

ALI HAZELWOOD

*New York Times Bestselling Author
of *The Love Hypothesis**

Under One Roof



PRAISE FOR
The Love Hypothesis

“Contemporary romance’s unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all of the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren “Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana Zapata “This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn’t put it down. Highly recommended!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica Clare “A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf.”

—Elizabeth Everett, author of *A Lady’s Formula for Love* “Smart, witty dialogue and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won’t be able to put down.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Under One Roof

Ali Hazelwood

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Praise for The Love Hypothesis](#)

[Titles by Ali Hazelwood](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt from Love on the Brain](#)

[About the Author](#)

For Becca, who is the best and had the best prompt.

Prologue

Present

I look at the pile of dishes in the sink and reach a painful realization: I've got it bad.

Actually, scratch that. I already knew I had it bad. But if I hadn't, this would be a dead giveaway: the fact that I cannot glance at a colander and twelve dirty forks without seeing Liam's dark eyes as he leans against the counter, arms crossed on his chest; without hearing his stern-yet-teasing voice asking me, "Postmodern installation art? Or are we just out of soap?"

It comes right on the trail of arriving home late and noticing that he left the porch light on for me. That one . . . oh, that one always makes my heart hiccup in a half-lovely, half-wrenching way. Also heart-hiccup inducing: I remember to turn it off once I'm inside. Very unlike me, and possibly a sign that the chia seed sludge he's been making me for breakfast in the mornings when I'm late for work is actually making my brain smarter.

It's good that I've decided to move out. For the best. These heart hiccups are not sustainable in the long term, not to my mental or cardiovascular health. I'm only a humble beginner at this whole pining thing, but I can safely state that living with some guy you used to hate and somehow ended up slipping in love with is *not* a wise move. Trust me, I have a doctorate.

(In a totally unrelated field, but still.)

You know what *is* good about the pining? The constant nervous energy. It has me looking at the pile of dishes and thinking that cleaning the kitchen could be a fun activity. When Liam enters the room, I'm riding the unexpected urge to load the dishwasher as far as it will carry me. I glance up at him, notice the way he nearly fills the doorframe, and order my heart not to hiccup. It does it anyway—even adds a flip for good measure.

My heart's a jackass.

"You're probably wondering if a sniper is forcing me to do the dishes at gunpoint." I beam at Liam without really expecting him to smile back, because—Liam. He's next to impossible to read, but I've long stopped trying to *see* his amusement, and I just let myself *feel* it. It's nice, and warm, and I want to bathe in it. I want to make him shake his head, and say "Mara" in that tone of his, and laugh against his better judgment. I want to push up on my toes, reach out to fix the dark strand of hair on his forehead, burrow into his chest to smell the clean, delicious smell of his skin.

But I doubt *he* wants any of that. So I turn back to rinse a cereal bowl hiding under the colander.

"I figured you were being mind-controlled by those parasitic spores we saw on that documentary." His voice is low. Rich. I will miss it so, so much.

"Those were barnacles— See, I knew you fell asleep halfway." He doesn't reply. Which is fine, because—Liam. A man of few smiles and even fewer words. "So, you know the neighbors' puppy? That French bulldog? He must have gotten away during a walk, because I just saw him run toward me in the middle of the street. Leash hanging from his neck and all." I reach out for a towel and my hand bumps into him. He's standing right behind me now. "Oops.

Sorry. Anyway, I carried him back home and he was so cute . . .”

I stop. Because all of a sudden Liam is not just *standing* behind me. I’m being crowded against the sink, the edge of the counter pressed into my hip bones, and there’s a tall wall of heat flat against my back.

Oh my God.

Is he . . . Did he trip? He must have tripped. This is an accident.

“Liam?”

“This okay, Mara?” he asks, but he doesn’t move away. He stays right where he is, front pressed against my back, hands against the counter on each side of my hips, and . . . Is this some kind of lucid dream? Is this a heart-hiccup-generated cardiovascular event? Is my brain converting my most shameful nighttime fantasies into hallucinations?

“Liam?” I whimper, because he is nuzzling my hair. Right above my temple, with his nose and maybe even his mouth, and it seems deliberate. Very much not an accident. Is he —? No. No, surely not.

But his hands spread on my belly, and that’s what tips me off that this is different. This doesn’t feel like one of those accidental brushing of arms in the hallway, the ones I’ve been telling myself to stop obsessing over. It doesn’t feel like that time I tripped over my computer cord and almost stumbled into his lap, and it doesn’t feel like him gently holding my wrist to check how badly I burned my thumb while cooking on the stove. This feels . . . “Liam?”

“Shh.” I feel his lips at my temple, warm and reassuring. “Everything’s okay, Mara.”

Something hot and liquid begins to coil at the bottom of my belly.

Chapter 1

Six months ago

“Frankly, *They get on like a house on fire* is the most misleading saying in the English language. Faulty wiring? Misuse of heating equipment? Suspected arson? *Not* evocative of two people getting along in the least. You know what a house on fire has me picturing? Bazookas. Flamethrowers. Sirens in the distance. Because nothing is more guaranteed to start a house fire than two enemies blowtorching each other’s most prized possession. Want to trigger an explosion? Being nice to your roommate is not going to do it. Lighting a match on top of their kerosene-soaked handmade quilt, on the other hand—”

“Miss?” The Uber driver turns, looking guilty about interrupting my pre-apocalyptic spiel. “Just a heads-up—we’re about five minutes from your destination.”

I smile an apologetic *Thank you* and glance back at my phone. My two best friends’ faces take up the entire screen. Then, on the upper corner there’s me: more frowny than usual (well justified), more pasty than usual (is that even possible?), more ginger than usual (must be the filter, right?).

“That’s a totally fair take, Mara,” Sadie says with a puzzled expression, “and I encourage you to submit your, um, very valid complaints to Madame Merriam-Webster or

whoever's in charge of these matters, but . . . I literally only asked you how the funeral went."

"Yes, Mara—how'd—funeral—go—?" The quality on Hannah's end of the call is pitiful, but that's business as usual.

This, I suppose, is what happens when you meet your best friends in grad school: One minute you're happy as a clam, clutching your shiny brand-new engineering diploma, giggling your way through a fifth round of Midori sours. The next you're in tears, because you're all going separate ways. FaceTime becomes as necessary as oxygen. There are zero neon-green cocktails in sight. Your slightly deranged monologues don't happen in the privacy of the apartment you share, but in the semipublic backseat of an Uber, while you're on your way to have a very, *very* weird conversation.

See, that's the thing I hate the most about adulting: at some point, one has to start doing it. Sadie is designing fancy eco-sustainable buildings in New York City. Hannah is freezing her butt off at some Arctic research station NASA put up in Norway. And as for me . . .

I'm here. Moving to D.C. to start my dream job—scientist at the Environmental Protection Agency. On paper, I should be over the moon. But paper burns *so* fast. As fast as houses on fire.

"Helena's funeral was . . . interesting." I lean back against the seat. "I guess that's the upside of knowing that you're about to die. You get to bully people a bit. Tell them that if they don't play 'Karma Chameleon' while lowering your casket your ghost will haunt their progeny for generations."

"I'm just glad you guys were able to be with her in the last few days," Sadie says.

I smile wistfully. "She was the worst till the very end. She cheated in our last chess game. As if she wouldn't have beaten me anyway." I miss her. An inordinate amount. Helena Harding, my Ph.D. advisor and mentor for the past eight years, was family in a way my cold, distant blood relatives never cared to be. But she was also elderly, in a lot of pain, and, as she liked to put it, *eager to move on to bigger projects*.

"It was so lovely of her to leave you her D.C. house," Hannah says. She must have moved to a better fjord, because I can actually make out her words. "Now you'll have a place to be, no matter what."

It's true. It's all true, and I am immensely grateful. Helena's gift was as generous as it was unexpected, easily the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me. But the reading of the will was a week ago, and there's something I haven't had a chance to tell my friends. Something closely related to houses on fire. "About that . . ."

"Uh-oh." Two sets of brows furrow. "What happened?"

"It's . . . complicated."

"I *love* complicated," Sadie says. "Is it also dramatic? Let me go get tissues."

"Not sure, yet." I take a fortifying breath. "The house Helena left me, as it turns out, she didn't really . . . own it."

"What?" Sadie aborts the tissue mission to frown at me.

"Well, she did own it. But only a little. Only . . . half."

"And who owns the *other* half?" Trust Hannah to zoom in on the crux of the problem.

"Originally, Helena's brother, who died and left it to his kids. Then the youngest son bought out the others, and now he's the sole owner. Well, with me." I clear my throat. "His name is Liam. Liam Harding. He's a lawyer in his early thirties. And he currently lives in the house. Alone."

Sadie's eyes widen. "Holy shit. Did Helena know?"

"I have no clue. You'd assume, but the Hardings are such a weird family." I shrug. "Old money. Lots of it. Think Vanderbilts. Kennedys. What even goes on in rich people's brains?"

"Probably monocles," Hannah says.

I nod. "Or topiary gardens."

"Cocaine."

"Polo tournaments."

"Cuff links."

"Hang on," Sadie interrupts us. "What did Liam Vanderbilt Kennedy Harding say about this at the funeral?"

"Excellent question, but: he wasn't there."

"He didn't show up to *his aunt's funeral*?"

"He doesn't really keep in touch with his family. Lots of drama, I suspect." I tap my chin. "Maybe they're less Vanderbilts, more Kardashians?"

"Are you saying that he doesn't know that you own the other half of his house?"

