bookland to close its doors. She can't keep this up—not if she wants to avoid serious repercussions.

It's already dark out, even though it's barely dinnertime. They won't have many more customers tonight, if any. So Cassie decides to take Zoe's advice and head home early.

Despite her warm coat and hat, Cassie shivers the second she steps outside. The cold air is like a slap in the face, although she's not certain if that's the reason a chill went through her body. Somebody's been following her. Someone's been writing slurs about her at both her store and her

apartment. And that someone isn't the person she'd believed it to be.

“Cold, ain't it?”

Cassie looks up and sees Maureen the Homeless Lady grinning at her from her usual spot on the sidewalk. Maureen's bundled up in her thick winter coat, paired with a scarf and hat, but to be fair, she wears all that year round. Even on the hottest day of August, Maureen's got that coat on.

Cassie glares at Maureen, a bubble of frustration rising in her chest. “What did you see?” she rasps at the woman sitting on the sidewalk. “You must have seen something!”

Maureen throws back her head and lets out that familiar cackle that makes Cassie's skin crawl. “I ain't seen nothing!”

“But you must have!” Cassie cries. “You must! You were right here!”

The smile abruptly drops off of Maureen's face. And then she's just staring, her jaw slack, her eyes empty. Cassie remembers when she saw Maureen at the window to the hardware store—it had really freaked her out. She never figured out what Maureen had been doing there.

“Maureen?” Cassie's voice wavers on the name.

Maureen the Homeless Lady doesn't say a word.

I've got to get out of here.

Cassie turns away from Maureen, who is still in that catatonic state. She hugs her coat tighter to her chest and hurries in the direction of the subway.

Except Cassie somehow finds herself going to a different station than her usual. She doesn't make the decision exactly—her feet take her there on their own accord. But she recognizes she's at the train station that will take her in the direction of Francesca's restaurant.

She doesn't know why she's doing it. She just knows she has to go there.

Cassie rides the subway until she reaches the stop for Angela's Ristorante. The sun has vanished from the sky and her footsteps crunch against bits of snow in the pavement as she makes her way to the tiny restaurant with the red, white, and green awning.

Cassie looks at the sign over the restaurant. The word "Angela" is written in beautiful script. Who was Angela? Was Angela someone close to Francesca? A relative she loved or respected? Or just a name she liked?

Cassie suspects she'll never know the answer to that question, since she will never meet Francesca.

A cold wind whips around the corner and Cassie shivers, hugging herself. She walks closer to the restaurant—close enough that she can see inside at the small establishment that Francesca built in the years before her death. She peers through the glass at the strangers enjoying their meals. Well, they're not all strangers. There's one person she recognizes all too well:

Joel. Sitting at a table in the back, his head bowed.

She shouldn't be surprised. Of course, he'd come here when he's thinking of Francesca. She remembers catching him here months ago. She wonders how often he comes here. It must comfort him. Remind him of the woman he had loved.

She has a feeling that the characters in his own *Wuthering Heights* are Joel and Francesca. Certainly not Joel and Cassie. After all, Francesca is the one who haunts him, even after she's gone.

In any case, she hurries away before he can catch sight of her.

It's nearly eight by the time Cassie gets off the subway by her apartment building. It's very dark by now, and the streets are deserted. She walks as quickly as she can down the pavement, trying to push away the feeling that somebody is behind her. She can almost hear footsteps.

If Francesca hasn't been threatening me, then who is?

Because somebody has been making those calls. Somebody wrote “slut” on her door. It isn’t in her head.

Unless it’s the ghost of Francesca.

No, not too likely. Grandma Bea spent the last several years of her life praying for Grandpa Marv to return as a ghost. If anyone was going to come back as a ghost, it would have been Marv. If there’s a heaven, he was certainly up there, pleading with St. Peter, *Let me go down there and be with Bea.*

But the fact that Ghost Marv never made any appearances, except in Bea’s imagination, is enough to convince Cassie the afterlife is not a thing.

When Cassie finally reaches her building, she discovers the lights that usually shine right outside the door have burned out. It’s pitch black as she fumbles in her purse for her keys. It’s so dark, anyone could be standing behind her and she’d never know.

Where are those goddamn keys?

When she gets the door to the building open and locked behind her, she breathes a sigh of relief. She can’t shake the feeling someone is watching her. But who? And why?

Now that she’s safe inside the building, she takes the elevator up to her apartment. She leans against the wall, totally spent. She can’t wait to get into her apartment. And then into the bathtub.

She was in her bathtub, her wrists slit and... she was cold by then.

Cassie closes her eyes, trying not to think of Francesca. Is this the way it’s going to be? Is Francesca going to haunt everything she does from now on? Is she *literally* haunting her right now?

Maybe Joel can’t push the thoughts from his head, but Cassie can. She starts the hot water going in the bathtub and plugs the drain. Then she goes to her bedroom to fetch some warm, cozy clothes. She shuffles through her closet, looking for a nice, warm fleece.

And that's when she sees the black ink at the back of her closet.

Her heart pounding, she pushes her clothes aside, parting them to get a view of the wall behind them. There's writing. In the back of her closet.

In black ink, someone has scribbled the word "SLUT."

Someone was in her apartment. Not a ghost. A human being entered her home when she wasn't there, picked up a marker, and wrote that word on the wall.

Cassie hears the screaming as she backs away from the closet. It takes her a moment to identify the voice as her own.

Chapter 49: The Ex

I've got to do something.

My own jealousy—that was something I could get past. Eventually. But I can't stand by if Olive is putting someone else's life in danger. Yes, Joel was an ass to me last time we saw each other, but I can't pretend he's some guy I bumped into on the subway. I loved him. I can't let her destroy his life. Or take his life.

So that's why I decide to go to Olive's apartment.

The weather has been especially cold, so I bundle up in my boots and warmest coat before I leave the apartment. And there's one other thing I do that I can't quite explain. Something that I know I may later regret.

I take a knife from the kitchen and drop it in my purse.

After all, Olive owes money to very bad people. It isn't terrible to have some protection, is it?

My heart is thumping audibly the entire subway ride into Manhattan. What am I *doing*? Why am I going to such lengths to protect Joel? He had no problem walking away from me. If I were in danger, would he do the same for me?

Honestly, I think he would.

Olive's apartment building is three blocks from the subway. It's not as nice as the place where Joel and I used to live, but it's nicer than what she can afford, given her financial woes. Then again, people don't get deep in debt by spending responsibly.

I approach the locked door to the building just as a middle-aged woman is leaving. I flash a smile at her. "Good evening," I say brightly.

The woman returns the smile as she holds the door open for me. "Good evening."

I don't look like a criminal. If she knew I had a knife in my purse, she might have behaved differently, but she doesn't know.

I take the stairs up to Olive's apartment. I know exactly where it is. I'm ashamed to admit, this isn't the first time I've been here.

And then I'm at her door. I'm staring at her peephole, my hands shaking even though the hallway is much warmer than outside. I lift my finger and press it against the doorbell.

Then I wait.

After a few moments, I hear the locks turning. The door swings open, and there she is, dressed in skinny jeans and a sweater. The olive-skinned beauty my ex-boyfriend started dating not long after he said sayonara to me. She won his heart—you might even say she brain-washed him. And now she may claim his life.

"Hello, Francesca," I say to this woman.

Francesca, aka Olive, stares at me, her eyes unkind. She doesn't smile. She never smiles, as far as I've seen. When I look at her, she radiates evil. I know that sounds crazy, but she does.

I've witnessed her in her restaurant, Angela's Ristorante, bossing around the staff. Their unhappiness shows itself in the food, which is why the restaurant is failing. They hate her, even though she's beautiful and a great cook. Even better than me—I know my way around the kitchen, but I'm not a culinary school trained chef like she is. My day job is as an office manager. I wonder how much culinary school set her back. No wonder she's so deep in debt.

Francesca. If I've ever had a mortal enemy, it's her.

I step inside the apartment and she regards me coolly. She folds her arms across her chest and stands up an inch straighter, as if she didn't already tower over me.

"Hello, Anna," she says.

Chapter 50: The New Girl

Through her screams, Cassie is dimly aware of a phone ringing. Her phone.

She takes a deep breath, struggling to calm herself. She can't panic. Yes, someone was inside her apartment and wrote a slur on her wall. Yes, since there are no signs of break-in, it means the person is in possession of a key to her apartment. Yes, she has not changed the locks, which means the person still has a key. Yes, there is a chance the person is in her apartment right this minute...

Okay, this isn't helping.

Cassie stumbles into the bathroom to turn off the water, then goes to the living room to find her phone. It's in her purse, where she left it. She looks at the screen, hoping to see a missed call from Joel. But there isn't a call from Joel. It's from Anna.

That's odd. Why would Anna be calling? She took Anna's number a bit ago, when they were contemplating having lunch together, but then after the baby, Anna seemed too overwhelmed. Totally understandable, and Cassie didn't want to be pushy, but why would Anna be calling now?

Cassie presses a button to return the call.

"Cassie?" Anna's sweet voice instantly comes on the other line. It sounds scratchy, like she's walking around outside.

"Hi, Anna." Her own voice sounds strange to her ears. She clears her throat. "What up?"

There's a long pause on the other line. "Are you okay, Cassie? You sound funny."

"Yeah, I..." There's something about Anna that makes Cassie desperate to confide in her. After all, she needs to talk to someone about all this. And Anna knows Francesca. Or

knew her. “Someone’s been inside my apartment. They wrote the word ‘slut’ on the wall.”

Anna gasps. “Oh my God! Cassie, that’s horrible! Did you call the police?”

“No.” Cassie bites her lip. She doesn’t want the police in her apartment, but what choice does she have? “I was about to.”

“Yes...”

Cassie pauses. “I should though. Right?”

“I suppose...”

“You don’t think so?”

“Well, what will they do?” Anna says. “Just loads of paperwork, right? And they’ll go through all your stuff.”

Cassie shudders at Anna’s assertion. That’s the last thing she wants.

“I mean, really,” Anna says. “Do the police *ever* catch burglars?”

“I... I assume they do...”