"Someone gave me his number and I told him I'd be coming around." I pause before adding, "Via text. We haven't talked yet." Another pause. "And he didn't really . . . reply."

"I don't like this," Sadie and Hannah say in unison. Any other time I'd laugh about their hive mind, but there's something else I still haven't told them. Something they'll like even less.

"Fun fact about Liam Harding . . . You know how Helena was like, the Oprah of environmental science?" I chew on my lower lip. "And she always joked that her entire family was mostly liberal-leaning academics out to save the world from the clutches of big corporations?"

"Yeah?"

“Her nephew is a corporate lawyer for FGP Corp.” Just saying the words makes me want to gargle with mouthwash. And floss. My dentist will be thrilled.

“FGP Corp—the fossil fuels people?” A deep line appears in the middle of Sadie’s brow. “Big oil? Supermajors?”

“Yep.”

“Oh my *God*. Does he know you’re an environmental scientist?”

“Well, I did give him my name. And my LinkedIn profile is just a Google search away. Do rich people use LinkedIn, you think?”

“No one uses LinkedIn, Mara.” Sadie rubs her temple. “Jesus Christ, this is really bad.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You can’t go meet with him alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“He’ll kill you. You’ll kill him. You’ll kill each other.”

“I . . . maybe?” I close my eyes and lean back against the seat. I’ve been talking myself out of panicking for seventy-two hours—with mixed results. I can’t crack now. “Believe me, he’s the last person I want to co-own a house with. But Helena did leave half of it to me, and I kind of need it? I owe a billion in student loans, and D.C. is crazy expensive. Maybe I can stay there for a bit? Save on rent. It’s a fiscally responsible decision, no?”

Sadie facepalms just as Hannah says combatively, “Mara, you were a grad student until ten minutes ago. You’re barely above the poverty line. Do *not* let him kick you out of that house.”

“Maybe he won’t even mind! I’m actually very surprised he lives there. Don’t get me wrong, the house is nice, but . . .” I trail off, thinking about the pictures I’ve seen, the hours spent on Google Street View scrolling and rescrolling

through the frames, trying to get a grip on the fact that Helena cared about me enough to *leave me a house*. It's a beautiful property, certainly. But more of a family residence. Not what I'd expect from an ace lawyer who probably earns a European country's annual GDP per billable hour. "Don't high-powered attorneys live in luxury fifty-ninth-floor penthouses with golden bidets and brandy cellars and statues of themselves? For all I know he barely spends time in the house. So I'm just going to be honest with him. Explain my situation. I'm sure we can find some kind of solution that—"

"Here we are," the driver tells me with a smile. I return it, a tad weakly.

"If you don't text us within half an hour," Hannah says in a dead-serious tone, "I'm going to assume that Big Oil Liam is holding you captive in his basement and call law enforcement."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Remember that kickboxing class I took in our third year? And that time at the strawberry festival, when I kicked the butt of the guy who tried to steal your pie?"

"He was an eight-year-old boy, Mara. And you did *not* kick his butt—you gave him your own pie and a kiss on the forehead. Text in thirty, or I'm calling the cops."

I glare at her. "Assuming a polar bear hasn't mugged you in the meantime."

"Sadie's in New York, and she has the D.C. police on speed dial."

"Yup." Sadie nods. "Setting it up right now."

I start feeling nervous the moment I exit the car, and it gets worse the farther I drag my suitcase up the path—a heavy ball of anxiety slowly nestling behind my sternum. I stop about halfway to take a deep breath. I blame Hannah

and Sadie, who worry way too much and are apparently contagious. I'll be fine. This will be fine. Liam Harding and I will have a nice, calm chat and figure out the best possible solution that is satisfactory to . . .

I take in the early-fall yard around me, and my trail of thought fades away.

It's a simple house. Large, but no topiary shit or rococo gazebos or those creepy gnomes. Just a well-kept lawn with the occasional landscaped corner, a handful of trees I don't recognize, and a large wooden patio furnished with comfortable-looking pieces. In the late-afternoon sunlight, the red bricks give the house a cozy, homey appearance. And every square inch of the place seems dusted in the warm yellow of ginkgo leaves.

I inhale the smell of grass, and bark, and sun, and when my lungs are full I let out a soft laugh. I could so easily fall in love with this place. Is it possible that I already am? My very first love at first sight?

Maybe this is why Helena left the house to me, because she knew I'd form an immediate connection. Or maybe knowing that she wanted me here has me ready to open my heart to it. Either way, it doesn't matter: this place feels like it could be home, and Helena is once again being her meddling self, this time from the afterlife. After all, she always went on and on about how she wanted me to really belong. *"You know, Mara, I can tell you're lonely,"* she'd say whenever I stopped by her office to chat. *"How do you even know?"* *"Because people who aren't lonely don't write fanfiction for The Bachelor franchise in their spare time."* *"It's not fanfiction. More of a metacommentary on the epistemological themes that arise in each episode and—my blog has plenty of readers!"* *"Listen, you're a brilliant young woman. And everyone loves redheads. Why don't you*

just date one of the nerds in your cohort? Ideally the one who doesn't smell like compost." "Because they're all dicks who keep asking when I'll drop out to go get a degree in home economics?" "Mmm. That is a good reason."

Maybe Helena finally realized that any hope of me settling down with *someone* was a lost cause, and decided to channel her efforts into me settling down *somewhere*. I can almost picture her, cackling like a satisfied hag, and it makes me miss her a million times harder.

Feeling much better, I leave my suitcase just off the porch (no one is going to steal it, not covered as it is in geeky KEEP CALM AND RECYCLE ON, and GOOD PLANETS ARE HARD TO FIND, and TRUST ME, I'M AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER stickers). I run a hand through my long curls, hoping it's not too messy (it probably is). I remind myself that Liam Harding is unlikely to be a threat—just a rich, spoiled man-boy with the depth of a surfboard who cannot intimidate me—and lift my arm to ring the bell. Except that the door swings open before I can get to it, and I find myself standing in front of .

..

A chest.

A broad, well-defined chest under a button-down. And a tie. And a dark suit jacket.

The chest is attached to other body parts, but it's so wide that for a moment it's all I can see. Then I manage to shift my gaze and finally notice the rest: Long, well-muscled legs filling what's left of the suit. Shoulders and arms stretching for miles. A square jaw and full lips. Short dark hair, and a pair of eyes barely a shade darker.

They are, I realize, fixed on me. Studying me with the same avid, confused interest I'm experiencing. The man appears to be unable to look away, as if spellbound at some

base, deeply physical level. Which is a relief, because I can't look away, either. I don't want to.

It's like a punch to my solar plexus, how attractive I find him. It addles my brain and makes me forget that I'm standing right in front of a stranger. That I should probably say something. That the heat I'm feeling is probably inappropriate.

He clears his throat, looking as flustered as I feel.

I smile. "Hi," I say, a little breathless.

"Hi." He sounds the exact same. He wets his lips, as though his mouth is suddenly dry, and *wow*. That's a good look for him. "Can I . . . Can I help you?" His voice is beautiful. Deep. Rich. A little hoarse. I could marry this voice. I could roll around in this voice. I could listen to this voice forever and give up every other sound. But maybe I should first answer the question.

"Do you, um, live here?"

"I think so," he says, as though too wonderstruck to remember. Which makes me laugh.

"Great. I am here for . . ." What am I here for? Ah. Yes. "I was looking for, um, Liam. Liam Harding. Do you know where I can find him?"

"It's me. I'm he." He clears his throat again. Is he flushing? "That is, I am Liam."

"Oh." Oh no. Oh *no*. No, no. No. "I'm Mara. Mara Floyd. The . . . Helena's friend. I'm here about the house."

Liam's demeanor changes *instantly*.

He briefly closes his eyes, like one would when given a tragic, insurmountable piece of news. For a moment he looks betrayed, as though someone gave him a precious gift only to steal it from his hands the second it was unwrapped. When he says, "It's you," there is a bitter tinge to his beautiful voice.

He turns around and begins to stalk down the hallway. I hesitate for a moment, wondering what to do. He didn't close the door, so he wants me to follow him. Right? No clue. Either way, I half own the house, so I'm probably not trespassing? I shrug and hurry after him, trying to keep up with his much longer legs, taking in next to nothing of my surroundings until we reach a living area.

Which is stunning. This house is all large windows and hardwood floors—oh my God, is that a *fireplace*? I want to make s'mores in it. I want to roast an entire piglet. With an apple in its mouth.

"I'm so glad we can finally talk face-to-face," I tell Liam, a little out of breath. I'm finally recovering from . . . whatever happened at the door. I fidget with the bracelet on my wrist, watching him write something on a piece of paper. "I am so sorry for your loss. Your aunt was my favorite person in the whole world. I'm not sure why she decided to leave me the house, and I do understand that this co-owning business comes a bit out of left field, but . . ."

I trail off when he folds the paper and hands it to me. He's so tall, I have to consciously lift up my chin to meet his eyes. "What is this?" I don't wait for his answer and unfold it.

There's a number written on it. A number with zeros. Lots of them. I look up, confused. "What does this mean?"

He holds my gaze. There is no trace of the flustered, hesitant man who greeted me a few moments earlier. This version of Liam is coldly handsome and self-assured. "Money."

"Money?"

He nods.

"I don't understand."

“For your half of the house,” he says impatiently, and it suddenly dawns on me: he is trying to buy me out.

I look down at the paper. This is more money than I’ve ever had in my life—or ever will. Environmental engineering? Not a lucrative career choice, apparently. And I don’t know much about real estate, but my guess is that this sum is *way* above the actual value of the house. “I’m sorry. I think there’s a misunderstanding. I’m not going to—I don’t—” I take a deep breath. “I don’t think I want to sell.”