“They don’t,” Anna assures her. “But listen, I’m just across town, and my husband’s got the baby. Why don’t I come by and help you get everything cleaned up?”

“But...” Cassie thinks back to the other night, when she had the anaphylaxis from her dinner, even though she’d eaten the same food the night before without a problem. “I think the person who broke in might be trying to kill me.”

“*Kill* you?”

She tells Anna all about the obscene calls she’s been getting. And she explains about the peanuts in her food and how she’d nearly died when she couldn’t find her Epi-pen. She no longer believes the peanuts were just bad luck. And she no longer believes the missing Epi-pen was from her own carelessness.

“Oh my God,” Anna breathes. “That’s... insane. If someone really did that...”

“Yeah,” Cassie manages. “Insane.”

“Listen,” Anna says. “Don’t move. I’ll be there soon... there’s just one thing I need to do first. Okay?”

Cassie is too spent to argue. “Okay.”

After she hangs up with Anna, she’s itching to call Joel. She remembers how comforted he made her feel the night she was scared someone was in her apartment. On a whim, she punches on his number. She grips the phone as she hears ringing on the other line.

But he never picks up.

Chapter 51: The Ex

After Joel broke up with me and started dating Francesca, I hated both of them. But especially her. Because she's everything I'm not. She's as tall and beautiful as a model. She's several years younger than I am. She's a successful (or so I had thought) restaurateur. But as I step inside Francesca's apartment, I realize something else about Francesca:

She is frightening.

I don't know why, but it's a feeling I've always gotten. That's why I brought the knife tonight. Not because I'm scared of a faceless loan shark, but because I need protection against Francesca herself.

As I said, there's something about her.

"What do *you* want?" Francesca growls at me.

I take a deep breath. "I know everything, Francesca. I know the trouble you're in. I know that you're putting the lives of everyone you care about in danger."

She snorts. "You don't know anything."

"I tried to warn Joel," I say. "But he won't listen. So that's why I'm appealing to you."

Francesca arches a finely plucked eyebrow at me. She and I are both Italian women—nobody could say Joel doesn't have a "type"—but we are so different. She is long-legged and tall with flowing hair. I am short and top-heavy with mousy brown curls. I don't know how Dean could have said I look like Sophia Loren when Francesca is the dead ringer for her. I heard at Lydia's Halloween party this year, Francesca dressed as Cleopatra and was absolutely stunning.

"That's where you're wrong," Francesca says. "Joel did listen."

She says his name almost like Nonna does, with more emphasis on the second syllable. Jo-el. I bet he likes it, even

though it drove him crazy when Nonna did it.

I frown at her. “Excuse me?”

“Joel came up here,” she says. “Accusing me. Asking all these questions about my financial situation. I knew you were behind it. Who else would put ideas like that in his head?”

I swallow. “So what did you say?”

She smiles at me then. I know I said Francesca never smiles, but that’s inaccurate. Her lips curl up and it looks like a smile, but there’s no joy behind it. “I told him he was being paranoid. Of course.”

“Of course,” I mumble. And surely he believed her. He is absolutely under her spell.

“Do you want a drink, Anna?”

“No, thanks.”

Francesca walks over to her kitchen. She grabs the bottle of wine on her kitchen counter, and I can tell even with my rudimentary knowledge of wine that it’s expensive. She and Lydia both have very expensive taste in wine, but Lydia can afford it while Francesca can’t. That’s Francesca—always spending beyond her means.

Not that I can throw stones.

She pours the wine into a glass, swishes it around for a moment. She takes a practice sip, letting it sit on her tongue for a moment, then she downs the rest of the glass in one gulp. And pours another.

“The problem is,” she says, “Joel did his research before he came here. He already knew exactly how bad things were for me.”

My mouth falls open. Joel listened to me. I can’t believe it.

“He ended it.” She takes another healthy sip of wine. “Told me he couldn’t be involved with someone who would get into this kind of mess and then lie about it. Of course, he didn’t know about the biggest secret of all.”

I shake my head, confused. “What?”

“Anyway,” she says, not answering my question. “Joel is gone. He walked out on me. For good.”

Is she saying what I think she’s saying? Did Joel really break up with Francesca?

“He’s all yours, Anna.” She laughs as she tops off her glass again. “He doesn’t want to have anything to do with me anymore. You can go pick up the pieces now.”

“I’m sure...” I blink at her, watching her drink more wine. “He’ll come back to you. He’s in love with you.”

“No.” She looks off into the distance. “Even if he was, you were right all along. It wasn’t fair of me to drag him into my mess. I’ll deal with it on my own.”

Joel is single again. Single and on the rebound. It would be easy to, as she says, go pick up the pieces.

But as I imagine a life with Joel, I realize that’s not what I want. I was scared for Joel when I found out what Francesca had gotten herself into, but I don’t love him anymore. Not like that.

The truth is, there’s another guy I can’t stop thinking about. And I’ve got to call him before it’s too late. If it isn’t already.

I look up at Francesca. I’ve felt a lot of things for her since that first night I saw her kissing Joel. Hatred. Envy. Fear. But this is the first time I’ve felt sympathy.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask.

Francesca laughs again. “God, you’re too nice. Just like Joel. So nice. It’s no wonder he wanted someone more exciting.”

My face burns. This is the Francesca I’m used to. “Fine. I’ll leave then.”

“Please do.”

After I leave Francesca’s apartment, I know exactly where I’m going. I don’t bother with the WhereAmI app—I’m

entirely done with that, even if Joel hadn't deleted it. There's only one person I want to see right now, and it's not Joel. I just hope it's not too late.

One subway ride later, I'm standing outside the glass door to Dean's cardiology practice, peering at the same blond receptionist who attempted to help me locate Nonna's glasses. If she's still here, then Dean would still be here, wouldn't he? My heart is pounding, and not just because I ran all the way here from the subway.

The bigger question is, does he want to see me?

And then before I can wonder any further, there he is. Emerging from the back office, looking handsome as hell in a white dress shirt and dark blue tie, his dark hair black as ink. He tugs on his coat as he makes conversation with the receptionist. He smiles at her, flashing those white teeth. I remember the dazed smile he had on his face after he kissed me. If I close my eyes, I can still feel his lips on mine.

Before I know what's happening, Dean is heading toward the exit, right where I'm standing. I quickly back away and flatten myself against the wall. I came here to find him, but I'm suddenly desperate that he doesn't see me. This was a mistake. I've waited too long. I've blown it.

My attempt to hide is entirely ineffective. The second Dean swings through the door to his practice, his dark eyes widen when he sees me pressed against the wall. His mouth drops open slightly, but then snaps closed.

"Hello, Anna," he says.

He's not calling me Miss Loren anymore. Not a good sign.

"Hi," I say.

He raises his eyebrows at me. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh..." I rub at my chest, suddenly conscious of the fact that I hadn't dressed up prior to coming here. I'm wearing worn jeans and my puffy coat. "I think I've been having an irregular heartbeat. So I figured..." Dean is staring at me and my shoulders sag. "Fine. I came here to see you."

“Why?” He doesn’t say it in a mean way. More like he’s genuinely curious. He has a right to be a jerk to me after how I’ve acted, but he isn’t. “You didn’t seem to have too much interest in seeing me again.”

I shift between my feet. “Are... are you busy now?”

“Actually...” He glances down at his watch. “I’ve got a date in an hour.”

“Oh.” I lower my eyes. This shouldn’t surprise me. Dean is a great guy, and there was no reason for me to believe he would wait around for me. It would have been more surprising if he did. “I see.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, well. Why not, right?”

“Yes, of course.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “That’s... wonderful. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations?” He cracks a half-smile. “You’re congratulating me on getting a date? Am I really that ugly?”

“No.” My cheeks color. “Not at all. Just... um, the opposite.”

That half-smile remains on his lips. “I see...”

“Look,” I mumble. I’m having trouble looking Dean in the eyes, but I’ve got to say my piece, even if I humiliate myself. “I know I screwed up before. I really... I like you.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “I don’t know what to say to that, Anna. I told you from the start that I don’t play games. When I told you I’d call the next day, I did. And when you didn’t return my calls, well...” He shakes his head. “I’m not playing that game. Not anymore.”

“It wasn’t a game.” I squeeze my fists together. “I just... I told you from the start, this breakup with Joel... it was hard on me. I mean, he and I were together for over ten years. When it ended, I just...” I chance a look up at Dean’s dark eyes. I see the tiniest bit of sympathy there, so I plow forward. “But I’m here because... I’m over it. After tonight, it’s behind me. I promise that.”

“You can’t make that kind of promise.”

“But I can,” I insist. “I don’t want to play games either. I can’t stop thinking about you and... if there’s any chance you still feel the same way...”

Dean is shaking his head at me. I have really screwed this up. He’s a great guy and I blew it. He’s got a date with another girl—one who doesn’t have two tons of baggage. I don’t even know why I’m bothering.

He fumbles around in his pocket and pulls out his phone. He punches some buttons on the screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

That crooked smile returns. “I’m canceling my date.”

For the first time since I walked in here, my heart soars. “You... you are?”

“Yeah.” He shoves his phone back in his pocket. “There was no point if I was just going to spend the whole date thinking about kissing you.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. “You would?”

“Well...” He takes a step closer to me. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since our night out. So.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t return your calls,” I say. “I was acting like an idiot. You’re the first guy I’ve liked since Joel, and I guess I just... I panicked. I went crazy.”

“Yeah, I did some dumb things after I got dumped.” It’s the first time Dean admitted he was the dumpee in his breakup. “I mean, I left town. Moved halfway across the country. That’s pretty crazy.”

I can’t even begin to admit to Dean some of the things I’ve done. Better he thinks he won the crazy competition. “Yeah, that’s pretty crazy. But I’m glad you did.”

“You know what?” His smile widens until my heart starts to flutter. “So am I.”

And then he kisses me.

Chapter 52: The Ex

The same night I was in Francesca's apartment, she died in the bathtub.