Liam stares, expressionless. “You don’t *think*?”

“I *don’t*. Want to sell, that is.”

He nods once, curtly. And then asks, “How much more?”

“What?”

“How much more do you want?”

“No, I—I’m not interested in selling the house,” I repeat. “I just can’t. Helena—”

“Is double enough?”

“*Double*—how do you *even*—do you have *corpses* buried under the flower beds?”

His eyes are blocks of ice. “How much more?”

Is he even listening to me? Why is he being so insistent? Where has his cute, boyish blush gone? At the door, he just seemed so . . .

Whatever. I was clearly wrong. “I just can’t sell. I’m sorry. But maybe we can figure out something else in the next few days? I don’t have a place to stay in D.C., so I was thinking of moving in for a little while . . .”

He exhales a silent laugh. Then he realizes that I’m serious, and shakes his head. “No.”

“Well.” I try to be reasonable. “The house seems large, and—”

“You’re not moving in.”

I take a deep breath. “I understand. But my financial situation is very precarious. I’m starting my new job in two days, and it’s really close by. On foot. This is a perfect place for me to live for a little while, until I get back on my feet.”

“I just handed you the solution to all of your financial problems.”

I wince. “It’s really not that simple.” Or maybe it is. I don’t know, because I just can’t stop remembering the ginkgo leaves settling on the hydrangeas and wondering what they would look like in the spring. Maybe Helena would have wanted me to see the yard in every season. If she’d meant for me to sell, she would have left me a chunk of cash. Right? “There are reasons why I’d prefer not to sell. But we can work out a solution. For instance, I could, um, temporarily rent you my half of the house and use the money to stay in another place?” That way, I’d still be holding on to Helena’s gift. I’d be out of Liam’s way and above the destitution threshold. Well, *slightly* above. And in the future, once Liam gets married to his girlfriend (who’s probably a Fortune 500 CEO who can list the Dow 30 by market cap and has a favorite item in the *goop* newsletter), moves to a McMansion in Potomac, MD, and starts a politico-economic dynasty, I could revisit this place. Move in, like Helena seems to have wanted. If by then I’ve gotten a raise and can cover the water bill on my own, that is.

It’s a fair proposal, right? Wrong. Because Liam’s response is:

“No.” Boy, he loves the word.

“But why? you clearly have the money—”

“I want this settled once and for all. Who is your attorney?”

I’m about to laugh in his face and crack a joke about my “legal team” when his iPhone rings. He checks the caller ID

and swears softly under his breath. "I need to take this. Stay put," he orders, way too bossy for my taste. Before he steps out of the living room he pins me with his cold, stern eyes and repeats once more, "This is not, and will *never* be your house."

And that, I believe, is it.

It's that very last sentence that clinches it. Well, together with the condescending, domineering, arrogant way he talked to me in the past two minutes. I walked into this house fully ready to have a productive conversation. I gave him several options, but he shut me down and now I'm getting *pissed*. I have as much legal right as he does to be here, and if he refuses to acknowledge it . . .

Well. Too bad for him.

Anger bubbling up my throat, I tear the paper Liam gave me in four pieces and drop it on the coffee table for him to find later. Then I go back to the porch, retrieve my suitcase, and start looking for an unused bedroom.

Guess what? I text Sadie and Hannah. Mara Floyd, Ph.D., just moved into her new house. And it's most definitely on fire.

Chapter 2

Five months, two weeks ago

I don't have time for this.

I am late for work. I have a meeting in half an hour. I have yet to brush my teeth *and* my hair.

I *really* don't have time for this.

And yet, like the fool that I have grown to be, I give in to temptation. I slam the fridge door, turn around to lean against it, cross my arms as menacingly as I can, and I stare at Liam across the expanse of the open-concept kitchen.

"I know you have been using my coffee creamer."

It's wasted energy. Because Liam just stands on the side of the island, as impassible as the granite of the countertop, calmly spreading butter on a piece of toast. He doesn't fight back. He doesn't look at me. He proceeds with his buttering, unbothered, and asks, "Have I?"

"You're not as stealthy as you think, buddy." I give him my best glare. "And if this is some kind of intimidation tactic, it's not working."

He nods. Still unbothered. "Have you informed the police?"

"What?"

He shrugs his stupid, broad shoulders. He is wearing a suit, because he is *always* wearing a suit. A charcoal three-piece that fits him perfectly—and yet not at all, because he

really doesn't have the evil-corporate-businessman physique. Maybe during his mandatory Kill the Earth training he interned as an oil rig driller? "This alleged theft of coffee creamer appears to distress you a lot. Have you told law enforcement?"

Deep breaths. I need to take deep breaths. In D.C., murder can be punished with up to thirty years in prison. I know, because I looked it up the day after I moved in. Then again, a jury of my peers would never convict me—not if I laid out the horrors I've been subjected to in the past few weeks. They would surely rule Liam's death as self-defense. They might even give me a trophy. "Liam, I'm trying here. *Really* trying to make this work. Do you ever stop and wonder if maybe *you* are being an asshole?"

This time he does look up. His eyes are so cold, my entire body shivers. "I did try. Once. And right when I was on the verge of a breakthrough someone started blasting the *Frozen* soundtrack at full volume."

I flush. "I was cleaning my room. I had no idea you were home."

"Mmm." He nods, and then does something I did not expect: he comes closer. He takes a few leisurely steps, making his way through the beautiful mix of ultramodern appliances and classic furniture of the kitchen until he's towering over me. Staring down as though I'm an ant problem he thought he'd long gotten rid of. He smells like shampoo and expensive fabric, and he's still holding the butter knife. Can you stab someone with that? I don't know, but Liam Harding looks like he'd be able to murder someone (i.e., me) with a beach ball. "Isn't your emotional-support creamer bad for the environment, Mara?" he asks, voice low and deep. "Think of the impact of ultraprocessed foods. The toxic ingredients. All that plastic."

He is so condescending, I could bite him. Instead I square my shoulders and step even closer. “I do something you’ve probably never heard of—it’s called *recycling*.”

“Is that so?” He sets the knife on the counter and glances next to me, at the bins I installed after I moved in. They are overflowing, but only because I’ve been too busy to bring them to the center. And he *knows* it.

“There’s no pickup in the neighborhood. But I plan to drive to the— What are you . . .” Liam’s hands close around my waist, his fingers so long, they meet both on my back *and* above my belly button. My brain stutters to a stop. What the hell is he—?

He lifts me up till I’m hovering above the floor, then effortlessly moves me a few inches to the side of the refrigerator. Like I’m as light as an Amazon delivery box, the giant ones that for some reason have only a single stick of deodorant packed inside. I sputter as indignantly as I can, but he doesn’t pay any attention to me. Instead he sets me on my feet, opens the fridge, grabs a jar of raspberry compote, and murmurs, “Then you better get to it,” with one last long, intense look.

He goes back to his toast, and I go back to not existing in his universe.

Lovely.

I growl my way out of the room, half flustered and all homicidal, still feeling the heels of his palms pressing into my skin. *In his sleep. I swear I’m going to kill him in his damn sleep. When he least expects it. And then I’ll celebrate by throwing empty bottles of creamer at his corpse.*

Ten minutes later I am rage-sweating, walking to work while on an emergency venting-videocall (ventocall) with

Sadie. There have been a lot of those in the past few weeks. *A lot.*

“. . . he doesn't even drink coffee. Which means that he's either flushing creamer down the toilet to spite me or chugging it down like it's water—and I honestly don't know which scenario would be worse, because on the one hand, one serving is like, six hundred and forty calories and Liam still manages to only have three percent body fat, but on the other, taking time out of his busy schedule to deprive *me* of *my* creamer is a gesture of unprecedented cruelty that no one should ever . . .” I trail off when I notice her bemused expression. “What?”

“Nothing.”

I squint. “Are you looking at me weird?”

“No! Nope.” She shakes her head emphatically. “It's just . . .”

“Just?”

“You've been talking about Liam nonstop for”—she lifts one eyebrow—“eight minutes straight, Mara.”

My cheeks burn. “I'm so sorry, I—”

“Don't get me wrong, I *love* this. Listening to you bitch is my jam, ten out of ten, would recommend. I just feel like I've never seen you like this, you know? We lived together for five years. You're usually all about compromise and harmony and *Imagine all the people.*”

I *try* not to live my life in a perennial state of flame-throwing anger. My parents were the kind of people who probably should not have had kids: checked out, not affectionate, impatient for me to move out so they could turn my childhood bedroom into a shoe closet. I know how to cohabitate with others and minimize conflict, because I've been doing it since I was seventeen—ten years ago. *Live and let live* is a crucial skill set in any shared living

space, and I had to master it quickly. And I still have it mastered. I really do. I'm just not sure I *want* to let Liam Harding live.

"I'm trying, Sadie, but I'm not the one who keeps lowering the damn thermostat to freezing. Who doesn't bother turning off the lights before going out—our electricity bill is *insane*. Two days ago, I got home after work, and the only person in the house was some random guy sitting on my couch who offered me my own Cheez-Its. I thought he was a hitman Liam had hired to kill me!"

"Oh my God. Was he?"

"No. He was Calvin—Liam's friend, who's tragically a million times nicer than him. The point is, Liam's the kind of shit roommate who invites people over when he's not home, without telling you. Also, why the hell can't he say hi when he sees me? And is he psychologically unable to close the cupboards? Does he have some deep-rooted trauma that drove him to decorate the house exclusively with black-and-white prints of trees? Is he aware that he doesn't have to slam the door every time he goes out? And does he absolutely need to have his stupid dudebro friends come over every weekend to play video games in the—" I finish crossing the street and look at the screen. Sadie is chewing on her bottom lip, pensive. "What's going on?"

"You were going off and didn't really seem to need me, so I did a thing."

"A thing?"

"I googled Liam."

"What? Why?"

"Because I like to put a face to people I talk about for several hours a week."

"Whatever you do, do *not* click on his page on the FGP Corp website. Do not give them the hits!"

“Too late. He actually looks . . .”

“Like global warming and capitalism had a love child who’s going through a bodybuilding phase.”

“Um . . . I was going to say cute.”

I huff. “When I look at him all I can see are all the creamer-less cups of coffee I’ve been drinking since the day I moved in.” And maybe sometimes, just sometimes, I remembered that flustered, wonderstruck look he gave me before he knew who I was. Mourn it a little. But who am I kidding? I must have hallucinated it.

“Has he offered to buy you out again?” Sadie asks.

“He doesn’t really acknowledge my existence. Well, except to occasionally stare like I’m some roach infesting his pristine living space. But his lawyer sends me emails with ridiculous buyout offers every other day.” I can see my work building, a hundred feet away. “But I won’t. I’ll keep the one thing Helena left me. And once I’m in a better place financially I’ll just move out. It shouldn’t take too long, a few months at the most. And in the meantime . . .”

“Black coffee?”

I sigh. “In the meantime I drink bitter, disgusting coffee.”

Chapter 3

Five months, one week ago

Dear Helena,

This is weird.

Is this weird?

This is probably weird.

I mean, you're dead. And I'm here, writing you a letter. When I'm not even sure I believe in the afterlife. Truth be told, I stopped pondering eschatological matters in high school because they got me anxious and made me break out in hives under my left armpit (never the right; what's up with that?). And it's not like I'm ever going to figure out a mystery that eluded great thinkers like Foucault or Derrida or that unspellable German dude with bushy sideburns and syphilis.

But I digress.

You've been gone for over a month, and things are same old, same old. Humanity is still in the clutches of capitalist cabals; we have yet to figure out a way to slow down the impending catastrophe that is anthropogenic climate change; I wear my "Save the Bees & Tax the Rich" T-shirt whenever I go for a run. The usual. I do love the work I'm doing at the EPA (thank you so much for that rec letter, by the way; I'm

very grateful you didn't mention that time you bailed Sadie, Hannah, and me out of jail after that anti-dam protest. The U.S. government would not have liked that one). There is the small issue that I'm the only woman in a team of six, and that the dudes I work with seem to believe that my squishy female brain is unable to grasp sophisticated concepts like . . . the sphericity of the Earth, I guess? The other day Sean, my team leader, spent thirty minutes explaining the contents of my own dissertation to me. I had very vivid fantasies about clocking him in the head and tiling his cadaver under my bathtub, but you probably already know all of this. You probably just sit around on a cloud all day being omniscient. Eating Triscuits. Occasionally playing the harp. You lazy bum.

I think the reason I'm writing this letter that you will never, ever read is that I wish I could talk to you. If my life were a movie, I'd trudge to your tombstone and bare my heart while a public-domain symphony in D minor plays in the background. But you were buried in California (inconvenient, much?) which makes letter writing the only feasible option.

All of this is to say: First, I miss you. A lot. A fucking huge lot. How could you leave me here without you? Shame, Helena. Shame.

Second: I am so, so grateful you left me this home. It's the best, coziest place I've ever lived in, hands down. I've been spending my weekends reading in the sunroom. Honestly, I never thought I'd set foot in a house with a foyer without being escorted off the premises by security. I just . . . I've never had a place that was mine, before. A place that's going to be there no matter what. A safe harbor, if you will. I feel your

presence when I'm home, even if the last time you set foot here was probably in the '70s on your way back from a women's liberation march. And don't worry, I fondly remember your hatred of cheesy and I can almost hear you say, Cut this shit out. So I will.

Third, and this is less of a statement and more of a question: Would you mind it if I killed your nephew? Because I am very close to it. Like—sooo close. I am basically stabbing him with a potato peeler as we speak. Though it occurs to me now that maybe it's exactly what you wanted. You never mentioned Liam in all the years I knew you, after all. And he does work for a company whose main product is greenhouse gases, so maybe you hated him? Maybe our entire friendship was a long con that you knew would end in me pouring brake fluid in the tea of your least favorite relative. In which case, well done. And I hate you.

I could give a comprehensive list of his horribleness (I curate one in my Notes app) but I like to inflict it upon Sadie and Hannah via Zoom. I just . . . I guess I wish I understood why you put me in the path of one of the asswipiest asswipes in the country. In the world. In the entire damn Milky Way. Just the way he looks at me—the way he doesn't look at me. He clearly thinks he's above me, and—

The doorbell rings. I stop midsentence and run to the entrance. Which takes me like, two whole minutes, proving my point that this house is plenty large for two people.

I wish I could say that Liam Harding has shit taste in home decor. That he abuses inspirational-quotes decals, buys plastic fruit at Ikea, sticks neon bar lights everywhere. Sadly, either he knows how to put together a pretty nice

house interior, or his FPG Corp blood money paid to hire someone who does. The place is an elegant combination of traditional and modern pieces; I'm almost certain that whoever furnished it can correctly use the word *palette* in a sentence, and that the way the deep reds, forest greens, and soft grays complement the hardwood floors is a little more than accidental. And there's the fact that everywhere looks so . . . simple. With a home as large as this one, I'd be tempted to stuff every room with tables and sideboards and rugs, but Liam somehow limited himself to bare necessities. Couches, a few comfortable chairs, shelves full of books. That's it. The house is airy, full of light, sparsely decorated in warm tones, and all the more beautiful for it. "Minimalist," Sadie told me when I gave her a video tour. "Really well done, too." I believe my response was a snarl.

And then there's the art on the walls, which is unwelcomely growing on me. Pictures of lakes at sunrise and waterfalls at sunset, thick woods and lone trees, frozen grounds and blooming fields. The occasional wild animal going about its day, always in black and white. I don't know why, but I've been catching myself staring at them. The framing is simple, the subject mundane, but there's something about them. Like whoever took those photos really connected with the settings. Like they tried to truly capture them, to take home a piece of them.

I wonder who the photographer is, but I can find no signature. It's probably some starving Georgetown MFA grad, anyway. They poured their soul into the series hoping it'll be bought by someone who appreciates art, and instead here it is. Owned by a total ass. I bet Liam didn't even choose them. I bet they were just a tax-deductible purchase for him. Maybe he figured that in the long run a nice collection is as good as stock dividends.

“I’ll need a signature,” the UPS guy tells me when I open the door. He’s chewing bubblegum and looks about fifteen. I feel decrepit inside. “You’re not William K. Harding, are you?”

William K. It’s almost cute. I hate it. “Nope.”

“Is he home?”

“No.” Mercifully.

“Is he your husband?”

I laugh. Then I laugh some more. Then I realize that the UPS guy is squinting at me like I’m the Wicked Witch of the West. “Um, no. Sorry. He’s my . . . roommate.”

“Right. Can you sign for your roomie?”

“Sure.” I reach for the pen, but my hand stills in midair when I notice the FGP Corp insignia on the envelope.

I hate them. Even more than I hate Liam. Not only does he make me miserable at home mowing the lawn at seven thirty A.M. on the one day of the week I can sleep in, but he adds insult to injury by working for one of my professional nemeses. FGP Corp is one of those huge conglomerates that keep on causing environmental messes—a bunch of overeducated dudes in \$7K suits who disseminate biotoxins around the world with utter disregard for the brown pelicans (and the entire future of humanity, but I’m personally more attached to the pelicans, who did *nothing* to deserve this).

I glare at the thick bubble mailer. Would Liam sign for an EPA envelope on my behalf? I doubt it. Or maybe he would. Then he’d tie it to red balloons his buddy Pennywise provided and watch it disappear into the sunset. I’m already 73 percent certain that he’s been hiding my socks. I’m down to four matching pairs, for crisp’s sake.

“Actually.” I take a step back, smiling, reveling in my own pettiness. *Helena, you’d be so proud.* “I probably shouldn’t

sign for him. I bet it's a federal crime or something."

The UPS guy shakes his head. "It's really not."

I shrug. "Who's to say?"

"Me. It's literally my job."

"Which you are performing admirably." I beam. "But I still won't sign for the envelope. Would you like a cup of tea? A glass of wine? Cheez-Its?"

He frowns. "You sure you won't? This is express shipping. Someone paid a lot of money for same-day delivery. It's probably really urgent shit that William K. will need as soon as he gets home."

"Right. Well, that sounds like a William K. problem."

He whistles. "That's *cold*." He sounds admiring. Or just scared. "So, what's wrong with poor William K.? Does he leave the toilet seat up?"

"We have separate bathrooms." I mull it over. "But I'm sure he does. In the very remote possibility I end up using his."

He nods. "You know, when my sister was in college she used to have a roommate she hated. I'm talking warfare. They'd yell at each other the entire time. She once wrote an entire list of everything she hated about him on her phone and it crashed her Reminders app. It was *that* long."

Uh-oh. That sounds familiar. "What happened to her?"

I cross my fingers that the answer won't be *She's serving a lifetime sentence at a nearby correctional facility for shaving off his hair while he was sleeping and tattooing "I'm a bad person" on his scalp.* And yet, what UPS guy ends up saying is ten times more disturbing.