Nobody knows I was the last person to see her alive. Even Joel, who was the one who found her. He didn't know about that, and he didn't know Francesca was pregnant. He only found out after the autopsy. He might have been able to deal with feeling like he caused her suicide, but the baby pushed him over the edge. It took him several months before he could go back to work again, to the job he loved.

But he did eventually go back. He got better. His friends talked to him about getting back in the dating market, but he resisted for a long time. Over a year. Every time someone would mention a girl he might like, he'd mumble, "I can't." He was even more of a mess than I was when he broke up with me.

But then he met Cassie.

I liked Cassie the first time I saw her. She was everything Francesca wasn't—sweet, earnest, and pretty in a fresh-faced sort of way. I could see how much Joel liked her. He was able to finally move on.

As for me, Dean and I went out on our second date the night I met him at work, and he kissed me again before he said goodnight. It was another incredible kiss. This time when he called me the next day, I picked up on the first ring—no games. Within a few weeks, we were practically living together. I'd never felt this way about anyone before, even Joel. In fact, I was grateful to Joel for ending things between us so I could experience this kind of love. After we were together for less than a year, I became the wife of Dr. Constantine Pourakis, called Con by his friends and Dean by the people he's closest to.

We decided to try for a baby right away, and we were blessed to get pregnant quickly. Dean was over the moon

excited when I told him the news—I tried not to think of the fact that Francesca never got to share *her* news. And Joel never got to hear it.

When our baby was born, it was Dean's idea to name him Andrew. After my grandmother Angela, who died a month before he was born. I am so sad Nonna never got to meet her namesake. But we keep a picture of her on our bookcase, so Andrew can know his great-grandmother. We hold him by the bookshelf, pointing out his relatives to him so he knows where he came from.

I've become friends with Joel again in the last year. I've been rooting for him and Cassie. I want him to be as deliriously in love as I am with Dean. I want that so much.

Cassie doesn't seem like the paranoid type—if she believes someone is trying to kill her, she's probably right.

And I know who that person is.

Chapter 53: The Ex

Last night, Dean and I went to Lydia and Pete's apartment for dinner. It was our first night out since Andrew was born, and Dean was both excited and adorably worried. He spent about an hour installing nanny cams around the apartment.

Well, the nanny cams may have been partially my idea.

"There's a blind spot right here," I told Dean as I stood in the corner between the kitchen and the living room, inspecting the multiple views of the apartment popping up on my phone.

"Right, I'm on it." He whipped out yet another camera from the box we purchased a few weeks ago. He concealed the camera partially behind a picture frame.

The cameras were well-hidden. But I was concerned that the babysitter might discover one of them, just based on the sheer *number* of them.

"Better?" he asked, once the new camera was positioned.

I continued walking around, scrolling through the multiple views on my phone. I stopped near the doorway. "Another blind spot."

Dean frowned at me. "We're out of cameras. And do we really need one near the front door?"

"Of course we do," I said. "What about Donna?"

Donna is our neighbor who lives down the hall. She's in her forties, married but without children, and every time she sees me go out with Andrew in his stroller, she looks as though she might scoop him up and take off with him.

"Uh..." A crease formed between my husband's eyebrows. That dimple was nowhere to be seen. "I honestly don't think we need to worry about Donna. And we've got all the other cameras."

It did take a little convincing and some shifting of cameras, but I finally agreed the visualization of the apartment

was good enough. If it were just me, I would have stayed home until we had more cameras. But Dean really wanted to get out of the house. “We haven’t been out together just the two of us since the baby came,” he said as he pulled me close to him. “I miss it.”

“I miss it too,” I said as I tilted my head up for him to kiss me. He grinned and leaned in immediately, pulling me close to him. Dean and I still have the best kisses. It hasn’t changed at all in the last two years. Of all the choices I’ve made in my life, he’s the best one.

Unfortunately, as soon as we got to Lydia and Pete’s apartment, it was obvious this wasn’t going to be the fun, relaxing evening with friends we’d hoped it would be. I had thought Lydia and Pete might be doing better, but clearly not. I could tell they’d been recently fighting by the red that rimmed Lydia’s eyes when she accepted the bottle of white wine I handed to her.

“Bonterra Vineyards,” Lydia said, crinkling up her nose instead of thanking me.

“I love Bonterra Vineyards,” Dean said, because even though he’s a cardiologist, he’s not the slightest bit pretentious. “Nothing wrong with it.”

“Yes...” Lydia held it out as if it was contaminated and she needed to stay a safe distance away. She would serve it to us, but never drink it herself.

Pete came out then, a beer in his right hand. His tie looked like it had once been cinched tight, but now was hanging loose around his neck. His eyes were bloodshot and I sensed it wasn’t his first drink of the evening. The last time we saw the two of them, Dean murmured to me that he was worried about how much Pete had been drinking lately. He was worried about how Pete was performing in the ER and worried about their daughter, Violet.

“Con! Anna!” Pete held out his arms, as if to wrap us both in an embrace. “Lydia, you’re being rude, making them both stand in the doorway. Invite them in!”

Lydia shot her husband a look, then marched off to the kitchen with our wine. Pete rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind her. She’s in a mood. You know.”

Pete’s comment prompted Dean to put his arm around my shoulders and pull me tighter to him. *That will never be us*, his eyes told me.

Dean eventually ended up in the living room, watching some sort of sports game with Pete. I wanted to stay close to my husband, but I felt obligated to check on Lydia in the kitchen. It was the polite thing to do, given she was cooking dinner for all of us. I may not be a professional chef like Francesca, but I’m very handy in the kitchen.

But when I got into the kitchen, Lydia was just standing there. Staring at the stove. A blank expression on her face. The smell of something burning assaulted my nostrils.

“Lydia.” I reached past her to shut off the stove. I didn’t know what she was making in there, but it was too late to save it. “Are you all right?”

“No.” Her eyes were glassy and bloodshot. “I’ve barely slept in a week.”

“Oh...”

She looked away from me. “The doctor gave me some pills but they do nothing.”

“Do...” I bit my lip. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t want to burden you,” Lydia murmured. “I’m sure you’re overwhelmed with the baby.”

“Lydia...” I shut down the stovetop as well before the fire alarm went off. “I’m sure it’s not that bad...”

“Marriage counseling isn’t working,” Lydia practically spat at me. “We’ve been going for three months. What a joke. It’s forty-five minutes of Peter telling the therapist what a witch I am. And the therapist always takes *his* side.” She lifted her red-rimmed eyes to look at me. “It’s all my fault. Did you know that?”

I winced and handed her a tissue from a box on the counter. "I'm sorry, Lydia."

"And Violet..." Lydia dabbed at her right eye with the tissue. "I'll probably only see her on weekends. Peter will make up some argument about how I work too much on the weekdays so he should get her. I can't imagine not being able to come home to my baby..."

This time, she couldn't stop the tears. They flowed freely from her eyes, soaking the tissue in her hand. I imagined someone taking Andrew from me. I've only known him for months, but I can't even fathom it. They'd have to kill me first. I was about to tell Lydia I understood, but then she blurted out:

"I wish I could talk to Francesca about this."

Ouch.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but Francesca... she was like my sister. It's all Joel's fault that she's gone. I'll never forgive him for that."

I couldn't blame her for wishing Francesca was there to talk to. I still remember how isolated I felt when my relationship with Joel fell apart. It was horrible.

"The most important decision a woman makes in her life is who she chooses for her husband." Lydia dabbed at her right eye with the tissue. "I know that sounds sexist but it's true. Your husband is your partner in everything you do. A bad husband can wreck your career. He can affect your parenting. Peter was the wrong choice for me... he's made me into... into..."

I frowned at her. "Lydia?"

She dropped the tissue on the counter, her eyes suddenly wild. "I took it out on the wrong person. I... was so goddamn angry at Joel for what he did to her. I couldn't stand to see him moving on, especially when my life had gone to shit. And that girl. Cassie. God, she's so *young*."

"Yes," I murmured.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I shouldn’t have. I was so angry though. You have no idea the things I’ve done, Anna.”

And then she told me everything.

Chapter 54: The New Girl

Where is Anna?

Cassie looks down at her phone, hoping for a call from Anna or Joel or *somebody*. Well, somebody aside from the person who's been hanging up on her, which is apparently *not* Francesca.

Maybe she should call the police. Someone breaking into her apartment and writing "slut" on the wall feels like something she should call the police about. Then again, like Anna pointed out, they couldn't do anything when it happened at the bookstore. And the last thing she wants is the cops nosing around her apartment.

Maybe she should call a locksmith.

Her doorbell finally rings and she nearly faints with relief. Anna's here—thank God. Cassie hurries over to the door and throws it open. Except it's not Anna.

It's Lydia.

"Lydia?" Cassie gasps. How did she even get inside without buzzing up? But then again, her neighbors let anyone inside who looks halfway respectable. Lydia looks more than respectable in her expensive trench coat with her shiny blond hair. "What are you doing here?"

Lydia looks her up and down with her ice-blue eyes. Her eyes are nearly the same color as Joel's but have none of their warmth. "I was hoping we could talk."

"Talk?" Cassie clears her throat. "Listen, Lydia, this isn't a good time."

"Nonsense." Lydia pushes past her, then pulls a bottle of wine with the label Bonterra Vineyards from her purse. "I brought wine."

In Lydia's world, bringing wine is worth entrance anywhere, apparently.

Without being invited or removing her coat, Lydia strides into her kitchen and starts going through the cupboards. “Where do you keep the wine glasses?”

“I don’t have any.”

Lydia’s mouth falls open. “You don’t *have* any? How is such a thing possible?”

“I have cups...”

Cassie isn’t in the mood for the way Lydia sifts through her glasses and inspects each one. She finally selects a satisfactory glass and places it on the counter. She picks up the bottle and fiddles with the cork.

“Do you need a bottle opener?”

Lydia shakes her head. “No, I opened it last night.”

Sure enough, the cork comes loose easily. She tips the bottle over and fills the glass with dark red liquid. She slides it over to Cassie. “Here. You’ll like this.”

Cassie is reluctant at first, but then she realizes how much she could use a drink. This day has been nothing short of horrible.