"They're getting married next June." He shakes his head and turns around with a wave of his hand. "Go figure."

* * *

I'm dreaming of a concert—a bad one.

More noise than music, really. The kind of '70s German electronic crap that Liam owns in vinyl form and will sometimes play when one of his friends comes over to play first-person shooter video games. It's loud and obnoxious and irritating, and it goes on for what feels like hours. Until I wake up and realize three things:

First, I have a horrible headache.

Second, it's the middle of the night.

Third, the noise-music is actually just regular noise, and it's coming from downstairs.

Burglars, I think. They broke in. They're not even trying to be quiet—they probably have weapons.

I have to get out. Call 911. I have to warn Liam and make sure that he—

I sit up with a frown. "Liam." But *of course*.

I fling myself out of bed and stomp out of my room. I'm halfway down the stairs when it occurs to me: my curls are all over the place, I'm not wearing a bra, and my shorts were already too small fifteen years ago, when my middle school issued them free of charge as part of my lacrosse uniform. Well. Too bad. Liam's going to have to deal with it, and with my "There Is No Planet B" T-shirt. It might teach him something.

By the time I reach the kitchen, I am considering one-clicking on a bullhorn to sneak up on him while he's asleep every night for the next six months. "Liam, do you *know* what time it is?" I erupt. "What are you even . . ."

I'm not sure what I expected. Definitely not to find the contents of the fridge cluttering every inch of the counter; definitely not to see Liam intent on slaughtering a stalk of

celery like it stole his parking spot; definitely not to see him naked, *very* naked, from the waist up. The plaid pajama bottoms he's wearing have a low waist.

Very low.

"Could you please put something on? Like a baby-seal fur coat, or something?"

He doesn't stop chopping his celery. Doesn't look up at me. "No."

"No?"

"I'm not cold. And I live here."

I live here, too. And I have every right not to look at that brick wall he calls a chest in my own kitchen, which is supposed to be a soothing environment where I can digest food without having to stare at random male nipples. *Still*, I decide to let the matter go and push it to the back of my mind. By the time I'm ready to move out, I'm going to need therapy, anyway. What's one more trauma to deal with? Right now, I just want to go back to sleep. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"My tax return."

I blink. "I—what?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

I stiffen. "I don't know what it *looks* like, but it *sounds* like you're just banging pans together."

"The noise is an unfortunate by-product of me making dinner." He must be done with the celery, because he moves to slicing a tomato—is that *my* tomato?—and back to ignoring me.

"Oh, and that's totally normal, isn't it? Cooking a five-course meal at one twenty-seven in the morning on a weeknight?"

Liam finally lifts his eyes to mine, and there is something unsettling about his gaze. He seems calm. He looks calm,

but I know he's not. *He is furious*, I tell myself. *He is really, really furious. Get out of here.* "Did you need anything?" His tone is deceptively polite, and my self-preservation is clearly still asleep in bed.

"Yes. I need you to keep it down. And that better not be my tomato."

He pops half of it in his mouth. "You know," he says evenly while chewing, managing to talk with his mouth full and yet still look like the aristocratic product of several generations of wealth, "I'm usually not in the habit of being awake at one twenty-eight in the morning."

"What a coincidence. Neither was I, before meeting *you.*"

"But today—that is, yesterday—the entire legal team I run ended up having to work past midnight. Because of some very important missing documents."

I tense. He cannot mean—

"Don't worry, the documents were found. Eventually. *After* my boss tore me and my team a new one. Sounds like something went wrong when they were delivered." If he could incinerate people with eye lasers, I'd be long cremated. Clearly he knows everything about my little afternoon spite-attack.

"Listen." I take a deep breath. "It wasn't my proudest moment, but I'm not your PA. And I don't see how it justifies you banging all the pots in the house in the middle of the night. I have a long day tomorrow, so—"

"So do I. And as you can imagine, I've had a long day today. And I'm hungry. Which means that I'm not going to keep it down. At least not until I've had dinner."

Until about ten seconds ago I was angry in a cool, reasonable way. All of a sudden, I am ready to wrestle the knife out of Liam's hand and slice his jugular. Just a tiny bit.

Just to make him bleed. I won't, because I don't think I'd flourish in jail, but I'm also not going to let this go. I've tried to have measured responses when he refused to let me install solar panels, when he threw away my broccoli stir-fry because it smelled "swampy," when he locked me out of the house while I was on my run. But this is the final straw. I'm done. The back of my camel is broken in two. "Are you fucking *kidding* me?"

Liam pours olive oil in a pan, cracks an egg in it, and seems to revert to his default state: forgetting that I exist.

"Liam, whether you like it or not, I. Live. Here. You can't do whatever the hell you want!"

"Interesting. You seem to be doing exactly that."

"What are you talking about? *You* are making an omelet at *two in the damn morning*, and *I* am asking you not to."

"True. Although there *is* the fact that if you had done your dishes this week I wouldn't need to wash them so noisily—"

"Oh, shut up. It's not like you don't leave your stuff around the house all the time."

"At least I don't stack garbage on top of the trash can like it's a Dadaist sculpture."

The sound that comes out of my mouth—it almost scares me. "*God*. You are *impossible* to have around!"

"That's just too bad, since I'm here."

"Then just *move the fuck out!*"

Silence falls. An absolute, heavy, very uncomfortable silence. Just what we both need to replay my words over and over in our heads. Then Liam speaks. Slowly. Carefully. Angry in a scary, icy way. "Excuse me?"

I regret it immediately. What I said and *how* I said it. Loud. Vehement. I am many things, but cruel is not one of them. It doesn't matter that Liam Harding has displayed

the emotional range of a walnut, I said something hurtful and I owe him an apology. Not that I particularly *want* to offer him one, but I should. The problem is, I just can't stop myself from continuing. "Why are you even here, Liam? People like you live in mansions with uncomfortable beige furniture and seven bathrooms and overpriced art they don't understand."

"People like *me*?"

"Yes. People like *you*. People with zero morals and way too much money!"

"Why are *you* here? I've offered to buy your half about a thousand times."

"And I said no, so you could have spared yourself about nine hundred and ninety-nine of them. Liam, there is no reason for you to want to live in this house."

"This is *my* family's house!"

"It was Helena's house as much as it's yours, and—"

"Helena is fucking *dead*."

It takes a few moments for Liam's words to fully register. He abruptly turns off the stove and then stands there, half-naked in front of the sink, hands clenched around the edge of the counter and muscles as tight as guitar strings. I can't stop staring at him, this—this *viper* who just mentioned the death of one of the most important people in my life with such angry, dismissive carelessness.

I am going to *destroy* him. I'm going to *annihilate* him. I am going to make him suffer, to spit in his stupid smoothies, to break his vinyls one by one.

Except that Liam does something that changes everything. He presses his lips together, pinches his nose, then wipes a large, exhausted hand down his face. All of a sudden something clicks inside my head: Liam Harding,

standing right in front of me, is tired. And he hates this, *all of this*, just as much as I do.

Oh God. Maybe my broccoli stir-fry really did stink, and I should have put it in a Tupperware. Maybe the *Frozen* soundtrack can be a tiny bit annoying. Maybe I could have signed for that stupid package. Maybe I wouldn't react well to someone coming to live under my roof, either, especially if I didn't have a say in the matter.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. Maybe I am the asshole. Or at least one of them. God. *Oh God.*

"I . . ." I rack my brain for something to say and find nothing. Then some dam inside me breaks, and the words explode out. "Helena was my family. I know you don't get on with your family, and . . . maybe you hated her, I don't know. Granted, she could be really grumpy and nosy, but she . . . she loved me. And she was the only real home I ever had." I dare to glance at Liam, half expecting a sneer of derision. A snarky comment about Helena that will make me want to punch him again. But he's staring at me, attentive, and I force myself to look away and continue before I can change my mind. "I think she knew that. I think maybe that's why she left me this house, so that I'd have some kind of . . . of something. Even after she was gone." My voice breaks on the last word, and now I'm crying. Not full-on bawling like when I watch *The Lion King* or the first ten minutes of *Up*, but quiet, sparse, implacable tears that I have no hope of stopping. "I know you probably see me as some . . . proletarian usurper who's come to take over your family fortune, and believe me, I get it." I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand. My voice is rapidly losing heat. "But you have to understand that while you're living here because you're trying to prove some point, or

for some sort of pissing contest, this pile of bricks means the world to me, and . . .”

“I didn’t hate Helena.”

I look up in surprise. “What?”

“I didn’t hate Helena.” His eyes are on his half-made omelet, still sizzling on the stove.

“Oh.”

“Every summer she’d leave California for a few weeks. Where did you think she went?”

“I . . . she just said she spent her summers with family. I always assumed that . . .”

“Here, Mara. She came here. Slept in the room next to yours.” Liam’s voice is clipped, but his expression softens into something I’ve never seen before. A faint smile. “She claimed it was to check up on my world-pollution plans. Mostly, she nagged me about my life choices in between meeting with old friends. And she kicked my ass at chess a lot.” He scowls. “I am positive she cheated, but I could never prove it.”

“I . . .” He must be making this up. Surely. “She never mentioned you.”

His eyebrow lifts. “She never mentioned *you*. And yet you were in her will.”

“But . . . But, wait. Hang on a minute. At the funeral . . . I thought you didn’t get along with your family?”

“Oh, I don’t. They’re pretentious, judgmental, performative assholes—and I’m quoting Helena, here. But she was different, and I got on with her. I cared about her. A lot.” He clears his throat. “I’m not sure where you got the idea that I didn’t.”

“Well, you not coming to the funeral fooled me.”

“Knowing Helena, do you think she’d have cared?”

I think about my second year. The one time I organized a small surprise party for Helena's birthday in the department, and she just . . . left. Literally. We yelled *Surprise!* and dropped a handful of balloons. Helena gave us a scathing look, stepped inside the room, cut a slice of her birthday cake while we stared in silence, and then went to her office to eat it alone. She *locked* herself in. "Okay. That's a good point."

Liam nods.

"Do you know why she left me the house?"

"I do not. Initially I figured it was some kind of prank. One of her chaotic power plays. Like when she'd guilt-trip you into watching old shows with her?"

"God, she *always* picked—"

"*The Twilight Zone*. Even though she already knew all the twist endings." He rolls his eyes. Then his expression changes. "I didn't know her health had gotten so bad. I called her two days before she died, exactly two days, and she told me . . . I shouldn't have believed her."

My heart sinks. I was there. I know the exact conversation Liam is referring to, because I heard Helena's side of it. The way she fielded questions and minimized the concerns of the person on the other side of the line. She lied her way through an hour of chatter—it was obvious that she was happy about the call, but she wasn't honest about how bad things had gotten, and I felt uncomfortable about the deception. Then again, she did that with everyone. She'd have done the same with me if I hadn't been her ride to doctors' appointments.

"I wish she'd let me be there." Liam's tone is impersonal, but I can hear the unsaid. How painful it must have been to be kept in the dark. "But she didn't, and it was her decision. Just like leaving you the house was her decision,

and . . . I'm not happy about it. I don't understand it. But I accept it. Or at least, I'm trying to."

For the first time, I realize what my arrival in D.C. must have been like from Liam's perspective: Some girl he'd never even heard about, some girl who'd had the privilege to be with Helena during her last few days, suddenly showing up and forcibly wiggling her place into his home. His life. While he was trying to come to terms with his loss and mourn the only relative he felt close to.

Maybe he acted like an asshole. Maybe he never made me feel welcome or wasn't particularly nice, but he was in pain, just like me, and . . .

What a total mess. What an obtuse idiot I've been.

"I . . . I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I didn't mean any of it. I don't know you at all, and . . ." I trail off, unsure how to continue.

Liam nods stiffly. "I'm sorry, too."

We stay there, in silence, for long beats. If I go back to my room now, Liam will order a pizza and I'll be able to fall sleep without having to hunt down my stash of earplugs. I almost leave to do just that, but something occurs to me: Things could be better. *I* could be better. "Maybe there could be a . . . a truce of sorts?"

He lifts one eyebrow. "A truce."

"Yeah. I mean . . . I could . . . I guess I could stop raising the thermostat to twenty-five degrees as soon as you turn around. Wear a sweater, instead."

"Twenty-five degrees?"

"I'm a scientist. We don't really do Fahrenheit, since it's a ridiculous scale and . . ." He's looking at me with an expression that I can't quite decipher, so I quickly change the topic. "And I guess I could lay off with the Disney soundtracks?"

“Could you?”

“Yeah.”

“Even *The Little Mermaid*?”

“Yes.”

“What about *Moana*?”

“Liam, I’m really trying, here. If you could please—” I am ready to storm out of the kitchen when I realize that he’s actually smiling. Well, sort of. With his eyes. Oh my God, was that a joke? He *jokes*? “You’re not as funny as you think.”

He nods, and doesn’t say anything for a moment or two. Then, “The Disney soundtracks are not that bad.” He sounds pained. “And I’ll try to be better, too. I’ll water your plants when you’re out of town and they’re about to die.” I knew he’d let my cucumber die on purpose. I *knew* it. “And maybe I’ll make a sandwich for dinner, if I get hungry past midnight.”

I lift my eyebrow.

Liam sighs. “Past ten P.M.?”

“That would be perfect.”

He crosses his huge arms on his equally huge, still bare chest, and then rocks a bit on his heels.

“Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

The silence stretches. Suddenly, this situation feels . . . tense. Sticky. A verge of some sort. A turning point.

A good time for me to leave.

“I’m going to . . .” I point toward the stairs, where my bedroom is. “Have a good night, Liam.”

I don’t turn around when he says, “Good night, Mara.”

Chapter 4

Four months, three weeks ago

There are plenty of things I wouldn't expect Liam Harding to do when he enters the kitchen.

For instance, he's unlikely to whip out castanets and flamenco his way around the island. To break into a Michael Bolton hit from the '80s. To sell me a leaf blower and recruit me into some gardening tools MLM venture. These are all *very* improbable events, and yet none of them would shock me as much as what he actually does. Which is to look at me and say:

"It's . . . nice outside today."

It's not that it isn't. It is, in fact, really nice. Unseasonably warm. It's because the Earth is dying, of course. Rising global average temperatures are associated with widespread fluctuations in weather patterns, and that's why we're still wearing lightweight jackets, even though it's late November in D.C. and Christmas trees have been popping up for weeks now. A few years ago, Helena wrote a paper about the way human action is increasing the periodicity and intensity of extreme weather events. It got published in *Nature Climate Change* and has about a zillion citations.

I could say all of this to Liam. I could be my most obnoxious self and lecture on the topic for hours. But I don't, and the reason is that even through his clipped,

hesitant tone and his currently lowered gaze, I can recognize an olive branch when it bites me in the ass.

Which, right now, it absolutely is. Biting, that is.

It's been about two weeks since I first became aware that Liam is capable of human emotions. And as it turns out, being in a truce while living together means having significantly fewer shouting matches, but still doesn't make finding topics of conversation any easier. Which is fine. Most of the time. It's a big house, after all. But on the rare occasions in which our schedules overlap and we end up in the living room or in the kitchen together . . .

Awkward.

As fuck.

"Yeah." My nod is sprain-your-neck enthusiastic—overcompensating. "It's nice. To have good weather, I mean."

Liam nods, too (stiffly, but maybe I'm just projecting), and just like that, we're back to square one: silence.

I bite my thumbnail. Apparently I did *not* stop doing that when I turned fourteen. I need something to say. What do I say? *Quick, Mara. Think.* "Um . . . So . . ."

No thoughts. Head empty.

I let my sentence dangle like an overcooked noodle and temporize by turning around to grab a . . . a what? A spatula? A toaster? A snack! Yes, I'll have a snack. I think I bought single servings of Cheez-Its. Trying to cut back and all that. Except that I can't find them in my cupboard. There's a family box. Another. A third one, in cheddar flavor—Jesus, I have a problem. But the little bags are not . . . Ah, there they are. Highest shelf, of course. I remember throwing them up there, thinking it'd be a problem for Future Mara.

Future Mara tries, but cannot reach it. So she looks back to ask Liam to grab one for her, and her heart sinks.

He's staring at where my shirt rode up on my lower back—i.e., my ass.

Well, no. He isn't. William K. Harding would never stoop so low, and the idea that he'd voluntarily glance at my scrawny ass is laughable. But he is looking at me, *there*, his lips slightly parted and his hand forgotten in midair, which likely means that he's . . . horrified? By my eight-year-old sweatpants, I bet. Or by the explosion of freckles on my skin. Or by . . . God, what panties do I even have on? Please, let it not be the ones with Jeff Goldblum's face Hannah got me last year. And how many holes do they have? He's going to report me to the underwear police. I will be executed by the Victoria's Secret mob, and—

He clears his throat. "Here." He bravely overcomes his disgust and comes to stand behind me. He is just *massive*. So big that he completely blocks the overhead light. For a microsecond I feel warm, oddly tingly. Then he drops a bag next to my hand without me even having to ask, and says, "Should I move them to a lower shelf for you?"

His voice is a little gravelly. Maybe he's coming down with a cold. I hope I don't get it. "Um, that would be great. Thanks." It takes him about half a second. Then we're both back to our original position, me with my coffee, Liam with his tea, and I realize that in the mildly mortifying adventures of the last minute, I forgot to think of a decent olive branch topic of conversation. *Fantastic*.

So I blurt out: "The Nationals are doing well this season." I *think*? I overheard a dude say it on the bus. Liam's always playing video games with his dude friends. He probably likes sports, too.

"Oh. That's . . . good." Liam nods.

I nod.

More awkward nodding, and then silence. Again.

Okay. This is *way* too uncomfortable. I'm going to install motion sensors in every room in the house so I can make sure our paths never cross again—

“What sport is that, again?”

I look up from the coffee I'm furiously stirring. “Mmm?”

“The Nationals. What sport?”

“Ah . . .” I glance around the kitchen, looking for clues. Find a grand total of none. “I have no idea.”

Liam dunks a tea bag in his mug, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. “Me, neither.”

We leave the room from opposite doors. I wonder whether he's aware that we almost smiled at each other.

Chapter 5

Four months, two weeks ago

I look out of the window, trying to use my engineering degree to approximate how many meters of snow fell overnight. One? Seventeen? Sadly, there was no Ballpark How Snowbound You Are 101 in my grad school curriculum, so I give up to glance down at my phone.

There's no way I can make it to work, and my entire team at the EPA is in the same situation. Sean's car is stuck in his driveway. Alec, Josh, and Evan can't even make it *to* their driveway. Ted is on his fifth joke about extreme weather events. The Slack channel pings with a few more messages cursing all forms of precipitation, and then Sean makes the call that we all should just work from home. Accessing the secure server from our EPA-issued laptops. Which for me is a bit of a problem.

So I text Sean:

Mara: Sean, I don't have my EPA-issued laptop at home with me.

Sean: Why?