“Thanks,” she says as she takes a sip. And she detects notes of cherry and rosemary and...

No, it just tastes like grape juice with a zing.

“Let’s have a seat,” Lydia says as she scans the room, looking for someplace to park herself. She scrunches her nose up at the sofa, but then deems the dining table acceptable. They sit opposite each other, Lydia settles gingerly into her seat as if she fears it might break.

“Aren’t you going to have wine?” Cassie asks.

“Oh, *no*.” Lydia rolls her eyes. “I don’t like that kind. Anna and Constantine brought it over last night. But you should drink up.”

So she does. She has another healthy sip, and she feels slightly better about the day. A nice, warm feeling comes over her. And she’s almost glad Lydia is here. Maybe Lydia isn’t

her favorite person, but she doesn't have to worry about an intruder in her house if she's got company.

"What do you want to talk about?" Cassie finally says.

"Francesca."

It's hard for Cassie to keep from spitting out her wine. That was the last thing she expected Lydia to say. Back when Cassie thought Lydia and Francesca were still buddy-buddy, it might have made sense. But why now? Why when Francesca is *dead*?

"Oh," Cassie murmurs.

"I know what you're thinking." Lydia holds up what had looked like a perfectly manicured hand, although Cassie now notices several of the fingernails have been chewed on. "You don't want to talk about your boyfriend's ex. But I'd like you to hear me out."

"Okay..."

"The thing is..." Lydia is staring hard at her now, which prompts Cassie to take another sip of wine. "I don't think Joel ever told you about my relationship with Francesca. Did he?"

Cassie frowns. "No..."

"I didn't think so." She crosses her legs and leans forward in her chair. "You see, I was the one who introduced Joel to Francesca."

Cassie's mouth falls open. "I... I had no idea."

Although it makes sense. Now she understands why Lydia was so defensive of Francesca. Why Cassie couldn't live up.

"Francesca was my sorority sister," Lydia says. Her eyes have become distant. "My little sister. I remember the first time I saw her walk into the Kappa house. She was taller than all the other freshman girls, and she carried herself like a woman ten years older. There was something about her that made everyone want to get to know her."

"Oh," Cassie mumbles because she's not sure what else to say.

“And when Francesca moved to the city after she graduated,” Lydia continues, “and she started her restaurant, I did everything I could to help her. Because she was still my little sister, and my job was to take care of her. I mean, she was my best friend. Like I said, she was Violet’s godmother.”

“I... I’m very sorry,” Cassie manages.

“You have no idea,” Lydia snorts. “I thought introducing her to Joel would make her life complete. That’s the most important decision a woman can make, you know—who she chooses for her husband. And I couldn’t imagine a better man for her. He was with someone else back then, and I had a sit-down with him—convinced him he could do better. He listened to me.” Lydia’s eyes become moist. “I thought I was helping Francesca.”

“It wasn’t your fault that she...” Cassie can’t bring herself to complete the sentence.

“No, it wasn’t.” Lydia lifts her slightly bloodshot eyes. “It was Joel’s fault.”

Cassie feels a buzzing in her head. It’s not a drunk feeling exactly. It’s something different. She feels almost woozy.

“Joel is responsible for Francesca’s death.” Lydia’s jaw tightens visibly. “He broke up with her and then two weeks later, she killed herself. Tell me he’s not responsible.”

Cassie tugs at her shirt collar. “Is it hot in here?”

There’s a sensation of heat all over her body. God, what’s wrong with her? What kind of wine is this?

“She was pregnant—did you know that?” Lydia says.

It’s the first thing Lydia’s said in the last sixty seconds that got through. “She was?”

Lydia nods. “Do you know what that must have been like for her to get dumped by the man she loved when she was pregnant with his child? No wonder she took her own life!” She frowns. “So when he started dating you, I felt angry that he was moving on. I didn’t think he deserved to be happy.”

“Yes...” Cassie murmurs.

“And that’s why I started following you.”

Cassie’s eyelids feel heavy. She’s trying to focus on what Lydia is saying, but she can’t. She can’t focus on anything. She knows Lydia is trying to tell her something, but she hears each scrap of a phrase individually and is unable to piece it together.

You...

Joel...

Needed to pay...

Never forgive...

And that’s the last thing Cassie remembers before she loses consciousness.

Chapter 55: The Ex

It doesn't surprise me at all to find Joel in Francesca's restaurant.

He comes here all the time. Or at least, he used to in the year after Francesca died. A family member of hers bought it and kept the name in her honor. Angela was Francesca's mother. She had the same name as my grandmother—yet another thing Francesca and I had in common.

But since he's been with Cassie, Joel hasn't been here as much. He's getting over it. He's been happy again for the first time in a long time.

I walk into the small restaurant that Francesca had once owned. The first time I came here, back when Francesca was still alive and kicking, I had been intensely jealous. She had the man I wanted, and she was living my dream of having her own restaurant. I had always imagined a small Italian bistro just like this one.

Sometimes Dean tells me I should go for it. Follow my dream—open my own restaurant. But I can't now. Not while Andrew is so young. And once he doesn't need me anymore, it will be too late. No, that dream has passed me by. But at least I can cook for my little family. Francesca will never cook for anyone ever again.

I enter the restaurant and walk to where Joel is sitting, drinking a glass of wine. He lifts his eyes when I approach his table, and he doesn't say anything when I fall into the seat across from him.

Joel is still as handsome as he ever was. These days I prefer Dean's looks though. I never get tired of staring into my husband's face. But Joel hasn't lost his old appeal. He looks like he'll age well. I bet all the women in the ER still hit on him.

"I really like Cassie," I say to break the silence.

Joel manages to lift his eyes. “So do I.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “So what are you doing here?”

He sighs and rakes a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. The thing with Francesca... that was rough. I’m still not over it. Sometimes I think I am, but I’m not.”

“I think you are.”

“No.” He says it firmly, without room for argument. “That was... awful. My whole relationship with her was... well, tumultuous.”

I offer a smile. “You said you wanted something different.”

“Don’t remind me.” He rubs his temples with his fingers. “Things are getting really intense now with Cassie and... I...”

I squint at him. “Wow, you’re really in love with her, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he admits. “I am. But part of me doesn’t want to be because... I can’t take losing someone else like I did with Francesca. I just can’t.”

“Why would you?”

“I don’t know.” He sighs. “Cassie’s been saying all these crazy things. She thinks some woman is *stalking* her. I don’t know where that’s coming from.”

“Here’s the thing.” I put my elbows on the table and lean forward. “I think she might be right.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Who do you think is stalking her?”

I hesitate. “It’s Lydia.”

“*Lydia*?” Joel snorts. “She can’t be bothered to stalk someone. She’s too important and busy working and... I don’t know... teaching Violet to speak Mandarin or something.”

I pause, uncertain if I should reveal the next piece of information. But Joel should know the whole story. “Lydia and

Pete are having a rough time, and she's... she's really missing Francesca a lot."

He winces. "She still blames me, doesn't she?"

"She does."

"I can't fault her." He rubs his temples. "I still blame myself." He frowns. "But that doesn't mean she'd—"

"She told me she did it."

Joel's eyes fly open. "She *told* you...?"

"Yes. She told me everything."

He shakes his head, unable to comprehend what I'm saying. "I can't believe Lydia would do that."

"You don't know what's been going on inside her head lately."

"Yes, but..."

"Look," I say. "I wasn't going to say anything about it because... well, I thought maybe it was something she needed to get out of her system and she wasn't hurting anyone. But now I'm not so sure." I take a breath. "Cassie told me she thinks someone has been in her apartment."

"Someone in her apartment?" His eyes widen. "Jesus, why didn't she tell me?" He jumps to his feet so quickly that the chair he's sitting in falls over backwards. "I've got to get to her. Now."

But he waits a minute for me to gather my belongings and follow him. As we walk toward the exit of the restaurant, I feel Joel's hand tug at my arm. "Hey, Anna," he says.

I turn to look at him. "Yes?"

His smile is crooked. "I'm really glad we're friends again."

I return his smile. "Me too."

Chapter 56: The Ex

The Uber ride to Cassie's apartment takes under ten minutes. I debate whether I should give her a call to let her know Joel is coming, and in the end, I decide to shoot her a text. She doesn't respond, but I figure she's busy.

When we get out at the building, I find Cassie's name on the intercom and wait for her to buzz us up. After about thirty seconds of waiting, I turn to Joel. "I don't get it," I say. "She told me to come over."

"I've got a key," Joel offers.

I step back and allow him to open the door, but it's certainly not what we expected. My stomach is doing flip-flops on the way up to Cassie's apartment. Something is going on. I can feel it in my gut. The same way I knew Francesca was up to something.

"I don't get it," I say again. "She said she was going to stay in the apartment and wait for me."

"Maybe she's in the shower?"

But I don't think she's in the shower. And I can tell from the look on Joel's face that he doesn't think so either. He presses the button on the elevator again, willing it to ascend faster. I think we're both frightened of what we're going to find up there.

When we get to the Cassie's door, I nudge Joel. "Don't ring. Just open it up."

We exchange silent looks. He fits his key in the lock and opens the door.

Joel's face blanches when he gets inside. I take a step back, my breath caught in my throat. Cassie is lying on the floor by her dining table, unconscious. Her dark hair is splayed around her and her face is colorless. Her eyes are open to slits.

And there's Lydia.

Standing over her, an unreadable expression on her face.

Oh my God. It's even worse than I had imagined.

"Cassie!" Joel rushes to his girlfriend's side. He's in doctor mode now, checking her pulse, seeing if she's breathing. He saved her the other night when she accidentally ate peanuts—this time it could be too late. "Cassie, wake up!"

I take a tentative step toward Lydia, whose mouth is hanging open. "Lydia, what have you done? What's going on here?"

Lydia's eyes dart around the room. "I didn't do anything! We were just... I mean, I was chatting with her and she passed out."

"Call 911!" Joel barks at us. He looks up at Lydia, who still has the deer-in-headlights look. "Unless you already did?"

"No," Lydia says softly. "I did not."

The look of anger on Joel's face is almost terrifying. "Why not?"