Mara: You haven't issued me one yet.

Sean: I see.

Sean: Well, you can just take the day to answer emails and stuff like that, then. We're just going to try to fix the electrostatic sprayer issue today, so we don't really need you.

Sean: And next time make sure to remind me that you don't have a laptop yet.

How passive-aggressive would it be to forward to Sean the reminder email I sent him two days ago? Very, I imagine.

I sigh, text a quick *will do*, and try not to grind my teeth over the fact that I'd love to give my input on the electrostatic sprayer issue. It's actually closely related to my graduate work, but who am I kidding? Even if I were present, Sean would act like he always does: politely hum at my contributions, find a trivial reason to discard them, and fifteen minutes later paraphrase and restate them as his own ideas. Ted, my closest ally in the team, tells me not to take it too personally, because Sean's a jerk to pretty much everyone. But I know I'm not imagining that his most egregious behavior is always directed at me ("I wonder why," I muse to myself, stroking my woman-in-STEM chin). But Sean's the team leader, so . . .

Did I say that I love my new EPA job? Maybe I lied. Or maybe I do love it, but I hate Sean more. Hard to tell.

I spend the day doing what work I can without access to classified information—i.e., very little. I briefly FaceTime with Sadie, but she's on a deadline for some hippy-dippy eco-sustainable project ("I haven't slept in thirty-eight hours. Please, tie an anvil to my neck and drop me in the Sargasso Sea."), Hannah is unreachable (probably frolicking with the walruses on a slab of ice), and . . . That's it. I don't really have any other friends.

I should probably work on that.

By one P.M. I am mortally bored. I nap; I watch a YouTube video on the plate arrangement of the stegosaurus; I paint my nails a pretty red matte color; I write a half-assed post for my *Bachelor* blog on my

expectations for the next season; I practice braiding my hair in a crown; I wonder whether I'm a workaholic, decide that I probably am.

I can't remember the last time I was inside all day. I've always been a bit restless, a bit too antsy. *Much too active*, my parents would say as they tried to enroll me in every possible team sport to keep me busy. They aren't bad people, but I doubt they wanted a kid, and I know for sure that they weren't fans of whatever changes my arrival brought to their lifestyle. Probably the reason they were never huge fans. We talk maybe once or twice a year now—and I'm always the one who calls.

Oh well.

I lean my forehead against the chilly glass of the window, feeling an odd sense of isolation, as though I'm disconnected from the entire world, swaddled in a muffled white cocoon.

I should start dating again.

Should I start dating again?

Yeah. I should. Except that . . . men. No, thank you. I am well aware that #NotAllMen are condescending shitlets like Sean, and I've had my share of perfectly nice boyfriends who didn't feel the need to *Actually* me when I tried to have a conversation. But even at their best, all my romantic relationships felt like work. In a way Sadie and Hannah and Helena never did. In a way *actual work* never did. And for what? Sex? Jury's still out on whether I even care about that.

Maybe I should skip the dating and just visit Sadie in NYC as soon as the weather gets better. Yeah, I'll do that. We'll make a weekend out of it. Ice-skate. Get that frozen hot chocolate thing she's been raving about, the one she insists is not just a rebranded milkshake. But in the

meantime it's still snowing, and I'm still stuck in here. Alone.

Well, not *alone* alone. Liam's around. He came downstairs this morning, large hand brushing over the smooth wooden railing, looking . . . not quite disheveled. But he didn't bother with his usual suit. The faded jeans and worn T-shirt made him seem younger, a more human version of his aloof, stern self. Or maybe it was the hair, dark as usual, but sticking up just a bit in the back. If we hated each other a tad less, I'd have reached up and fixed it for him. Instead I watched him step into the roomy entrance until it didn't feel quite so roomy anymore. No high ceiling is *that* high when someone as tall as Liam stands under it, apparently. I stared at him half-mesmerized for a few moments—till I realized that he was staring right back. *Oops*. Then he looked out the window, sighed deeply, and headed back upstairs. Phone already on his ear as he gave calm, detailed instructions about a project that's probably aimed at freeing the planet from the evil clutches of photosynthesizing plants.

I haven't seen him since, but I heard him. Laughter here. Barefooted steps there. Creaking wood and the beep of the microwave. Our rooms are one and a half hallways away. I know he has a home office, but I've never been in there—a bit of a tacit Do-not-go-to-the-West-Wing, *Beauty and the Beast* situation. I've considered snooping around when he was gone, but what if he put live traps around? I picture him coming home, finding me wailing, my ankle tangled in a snare. He'd probably leave me there to starve.

Plus, he doesn't go out much. There are that couple of friends of his who come over to do surprisingly nerdy stuff (which reminds me a bit too much of me, Sadie, and Hannah making brownies for a *Parks and Rec* marathon—

which in turn is vaguely painful—so I pretend it doesn't happen). His workdays seem to be sixteen hours long, even when I'm not being a petty gremlin about signing his mail, but that's about it. I wonder if he dates. I wonder if he sneaks a different girl into the house every night and tells her *Shh, be quiet. My squatting ginger roommate will key my record player if we're too loud.* I wonder if I'm simply failing to notice the masked orgies he has in the kitchen every weekend while I'm tucked under my granny quilt, carefully composing my blog posts.

I wonder why I wonder.

When I pad downstairs for dinner, the house is dark and silent. And cold. Honestly, how is Liam not freezing? Is it the seventy pounds of muscles? Does he coat himself in baby-seal fat? I shake my head as I raise the thermostat and heat up more food than I need to eat (but, crucially: not more food than I *can* eat).

There are a few living/sitting/front/lounge/whatnot rooms on the first floor, but my favorite is the one connected to the kitchen. It has a large, comfortable couch that probably cost more than my graduate education, a soft area rug I like to stealthily caress when I'm home alone, and the pièce de résistance: a giant TV. I move my (many) food containers to the walnut coffee table and let myself plop down on the couch.

For reasons I don't understand, Liam pays for cable television and for about fifteen different streaming services that I've never seen him use. I'm in no way above exploiting FGP Corp's blood money, so I find a rerun of a season twelve episode of *The Bachelorette*. Not my favorite, for reasons I explained at length on my blog (don't judge me), but decent. I settle in.

Ten minutes later, an idiot with an obvious tanning-bed addiction is fist-fighting an idiot who clearly snorts protein powder, all under a delighted girl's eyes—i.e., the premise of the show. But I realize that not all noises come from the TV. When I mute it, I can hear another argument. From upstairs. In Liam's voice.

It's not loud enough to make out the gist of it, but I do manage to eavesdrop the occasional words. *Wrong. Unethical. Opposed*, maybe? Quite a few firm *Nos*, but that's about it. After a brief moment, the sounds are muffled again. Another minute, and a door slams; feet quickly make their way down the steps.

Crap.

I consider quickly switching to a Lars von Trier movie, but Liam arrives before I can fool him into thinking that I'm an intellectual. I look up from my egg roll and he's there, in the slice of kitchen I can see from the couch, looking like . . . murder.

That is: more than usual.

My first instinct is to flatten myself against the couch, keep watching my trashy show and eating my excellent food. But he turns, our eyes meet, and I have no choice but to hesitantly wave at him. He answers with a curt nod, and . . . he looks broody and dark, like he just had a terrible ten minutes, perhaps a terrible day. Even worse, he looks like he's ready to take it out on the first person he'll find in his path—which, given the weather conditions, is regrettably going to be me. He looks like he needs a distraction, and a very stupid idea pops into my head.

Don't do it, Mara. Don't do it. You're gonna regret it.

But Liam is visibly clenching his teeth. The way he's staring into the open fridge suggests that he'd like to strangle each and every jar of tartar sauce (for unknowable

reasons, he owns three). Maybe the ketchup, too. The line of his overbroad shoulders is so tense I could use it as a bubble level, and—

Ah. Screw it.

“So.” I clear my throat. “I ordered way more food than I need.” I resist the urge to cover my discomfort with nervous laughter. He can probably smell it, my abject terror. “Would you, um, like some?”

He slowly closes the fridge door and turns around. “Excuse me?” He looks at me like I just offered to go rob a bank together. To buddy-sign up for aerial yoga. To spend the rest of the night moth watching.

“Takeout. Chinese. Want some?”

He glances at the window. Yes, it’s still snowing. We’re officially the North Pole. “You ordered takeout.” He sounds dubious.

“Not today. Two days ago. I always order too much, because leftovers taste better. Especially the lo mein, it really needs to soak into the sauce to . . .” I stop. And flush. “Anyway, would you like some?”

“We’re in the middle of a snowstorm, Mara.” Why am I shivering all of a sudden? Ah yes. Because it’s cold. Not because he said my name. “You should be hoarding your food.”

Yeah, I should. “It’s about to go bad. And I’m happy to share.”

It takes Liam an inordinate amount of time to answer. Ten good seconds of him staring skeptically, perhaps suspecting me to be a deranged murderess on the prowl for roommates to poison. Eventually he says: “Sure.”

He sounds everything but sure. Very cautious. Looks cautious, too, as he makes his way to me. He slides his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and looks around

morosely, and it's obvious that he has no idea what to do—sit on the couch, the chair, the floor. Eat standing in the middle of the living room. It occurs to me for the first time that his entire aloof, stern persona might hide a smidge of awkwardness. Could he be one of those people who are hyperconfident in professional settings and the total opposite in their social lives? Nah. Unlikely.

I pat a spot next to mine, already regretting this. We've never sat together before. So far, every interaction between us has been circumstantial. The act of sitting next to each other implies intentionality and a longer duration. A new territory.