"Because... I..." She rings her hands together. "I didn't know what to do. She just... dropped. I'm not a doctor like you."

I reach for my phone within my purse and call 911. I tell them we've got an unconscious woman on the floor.

"They're on their way," I report.

"She's still breathing," Joel reports, a look of relief on his face. He looks up at Lydia. "What did you give her?"

Lydia sinks onto the sofa and buries her face in her hands. "I'm sorry," she whimpers. "I just miss Francesca so much... I wasn't... I didn't mean to..."

But Joel isn't listening. He's crouched next to Cassie, whispering to her, "Hang in there. Please hang in there. You're going to be okay..."

Chapter 57: The New Girl

Cassie has no idea where she is when she wakes up.

The last thing she remembers is having drinks with Lydia. And Lydia was saying terrible things and looking at her like she wished she were dead. And then...

Nothing.

Cassie blinks her eyes and rubs them as her vision clears. She's lying in a bed—that much is clear. She sees a white ceiling. An IV pole with a line leading to her left arm. A hospital gown.

And Joel, fast asleep in a chair next to her bed.

She isn't sure what happened, but one thing is very clear: Joel saved her life. Again.

"Joel." Her voice cracks on the word and she clears his throat. "Joel, wake up."

His eyes flutter open. But when he sees she's awake, he sits up straight. He smiles as wide as she's ever seen. "Cassie, thank God."

"What happened?" she mumbles. Her mouth feels like there's cotton in it.

He hesitates. "It's... complicated."

She rubs at her eyes again. Her head throbs dully. "Please tell me."

He leans forward, burying his face in his hands. He's silent for nearly a full minute before speaking. "Lydia tried to kill you."

Cassie sucks in a breath. "*What?*"

"I know. I can't believe it either." He lets out a sigh. "She and Francesca were so close. Like sisters. And she blamed me for Francesca's death."

"That's crazy!"

He shakes his head. “Not really. *I* blamed me. I still blame myself.”

He’s quiet for a moment, staring at the wall. “She wanted to punish me. She thought if something happened to you, it would push me over the edge.” He reaches for her hand. “And it would have.”

Cassie swallows a lump in her throat. “How did you figure out she was the one responsible?”

“Anna told me, actually,” he says.

“Anna?” She frowns, remembering how she spoke to Anna on the phone before Lydia arrived. How worried she had seemed. “I didn’t realize you and Anna were even friendly.”

He coughs into his hand. “I don’t know if you knew this, but Anna and I used to... date. No, not just date. She was my girlfriend. For a long time. A really long time.”

That surprises her. Anna and Con seem like they’re so made for each other, it’s hard to imagine her with anyone else. But then again, it makes sense in a crazy kind of way. Like Cassie and Francesca, Anna has dark hair and eyes. Cassie heard Anna’s maiden name is Mascolo. She’s certainly Joel’s type. She wonders who ended it.

“If not for Anna,” Joel says, “we wouldn’t have gotten there in time to save you. And I might have lost you.”

Cassie imagines that possibility but it’s hard to wrap her head around it. She nearly died twice in one week. She wonders if Lydia was responsible for the peanuts in her Chinese food. She has a bad feeling about that one.

Joel gives her hand a squeeze. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Cassie. When I thought I might lose you, God... it was like the end for me.”

She squeezes him back. “I feel the same way about you.”

“Don’t ever scare me like that again,” he admonishes her. “I... I love you.”

“I love you too,” she says.

Of course she does. After all, he saved her life.

Epilogue: Two Months Later

Cassie

“Andrew is such a good baby!”

Cassie’s got Anna’s baby on her lap and is bouncing him up and down. He laughs with each bounce, a dimple poking out on his cheek just like his dad. Cassie doesn’t have a lot of experience with babies, but she can’t imagine a cuter baby than this one.

“He’s really well-behaved,” Anna says with a smile. “He’s always smiling and happy.”

“Of course,” Con says, “that’s only because Anna is the best mother in the world.”

Anna laughs, but Cassie’s not sure it’s an exaggeration. Anna dotes on little Andrew so much. She tends to his every need. She really is a supermom. Cassie’s not sure Con’s a superdad, but the way he dotes on Anna, she would definitely call him a superhusband.

Con nudges Joel, who is sitting on the couch. “This giving you guys any ideas?”

Joel laughs and doesn’t say anything, but the two of them exchange meaningful looks. They’ve decided to go ahead with moving in together, and Cassie feels like she’s ready. And when she looks at little Andrew, she thinks maybe having babies in the near future might not be such a bad thing.

Of course, she’s got a lot on her mind lately. Business at Bookland has picked up considerably lately, in no small part thanks to Joel. When she complained to him about how half their “business” seems to be turning away medical students looking for textbooks, he said, “And you don’t carry medical books because...?”

It was a valid point. He helped her set up a contact with the medical students and residents to buy their used textbooks for cheap. Now she's got six full shelves of medical books, and they're flying off the shelves—each one selling for far more money than a book of poetry. She doesn't want to betray her grandparents' vision of the bookstore, but this is what's going to keep the doors open. It's the perfect solution.

And it means she got rid of the dresser at the back of her closet. Yes, she could have saved it as insurance, but she didn't want the temptation. And she can't afford the risk.

"My turn!" Joel says, holding out his arms for Cassie to pass him the baby. "Come to Uncle Joel."

Andrew gurgles with delight as he gets into Joel's arms. Cassie's gotten more comfortable with holding him lately, but she still feels a bit awkward. She tries not to think of Lydia's comment about her not being "maternal."

Not that Lydia had a right to comment on anything, given what she tried to do to Cassie. She admitted that she was the one who threw paint on Cassie's bookstore entrance and wrote "slut" on her apartment door. She admitted to vandalizing the bookstore, although swore the door was unlocked. She admitted she slipped Maureen the Homeless Lady a twenty to forget her face. Then slipped her another twenty to follow Cassie around and freak her out.

But she won't admit to other things, even though the evidence is smacking her in the face. She denies making any calls to Cassie, even though the police found multiple burner phones in her home that they confirmed were used to call Cassie's phone. She denies ever being inside Cassie's apartment until she was invited in, even though they found a set of keys to Cassie's apartment deep in Lydia's dresser—God knows how she got her hands on those. Cassie imagines she took Joel's keys when he was visiting Pete.

Lydia also insists she came to Cassie's apartment that night to make peace, not to poison her. Except there was an empty bottle of the same sleeping pill in her medicine cabinet

that they found in Cassie's bloodstream when she was taken to the hospital.

And most damning, Joel and Anna caught Lydia standing over Cassie, while she lay unconscious on the floor. Lydia hadn't called 911. She was simply waiting for Cassie to die.

The fact that Lydia could still claim to be innocent after all that is evidence that some people think they can get away with anything. Fortunately, Lydia is currently in jail, awaiting trial for attempted murder. It's a load off Cassie's mind to know she's off the streets. Although she feels a twinge of sadness that Violet doesn't have her mother at home, because if nothing else, Lydia definitely loved her little girl.

"Uh, Anna..." Joel is holding up Andrew, who has spit up a ton of milk. "Little help?"

Anna laughs and takes the baby from him. She dabs at his chin with a tissue, but it doesn't quite do the trick. "Cassie," she says. "Would you mind terribly grabbing a rag from the top drawer in Andrew's room?"

"Of course!" Cassie leaps to her feet, happy to help. As long as Anna doesn't ask her to change any diapers.

She goes to Andrew's bedroom, which is painted a vivid sky blue. There's a colorful mobile over his bed and a toy box filled with stuffed animals. It's the ideal room for a baby boy—she can feel the love emanating from every corner of the room. She goes to the blue dresser in the corner of the room and opens the top drawer.

And her heart stops.

Why is there a flip-phone tucked in the corner of the drawer?

She glances around, making sure she's alone. Then she picks up the phone gingerly. She flips it open and it springs to life.

Why would Anna have this phone? Anna uses an iPhone. Cassie's seen her use it a million times. It's not *Andrew's* phone.

There's a green button on the phone that seems to be used to make calls. Cassie presses it, and the phone starts to dial a number. The last number that was called with the phone.

That's when Cassie hears ringing in the other room.

No. It couldn't be.

"Cassie."

Cassie jerks her head up. The phone slides from her hands and clatters onto the floor, smashing to pieces. Anna is standing at the door to Andrew's room, a sweet smile on her lips. She's holding Cassie's cell phone.

"Your phone was ringing, Cassie," Anna says.

And then Anna closes the door behind her. When she turns to Cassie, her eyes are dark and foreboding.

Anna

During the second half of my pregnancy, I couldn't sleep.

People warned me that as I got closer to my delivery date, sleep would elude me more and more. But even before my stomach was bulging and pressing on my bladder all night long, I had horrible insomnia. And because of the pregnancy, pills were out of the question. The best I could do was practice good sleep hygiene and drink glasses of warm milk.

One night, Dean woke up and caught me pacing our bedroom at one in the morning. He cracked an eye open, rubbing at his already messy dark hair. "Anna," he mumbled. "What are you doing? Come to bed."

"I can't sleep."

He yawned as he struggled into a sitting position. Before the baby came, he still made it to the gym a few nights a week, and his well-muscled bare chest was extremely appealing. He grinned at me. "You want me to wear you out?"

“Yes, please,” I said, because Dean had delivered on the promise he made during his first date. He was a damn good doctor. He was a damn good kisser. And he was damn good in bed. I mean, *damn*.

After it was over, he passed out with his arms wrapped around me, but instead of wearing me out, the good sex had energized me. I slipped out of his arms and reached for my phone on the nightstand.

The WhereAmI app was still on my phone. Dean allowed me to install it on his so that I would be able to locate him wherever he was, which felt increasingly important as my due date neared. One other person I was also able to track was Lydia.

This was, more or less, innocent. Lydia had no regard for anyone else’s time but her own, so she thought nothing of telling me we were meeting at a given time, then showing up twenty minutes or even half-an-hour late. She never called to say she’d be late, or if she did, it was always after I was already sitting in the restaurant like an idiot, waiting for her. So one day, after she had been an enraging forty-two minutes late for our lunch together, I plucked her phone out of her purse while she was visiting the ladies’ room. The screen was locked but her password was Violet’s birthday. It took me thirty seconds to install WhereAmI on her phone, so that I’d always know exactly when she was on her way to meet me.

I loaded the app on a whim. Dean’s location was blinking in the same place as mine—his phone was five feet away from me. But Lydia wasn’t home. She was somewhere else. Somewhere surprising.

She was at Joel’s new girlfriend’s bookstore.

Dean was sound asleep, snoring softly. I got out of bed, shrugged on my coat, and called for an Uber to meet me downstairs. Ten minutes later, I was outside Bookland. Well, down the block. I instructed Pierre, my Uber driver, to keep in the distance. I slipped him a twenty to shut off his lights and let me stay in the car to watch.

It was after two in the morning by then and the street was very quiet. Lydia's BMW was parked by the bookstore, and she was standing on the street in her black coat. Her blond hair glowed in the streetlights. I could only just barely make out the splash of paint on the door, and there was a homeless woman who suddenly started shouting at Lydia. Lydia said something back that I couldn't make out, then dug around in her purse until she came up with something that she handed to the woman. Money, I later realized.

When I heard from the grapevine that Cassie's store had been vandalized, I kept my mouth shut. But I started tracking Lydia in the app. I tracked her to Cassie's apartment. Back to the store again multiple times.

I considered blowing the whistle on her. I never forgave Lydia for what she did to me, and this seemed like a great opportunity to humiliate her. I could have told Joel what she was doing, but she would have denied it. And after that first time, I never caught her in the act again.

So I decided to make my own evidence. I bought three burner phones. Untraceable.

And I started to make my calls.

Cassie

"Anna," Cassie gasps. She looks down at the pieces of the shattered phone on the ground, then back at Anna. "What... why...?"

"I don't expect you to understand," Anna says.

Cassie backs up, nearly stumbling on a teddy bear. "But I thought Lydia..."

"Lydia started the job. I finished it for her."

Cassie blinks rapidly. She doesn't know what to say. She'd thought Lydia had to be lying when she refused to admit

to some of the harassment Cassie had experienced. It turns out, she wasn't lying.

"Look in the drawer again," Anna says. "There's something else I want you to see."

Cassie's hands are shaking as she goes back to the drawer, digging frantically through the cloth diapers, but she knows what she's going to find even before she sees the brown book inside with the gold lettering on the cover. *A Christmas Carol*.

A first edition. Worth twenty-five thousand dollars.

Except not really.

"After I had left my little love note in your closet," Anna says, "I poked around a little. I didn't expect to find that. I guess even a goody two shoes like you has secrets."

Cassie can't find the words to speak. Anna was the one in her apartment. Anna had made the calls to her. Was Anna also the one who sprinkled peanuts in her food?

"I have to hand it to your grandfather," Anna goes on. "It really does look like a first edition. I brought it to an expert and even he had trouble proving it was a forgery. I can see how they managed to fool all those people."

Cassie had been shocked the first time she heard the story. It started innocently enough, when Grandpa Marv had somehow gotten his hands on a real first edition of *Gone With the Wind*. It was in good condition, and he sold it for ten-thousand dollars. After several collectors heard about this sale, he received multiple calls asking if he had any other collectible editions. He didn't. But it gave him an idea.

It turns out forging old books is not at all difficult. Marv bought walnut oil to age the books and would read up for hours on techniques to make the books appear old and worn. Then he forged certificates of authenticity.

His saving grace was that he didn't get greedy. He only sold off one book every few months—just enough to keep the floundering bookstore from going under.

Bea and Marv never would have done it if they weren't desperate. Cassie didn't discover the truth until Grandpa Marv was already gone, and she was helping Bea sort through some of his belongings. Cassie had picked up one of the perfect first editions and stared at it, hoping it was real but knowing in her heart it couldn't be.

Bea's excuses were tearful. *We couldn't make enough money. We would have lost everything.*

You can never do this again, Cassie admonished her.

But Bea did it again, and Cassie turned a blind eye, knowing her grandmother did what she had to. It was only six months after Bea's death when she got a call from a collector herself. *Do you have anything I can buy?*

She said no. She said no to the next person who called too. But in a month when sales were particularly dismal, Cassie thought to herself, *Well, what's the harm?*

Each time she made a transaction, she would tell herself it was the last one. But what choice did she have? Without that extra money, her business was gone. She couldn't lose her grandparents' store.

And she wasn't hurting anyone. Not really. The forgeries were excellent, nearly indistinguishable from the originals. At the time of his death, he had a whole drawer full of his perfect forgeries. And a list of rich and foolish clients who would take them off his hands for an excellent price.

The buyers thought they now owned the originals. Bookland kept its doors open. And every day, Cassie was terrified of the police banging on her door.

"These things always catch up to you eventually." Anna cocks her head to the side. "Did anyone ever question you when you were unloading those books onto your unsuspecting victims?"

Cassie swallows a hard lump in her throat. "Sometimes."

Anna cocks her head to the side. "What do you think the jail sentence is for forgery?"

Cassie has looked this up many times. Depending on the amount of money involved, the penalty for forgery can be anywhere from a misdemeanor warranting a fine and probation, or it can be a felony with a ten-year prison sentence. But Cassie knows how much money was involved. It would be a felony.

“And to see your lovely grandparents’ names dragged through the mud in the newspapers...” Anna clucks her tongue. “So sad. So unnecessary.”

“What do you want?” Cassie whispers.

Anna’s eyes darken. “End it with him. Tonight. And you never have to hear from me again.”

“But...” Cassie sputters. “You’re so *happy*. You have a beautiful son. And you love Con, don’t you?”

“Of course I love him! This isn’t about him.”

“But... why...?”

Anna considers the question for a moment, cocking her head to the side. “You know how they say the best revenge is living well?”

Cassie’s mouth is too dry to speak but she manages to nod.

“Well, that’s bullshit,” Anna says. “The best revenge is making sure the people who wronged you lose everyone they love and die miserable and alone.”

With those words, Anna turns on her heel, opens the door, and leaves the room.

Anna

Up until my delivery, I was having the ideal pregnancy. Aside from my insomnia, I had never felt better. I never even had morning sickness. And Dean and I were so excited about the

baby coming, it was all we could think about. Our marriage had never been stronger.

Then things went wrong.

I was in labor for over two days before the monitor on my belly showed the baby in distress. I needed to go for a C-section. Immediately. STAT.

Considering my husband is a doctor himself and had taken part in many surgeries during his training, I'd never seen him so white. But he gowned up as they rushed me in for the C-section. He held my hand, even as the monitor started beeping furiously. *Something is wrong*. It was my last thought before I lost consciousness.

I found out later that they couldn't stop the bleeding. They told Dean I would die if they didn't perform a hysterectomy. He told them to go ahead and do it. I don't blame him for that decision, even though he beat himself up over the whole thing later. He wanted his son and his wife to survive. He did what he had to do.

After a transfusion of several units of blood, I recovered. We had a beautiful, perfect newborn boy. But it was bittersweet. Dean and I hadn't decided how many children we wanted, but we were agreed on at least one more. Finding out I would never get pregnant again was a tremendous blow. I begged him not to tell anyone because I couldn't stand the outpouring of sympathy.

I was very protective of Andrew when I got home. Overprotective? I don't think so. He was my baby. My only baby. I had a duty to him. To keep him safe.

Then Joel started coming to visit us. I could tell from the look in his eyes how badly he wanted to be a father. His new girlfriend Cassie was only twenty-six. She could give him six babies if he wanted. When I asked my doctor for answers as to why I had such a traumatic delivery, he had cited my age as one of the reasons. *Advanced maternal age*. A risk for everything. But it was only because of Joel that I didn't have a baby until thirty-seven. He made me wait. Then he dumped me.

It was his fault. His fault I didn't have a uterus anymore. His fault Andrew wouldn't have a younger brother or sister.

His goddamn fault.

So one day when he and Dean were watching television together in the apartment while Andrew was napping, I slipped his ring of keys out of his jacket pocket and went to the local hardware store to copy them. It was even easier than when I had taken Francesca's keys.

I remembered Cassie's peanut allergy. I knew Lydia would be the one who would get blamed if she died, especially if I slipped that homeless woman another twenty to jog her memory.

Joel was untouchable. But Cassie? It was too easy to get to Cassie.

Cassie

Cassie's knees are trembling as she exits the baby's bedroom. She manages to make her way to the sofa, where the three adults are chatting animatedly while Andrew gurgles happily in Anna's arms. She collapses onto the sofa next to Joel.

He reaches out and squeezes her knee. "You okay, Cassie?"

Cassie lifts her eyes to look at Anna, who is bouncing her son slightly on her lap. Anna looks in Cassie's direction, and her eyes darken. A shudder goes through Cassie, and she thinks she might throw up.

"Yes, Cassie," Anna says. "You look a bit ill. Could I... offer you something to drink?"

"No!" Cassie gasps. "I... I'm fine. Just fine."

"Good." Anna's lips pull up in a smile, her eyes still dark. "Let's keep it that way."

Cassie can't stop picturing the dark look in Anna's eyes even later, after they leave the apartment and go out into the brisk spring night. She shivers and Joel puts his arm around her, thinking she's cold, but she's not cold. She's terrified.

I don't want to go to jail. Not for ten years. Not for one year. Not for one month.

"You feel like sushi for dinner?" Joel asks her as they stand on the corner.

Cassie hugs her arms to her chest. She has no appetite, but her stomach rumbles. "Fine."

He squints at her in the fading light of the evening. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she lies. "I'm fine."

He hails a cab and gives them a familiar address. It isn't until they've reached the sushi bar that Cassie realizes why the address sounded familiar. It's the same conveyor belt sushi place where they had their first date.

Anna

On the night before Lydia was accused of poisoning Cassie, Lydia tearfully confessed everything to me in the kitchen while our dinner burned.

"I was so angry at Joel," she murmured into the tissue clasped in her hand. "I couldn't stand the thought of him being happy. But it was... stupid."

"I'm sure he'd understand, Lydia," I told her. "You've been going through a lot."

Lydia cast a glance at the living room, where Dean and Pete were chatting animatedly. "You have no idea, Anna," she said. "Constantine has been so good to you. You don't know what it does to you..."

I didn't point out how after my horrible breakup with Joel, I had fallen apart. And she had abandoned me. She had been a terrible friend to me. A terrible person.

"You know what you need to do," I told her.

She looked up at me, frowning. "What?"

"You need to talk to Cassie," I said. "Make peace with her." I put my hand on the bottle of wine I'd brought her—the one I had known she wouldn't touch because it was an inferior brand. "Go see her tomorrow. Bring her wine as a peace offering."

Later, after everyone had too much to drink and were watching television in the living room, I slipped into Lydia and Pete's bedroom. It was funny how nobody even noticed, but then again, I was the only sober one there. I didn't dare drink if I knew I'd be responsible for Andrew later. I've heard horror stories about horrible fates of babies left in the care of drunk parents.

The bedroom was as expansive as the rest of their apartment. Dean and I live well, but you could fit two of our bedrooms into theirs. I sat on her bed, gasping at the softness of the bedspread. I lay down on the bed for a moment and it was heavenly. Like sleeping on a cloud. If I had this bed, I never would have developed insomnia.

Reluctantly, I sat up again and walked over to Lydia's antique dresser. I removed one of the burner phones from my purse with a tissue from her vanity table and dropped it into one of the drawers, nestled between two pairs of designer jeans.

Then I went into the master bathroom. I thumbed open the medicine cabinet. Lydia's sleeping pills were in there, but not just that. God, they had enough pills in there to kill a horse. I emptied three-quarters of the bottle of sleeping pills into my hand, then grabbed some of the Xanax and a bunch of Vicodin. I doubted anyone would notice when I dropped them into the bottle of wine I brought.

There was, of course, a chance Pete might have finished off the bottle of wine that evening and never woken up. That would be even better—when a husband is murdered, they always look to the wife.

I was surprised by the anger I felt for Lydia as I emptied the pills into the wine bottle. I hadn't felt this way in years. Not since Francesca.

There are three people in my life who wronged me:

Lydia, Francesca, and Joel.

Lydia saw a few cracks in my otherwise solid relationship with Joel, and encouraged him to end it so that her best friend and sorority sister Francesca would have a shot with a great guy. I believe Joel would have asked me to marry me if Lydia hadn't intercepted.

Francesca went along with Lydia's plan to seduce the man who was rightfully mine. I have no idea if she got pregnant on purpose so that he wouldn't be able to leave her. I suppose not, since she never ended up telling him her news. If she had survived, he surely would have forgiven her and married her.

It was so easy to follow Francesca back then. Easy to swipe her keys from her purse. Easy to use those keys to drop her entire bottle of sleeping pills into the wine bottle she had on her counter, then watched the combination of alcohol and benzodiazepines do their trick. I led her to the bathroom. I found her razor.

She didn't have a chance.

I didn't intend it to look like a suicide. I left clues that the whole thing had been staged, and Francesca hadn't taken her own life. The clues were meant to lead to Joel—meant to send him to jail for a very long time for murdering his pregnant ex-girlfriend. But the police were lazy. Joel was questioned, but the death was ruled a suicide.

Joel was despondent over Francesca's death. He took a long leave from work, but he didn't go to prison. He recovered. He went back to work and then started dating Cassie. He fell in love with her. They're going to get married.

They're going to have children together. They're going to grow old together.

He never paid. Not really.

And he was the worst one of them all. Because I had *loved* him.

Cassie

Cassie wonders if it's a coincidence he brought her here to this sushi restaurant, of all places. It was a good meal and a lovely evening, but somehow, they'd never been here again. She remembers how they had joked about different types of conveyor belt restaurants. Despite everything, she smiles at the memory.

Joel holds the taxi door open for her and takes her hand in his unnecessarily as they walk the ten feet from the cab to the restaurant. As she walks inside, bright lights assault her eyes. Her right temple throbs and she regrets coming here. She should have told him she wanted to go home.

The host takes them to a booth next to the conveyor belt. It could be the very same booth they occupied on their first date. Cassie can't remember.

"You remember this place?" he asks.

She forces a smile. "Of course I do."

"Our first date," he says. "First of many. I knew it would be."

"Did you?" she asks vaguely.

"Absolutely. I had a feeling about you."

Cassie looks around desperately for a waiter. "Do you think we could get something to drink?"

He laughs, mistaking her anxiety for something else. "Sure."

He hails the waiter and they get two glasses of wine. Cassie taps her fingers on the table between them, her heart pounding in her chest. She can still see Anna's eyes.

End it with him. Tonight.

She has to do it. She doesn't have a choice. It would be too easy for Anna to go to the police. And if she does, if Joel finds out about this enormous lie she's been keeping from him, that she's a *criminal*, it will be over anyway.

And anyway, there's always been something missing with Joel—something she could never quite put her finger on. Yes, he did save her life once. Well, twice. It fooled her into thinking she was in love with him, but as she stares across the table at him, she realizes she never really was. He's not the Heathcliff to her Catherine. He's not the Marv to her Bea. He's just a man. A totally ordinary man. There will be other men. The city is full of them.

"Listen, Cassie," he says. He takes her hand across the table, and the warmth of his fingers only makes her realize how cold her own fingers are. "The time I've been dating you has been the best time of my life."

"Yes." Cassie lifts her glass of wine.

"I know it's a little soon," he continues, "but sometimes you just get a feeling and you have to go with it. You know?"

Cassie drains her glass in two gulps. "Uh huh..."

"So..."

She glances around. Where's the waiter? She needs another drink.

"Will you marry me, Cassie?"

The words penetrate through the haze in her brain. Her attention shoots back to Joel and she's suddenly aware he's holding a blue velvet box. The hinge of the box creaks as he opens it up, and she's staring at a huge diamond. Too big for a girl like her.

End it with him. Tonight.

“Joel...”

“Please say yes, Cassie. Please be my wife.”

She doesn't know he picked out the ring with Anna last week. She doesn't know it was Anna who suggested bringing Cassie to the restaurant where they had their first date. She doesn't know Anna assured him Cassie would say yes.

“I'm sorry,” Cassie says. “I'm so sorry, but... I... I can't.”

His face drops. Suddenly, he looks much older than his age. He could be twenty years her senior. “*What?*”

“I can't,” Cassie says again, more firmly this time.

And I can never tell you why.

She stands up from her seat, her legs nearly giving way beneath her. She's glad he didn't get on his knees to ask. It would have made it harder, but it was hard enough as is.

“I'm sorry,” she says one last time.

And then she leaves him sitting there in the restaurant where they had their first date, holding the blue velvet box.

Anna

“Anna?”

Dean's voice above my head jars me out of my almost sleep. I'd never dozed off with Andrew in my arms. I look down at his sweet sleeping face, feeling a spike of terror that I could have dropped him or worse. My baby. My only baby.

I have to be more careful.

“Anna,” he says again. His brows are knitted together. “You need to go to sleep.”

“I'm fine.” I stifle a yawn and Andrew stirs. “I just took a nap.”

“No. You were asleep for like ten minutes. That’s not even enough to get to REM sleep.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Please, Anna,” he says, holding out his arms. “Give me the baby.”

I shake my head and hold Andrew tighter to my chest. “You have to work tomorrow. I don’t. I’ll stay up with him.”

“I’ll call in sick then.”

“It’s fine. Your patients need you.”

“It’s not fine.” Dean sinks down onto the sofa next to me. There are purple circles under his dark eyes. “Anna, I’m worried about you. You never sleep. And ever since the baby came, you’ve been... acting strangely...”

I snort. “Acting strangely?”

“You don’t think so?” He squeezes his knees with his fists. “Like you’re obsessed with thinking our neighbors are trying to steal Andrew. You talk about it constantly, even though they haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You don’t see the way Donna looks at me. She asks a million questions about Andrew.”

“She’s just being friendly. Mark said Donna doesn’t even like children.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Right.” He nods, but I can tell he doesn’t agree. How could he not notice Donna’s desperation when she smiles and tells me Andrew looks cute in his little coat? “And then in the evening when I’m here, sometimes you just... disappear. You just pull on your coat and leave without saying a word. Where do you go?”

“I don’t go anywhere.”

“Obviously you go *somewhere*.”

I stare at him. I have no idea what he’s talking about. I don’t disappear.

Do I?

His eyes soften. “I know it was hard on you what happened. It was hard on me too. Believe me.”

I look up sharply. It was awful for him, but he isn’t the one who got butchered on the operating table. “Please don’t compare.”

“I’m sorry,” he says quickly.

I shake my head and clutch my abdomen. It’s still sore where they cut into me.

“I just...” He rubs the back of his neck. “Look, I’ve been googling postpartum psychosis and—”

“Postpartum psychosis!” I burst out, loud enough that Andrew’s eyes fly open. “You think I’m *psychotic*?”

“No, no... I don’t... I just...” He blinks a few times. “Look, you told me you’d consider going to a therapist when we got back from the hospital...”

I fumble with my nursing bra. “I’m not psychotic, Dean.”

“I never said you were. I just don’t want things to get out of control.” He chews on his lip. “Please just get some sleep tonight, Anna. Will you at least do that for me?”

My heart is pounding. I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I tried, even though I’ve been awake for... well, a lot of hours. Psychotic? How could he *say* that to me?

All right, maybe most people wouldn’t break into another woman’s house and write on her walls. But I did it for a reason. A good reason. I wish I could explain it to Dean, but he wouldn’t understand. He never even thinks about that girl who dumped him in Chicago.

“I’m going out,” I say as I hook my bra back up and thrust Andrew into Dean’s arms. “I need to get some air. You can take the baby if you want him so bad.”

Dean watches me, his eyebrows still bunched together. He’s worried, but he’s worried over nothing. I’m fine. Better

than fine. I've been thinking so much more clearly than I have in a very long time.

"It's cold out," Dean points out. Andrew is wailing in his arms. "Why don't you stay here?"

"I need some air," I say again.

"Where are you going?"

"I haven't decided."

New York is a big city—I'm sure I'll find somewhere to go. I could walk around the park. I could see a movie. I could visit Francesca's restaurant.

Or I could go to Joel's apartment. Maybe he and I need to have a little talk. Cassie was panicked enough by my threats that she's surely dumped him by now. I want to see his face—see him crumble the way he made me crumble when he broke my heart. And if Cassie hasn't managed to destroy him, maybe I need to pay a visit to her. Convince her. One way or another, there will be retribution.

Because I lied about one other thing.

I absolutely did mean to kill Francesca.

And I'd do it again.

THE END

(Keep reading for an excerpt of my new book, *The Perfect Son*)

Acknowledgments

It is incredible how much help I get from the point I finish my first draft to the final version. There are times when things happen in my life to make me realize how lucky I am to have the support I have—friends and family who are always there to give me an opinion or more.

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Did you enjoy reading *The Ex*?

If so, please send me an email at fzzziatrist@gmail.com. I would love to hear from you. Or consider leaving a review on Amazon!

Check out my website at:

<http://doccartoon.blogspot.com/>

In the meantime, please enjoy a short excerpt of my new book, *The Perfect Son...*

The Perfect Son

Transcript of police interview with Erika Cass:

“Can you please tell us what happened, Mrs. Cass?”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“I know what you found. I know what you must be thinking.”

“What do you think we found, Mrs. Cass?”

“A... a dead body.”

“And can you explain how this happened?”

“I...”

“Mrs. Cass?”

“Am I under arrest? Please just tell me.”

“At this time, no, you are not under arrest. But obviously, we need to know what happened.”

“He was... stabbed to death.”

“And who did it?”

“...”

“Mrs. Cass?”

“I did it. I killed him, Detective. And I would do it again.”

About one week earlier

Erika

You're not supposed to have a favorite child.

If you ask most mothers, they'll say something along the lines of "Sammy is really smart, but Nicole has a great heart." They refuse to choose. And some of them are sincere. Some mothers genuinely love both their children equally.

Others, like me, are lying through their teeth.

"Good morning!" I say as my fourteen-year-old daughter Hannah pads into the kitchen. She's in her bare feet and an old pair of gym shorts, and her reddish brown hair in disarray around her face. She's supposed to be dressed and ready for school, but clearly she's not. She always waits until the last possible second to get ready. She likes to keep me in suspense over whether or not she's going to make the school bus. But I've learned from experience that nagging her doesn't help at all—in fact, it only seems to slow her down—so I turn back to the eggs I'm scrambling in a frying pan.

"Mom!" Hannah can't seem to say that word anymore without the whiny edge to her voice that draws the word out for at least two syllables. *Mo-om*. I remember how happy I was the first time she said "mama." I shake my head at my old naïve self. "Why do you have to say it like that?"

"Say it like what? I just said 'Good morning.'"

"Right." Hannah groans. "Like that."

"Like what?"

"Like... oh my God, you know what I mean."

"I really don't, Hannah."

"You say it like... I don't know. Just don't say it like that."

I'm not sure how to respond, so I focus my attention back on the eggs. I pride myself in making really fantastic eggs. It's one of my superpowers. My eggs are so good that when one of Hannah's friends ate them on the morning after a sleepover, she said that I should be the lunch lady at their school. It was the highest compliment.

Hannah yawns loudly and scratches at the rat's nest on her head. "What's for breakfast?"

I ignore the irony: if I asked Hannah what she was making for breakfast while she was very clearly in the middle of cooking eggs, she would have a meltdown. "I'm making eggs."

"Eggs? I hate eggs."

"What are you talking about? I thought eggs are your favorite breakfast."

"Yeah. When I was, like, eight years old."

I put down the spatula I've been using to slowly stir the eggs. That's the trick to making good eggs. Cook them low and slow. "I made them for you this weekend and you ate them up."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they're my *favorite*. God, Mom."

I don't know what to say to that. It seems like lately, every conversation I have with my daughter is an exercise in trying not to say something really mean back to her. I close my eyes and repeat my mantra to myself: *I am the adult. This is just a phase.*

After fourteen years, it's harder to convince myself it's all just a phase.

"What else is for breakfast?" Hannah asks, even though she is two feet away from the refrigerator and three feet away from the pantry.

"Frozen waffles?"

“Yuck.” She sticks out her tongue. “What else?”

“You can make yourself some cold cereal.”

“What kind of cereal do we have?”

I sigh. “I don’t know, Hannah. Go look in the pantry.”

She lets out a grunt as she stands up that would make you think she is ninety years old rather than a high school freshman. She limps over to the pantry and studies the boxes of cereal intently.

While Hannah contemplates the pantry, my son, Liam, joins us in the kitchen. Unlike his sister, Liam is fully dressed in what is a surprisingly nice blue button-down shirt and khaki slacks. I bought a new wardrobe for him over the summer when he shot up four inches and all his old clothes looked comically short. He recently turned sixteen, which means he went to the DMV last month with my husband to get his learner’s permit to drive. I had thought my son getting his learner’s permit would fill me with terror, but I’m oddly calm about the whole thing. Liam will be a good driver. He’ll be careful, he’ll pay close attention to the road, and he’ll never drink and drive. I’m certain of that much.

That’s not why I’m worried about him driving.

“Eggs. I love eggs. Thanks, mom!”

Liam’s lips spread into an appreciative smile. He was always an attractive kid, but in the last couple of years, he’s grown downright handsome. We were out at a restaurant as a family last weekend, and I caught a woman who was in her twenties giving him a second look. A full grown adult was checking him out! There is something about his thick dark hair and chocolate-colored eyes that almost twinkle when he smiles. Unlike Hannah, Liam never needed braces, and his smile reveals a row of perfectly straight, white teeth.

According to my mother, Liam looks very much the way my father did when he was young. My father died when I was a child and I barely remember him, but I’ve seen pictures, and I agree the resemblance is uncanny. I keep one of those photos

in a drawer by my bed, and lately, every time I look at it, I get a pang in my chest. It was hard enough knowing my dad never got to see me grow up, and it's another sting to know he'll never meet the grandson who looks just like him.

Hannah pulls a box of Cheerios out of the pantry and studies the label, her nose crinkling.

"What's in Cheerios?" she asks me.

"Poison."

"Mom!" That was at least four syllables right there. *M-o-o-o-m*. "You *know* I'm trying to lose weight and be healthy. Don't you want me to be healthy?"

Hannah has always been a little on the chubby side. I think she looks cute, but in the last year, she's been obsessed with losing ten pounds, although she has not done anything to lose it. In fact, when I brought home a bag of chips that I had been planning to pair with guacamole to bring to a mom's night out last month, Hannah demolished it before I made it out the door. I ended up bringing some sliced up apples. They haven't invited me back.

"Of course I want you to be healthy," I say.

She rolls her eyes. Hannah has mastered the eye roll. It's her favorite facial expression. It can be used when I've asked her to do something she doesn't want to do. Or when I've said something so terribly lame, she just can't bear it. Or best of all, when I express any sort of love or affection.

"Eggs in two minutes," I say to Liam.

"No rush. I'm gonna have some orange juice." Liam goes for the fridge, but he's not quick enough. Hannah shoves him aside to get to the quart of milk. He raises his eyebrows, but he lets his sister get away with it without commenting.

"What are you all dressed up for, Liam?" I ask as I turn off the heat on the stove. Usually my son wears jeans and a T-shirt, regardless of the weather. I'm just happy when they're clean.

“Debate.” He finally gets his turn and grabs the orange juice from the fridge. He pours himself a heaping glass, so full that the juice is licking the edges, threatening to spill over. Like every other teenage boy in the world, Liam has a huge appetite even though his build is lanky and athletic. “We’re competing against Lincoln High after school.”

“Can I come to watch?”

Hannah rolls her eyes. “*Seriously?* Liam’s debates are mega boring.”

Liam smiles crookedly and takes a swig from his orange juice. “She’s right. It won’t be fun for you.”

I scrape the eggs onto a plate for him, giving him his portion in addition to the eggs I made for Hannah. I’ll make more for my husband later if he wants it—Jason should be back from his run before long. “It will be fun if you’re up there.”

“Okay, sure.” Liam digs into the plate of eggs as I watch him. For some reason, I get a lot of satisfaction out of watching my children eat. It dates all the way back to when I was breast-feeding. (Hannah says it’s super weird.) “These eggs are great, Mom.”

“Why, thank you.”

“What’s your secret ingredient?”

I wink at him. “Love.”

Hannah lets out the longest sigh I’ve ever heard. It lasts for at least five full seconds—which is a long time for a sigh. “Oh my *God*, the secret ingredient is Parmesan cheese. Mom *always* put Parmesan cheese in the eggs. You know that, Liam. God, you’re such a...”

He lifts an eyebrow. “I’m such a what, Hannah.”

“You know what.”

For a moment, the two of them stare at each other, and it’s so quiet in the room that I could hear the coffee machine

humming. But then Liam snorts loudly and goes back to his eggs. I envy his ability to ignore his sister's irritability. If eggs are my superpower, ignoring Hannah is Liam's. Nothing she says ever gets to him. And the truth is, despite their sparring, Hannah adores Liam. The minute she started walking, she was following him around. These days, he's probably her favorite person in the house. I suspect I come in fourth, after Jason and probably her phone.

"Well, I think the eggs taste especially good today," Liam says. And he smiles, blinking up at me with those eyelashes that Hannah complains are unfairly long. "Thanks, Mom. You're the best."

And Hannah rolls her eyes.

I love Hannah. I really do. I love her more than I love my own life. She's my daughter. She's my little girl.

But Liam is my favorite. I can't help it. From the moment he was born and I became a mother, I knew no matter how many other children I had, he would be my favorite. Nobody else had a chance. Even if Hannah liked my eggs better and didn't roll her eyes, it wouldn't matter. Liam would still be my favorite.

He's my favorite, even knowing what he's capable of.

And I will protect him with every fiber of my being.

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