Weird.

Liam is so heavy and tall that the cushion dips when he sits down, and I have to tense my abs and readjust to avoid sliding toward him. I hand him a plate and a pair of chopsticks, pretending there's nothing unusual about any of this. He does the same as he accepts them with a brief nod, his fingers never accidentally touching mine.

"What are you watching?" he asks.

"*The Bachelorette*." No sign of recognition. "It's this stupid, *amazing* show. Reality. You don't have to watch with me. Save yourself while you can." Surprisingly, Liam stays put. Still looks a bit like he wouldn't mind trashing the entire house, but his expression is slightly less bloodthirsty. Progress? "So, Sheryl, the girl in the green dress—the only girl—has a few weeks to choose a husband among all the guys."

Liam squints at the TV for a moment. "Based on what? They all look the same."

"They do, don't they?" I shrug. "They take her on dates. And chat. Toward the end they might even have sex."

Is he flushing? No. It's just the light. "On-screen?"

“Hey, it’s ABC, not HBO.” I put a spring roll on his plate. Then I take a look at him—his arms filling his shirt, his chest, his general . . . hugeness—and add two more. How many million calories does he need a day? I should find out. In the name of science. “You see the guy wearing glasses he obviously doesn’t need in the vain hope of looking less imbecilic?”

“Blue shirt?”

“Yes. We’re rooting for him.”

“Are we.”

“Yep. Because he’s from Michigan. And I went to U of M for undergrad,” I explain, licking a drop of hoisin sauce off my thumb. His eyes linger on my lips for a too-long moment, then abruptly slide away.

“I see.”

“It’s a great place. Ever been?”

“I don’t believe so, no.” He’s still not looking at me. Maybe he holds a profound and irrational hatred for Ann Arbor?

“Where did you go to school?”

He seems mildly surprised that I’m asking. Fair, since I haven’t exactly excelled at turn taking and conversation making in the past. “Dartmouth. Then Harvard Law School.”

“Right.” I nod knowingly. “That sounds . . . cheap.”

He has the decency to look sheepish, so I take pity on him. “Want some cashew chicken?”

“Ah . . . Yes, please.”

“Here. You can finish it, I’ve already eaten like, ten pounds of it.”

He nods. “Thanks.”

Liam Harding. Being polite. Wow. “You’re welcome.”

For a couple of minutes we are silent—Liam watching the TV, me sneakily watching Liam as he eats ravenously, large quick bites that are youthfully endearing. Then he turns to me.

“Mara.”

“Yes?”

“You clearly are some kind of genius.”

Uh? Am I? “Is this—are you—making fun of me?”

He looks dead serious and faintly offended at the idea. “You’re basically a rocket scientist.”

“Basically being the operative word.”

“And Helena, who had ridiculous standards, chose you to work with her. You’re obviously remarkable.”

Oh God. Is this a compliment? Am I going to blush? “Um . . . thanks?”

He nods. “What I don’t understand is, why is someone as smart as you watching this shit?”

I smile into my fried rice. “You’ll see.”

One hour later, when Sheryl says, *“I think our relationship has come a long way, but I am not convinced that it could develop any further . . .”* I slam my hand on my armrest and yell, “Oh, come *on*, Sheryl,” just as Liam slaps his armrest and yells, “Sheryl. What the hell?”

We turn to each other and exchange a brief, bemused look. *Told ya*, I think at him with a smile. His mouth twitches, like he heard me loud and clear.

“. . . at this point, I just know that it’s not gonna work out between us. Can I walk you out?”

Liam shakes his head, horrified. “That’s just a bad decision.”

“I know.”

“He’s the best of the lot.”

“Soooo stupid, right? She’s gonna regret this so bad. I know it, because I’ve already seen the season.” *Multiple times*. I reach for one of the beers Liam took out of the fridge a few minutes ago. “Want another crab rangoon?” I ask.

He nods and settles back, long legs stretched next to mine on top of the coffee table. The snow outside is still falling, and we wait for the next episode to start.

* * *

He shovels snow like it’s his one and only vocation.

Maybe it’s the isolation-induced insanity speaking, but there’s something hypnotic about it. The rhythmic rise and fall of his shoulders under the black fleece. The seemingly effortless way he’s been going at it for hours, occasionally stopping to wipe the sweat off his brow with the back of his sleeve. I press my forehead to the window and just . . . stare. I can almost hear Helena’s voice in my head (*Would you like to borrow my birding binoculars?*). I blithely ignore it.

Maybe that’s what he majored in at Dartmouth: Snow Shoveling. Nicely complemented by a minor in Muscles. His honors thesis was titled *The Importance of Armceps in Ergonomic Excavating*. Then he moved to graduate school to study How-to-Make-a-Mundane-Winter-Task-Look-Attractive Law. And here I am, unable to take my eyes off a decade of overpaid-for higher education.

This is getting weird. It’s giving me flashbacks to the first time I saw him, when his dark eyes and those (frankly ridiculous) shoulders hit me like a brick in the head. It’s not a memory I want to revisit, so I look away and head

downstairs to make lunch, blaming my temporary lunacy on skipping breakfast. This is what I get for falling asleep late last night, halfway through the finale, in the middle of explaining to Liam between yawns that *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* contestants get mandatory STD screenings. What I get for waking up this morning on the couch, a soft, heavenly smelling blanket laid over me. I wonder where it came from, anyway. Not from the living room. I'm positive that there wasn't one around.

It's not that Liam and I are friends now. I don't know him any better than I did yesterday—except, I guess, that he has some surprisingly valid opinions when it comes to reality TV. But for some unparsable reason, when I start working on my soup I find myself making enough for two.

See, this is why humans are not meant to be sequestered at home. Boredom and loneliness turn their minds to mushy oatmeal, and they start imposing their poorly cooked food on unsuspecting Snow Lawyers. And I'm apparently embracing my weird, because when Liam comes in, dark hair damp and curling from the melting snowflakes, cheeks glowing from the exercise, I tell him, "I made lunch."

He stares, arms dangling at his sides, as though unsure how to answer. So I add, "For both of us. As a thank-you. For doing that. The shoveling, I mean." He stares some more. "If you want. It's not mandatory."

"No. No, I . . ." He doesn't finish. But when he notices me reaching toward a high shelf to the bowls, he comes up behind me and sets two on the counter.

"Thank you."

"No problem." I might be imagining this, but I think I hear him inhale slowly before he moves away. Does my hair smell bad? I washed it yesterday. Has Garnier Fructis finally failed me after years of faithful service? I'm

wondering whether it's time to switch to Pantene by the time we're politely eating at the kitchen table, in front of each other, like we're a young family in a Campbell's commercial.

Problem: without the TV on, it's pretty conspicuous that we have nothing to talk about. Liam glances at me every few seconds, as though me stuffing my face is either something he likes to look at, or something totally hideous—who's to say? As the silence stretches, I am once again regretting every choice I've ever made. And when his phone rings, I'm so relieved I could fist-pump.

Except that he doesn't pick up. He checks caller ID (*FGP Corp—Mitch*), rolls his eyes, and then turns the phone around in a dismissive movement that has me chuckling.

Liam gives me a puzzled look.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to . . . Just . . ." I shrug. "It's nice to know that you hate your colleagues, too."

He lifts one eyebrow. "You hate your colleagues?"

"Well, no. I don't hate them. I mean, I *sometimes* hate them, but . . ." Why is this about *me*? "Anyway, do you think the snow is over for good?"

"Why do you sometimes hate your colleagues?"

"I don't. I misspoke. It's just . . ." Liam has stopped eating and is looking at me like he's actually interested. *Ugh*. "They're all men. All engineers. And men engineers can be . . . yeah. And I'm the newest arrival, and they're all kind of chummy already. And I'm pretty sure that Sean, my boss, thinks that I'm some sort of pity diversity hire. Which I'm not. I'm actually a really good engineer. I have to be, or Helena would have butchered me in my sleep."

He nods as though he understands. "She'd have butchered you awake."

“Right? She wasn’t exactly forgiving. And I’m not complaining—I owe her so much. She truly helped me become a better scientist, but everyone in my team treats me as though I’m some infant engineer who doesn’t know what an ohm is, and—” Why am I *still talking*? “Well, everyone except for Ted, but I’m not sure whether he actually respects me or is just trying to get laid, since he’s already asked me out like, three times, which makes things kind of awkward . . .”

Liam’s face instantly hardens. His spoon sets in the bowl with a loud clink. “This is sexual harassment.”

“Oh, no.”

“At the very least, it’s highly inappropriate.”

“No, it’s not like that—”

“I can talk to him.”

I blink. “What?”

“What’s his last name?” Liam asks, like it’s a totally normal question. “I can talk to him. Explain that he has made you uncomfortable and he should stop—”

“What?” I let out a laugh. “Liam, I’m not going to tell you his last name. What are you gonna do, pour a barrel of oil on his house?”

He looks away. Like it was an option.

“No, I . . . I actually like Ted. He’s nice. I mean, I’ve even considered saying yes. Why not, right?” *Why not?* is what Helena would say, but Liam’s expression darkens at that. Or maybe it’s just my entire soul, darkening at the idea of putting on eyeliner to go out with a guy who’s perfectly fine and excites me as much as boiled spinach. “It’s just that . . .” I shrug. How to explain that I am forever uninspired by the men I meet? I won’t even bother. It’s not like he cares. “Thank you, though,” I add.

He looks like he'd like to insist, but just says, "Let me know if you change your mind."

"Um. Okay." I guess I have a six-foot-three mountain of muscles in my corner now? It's kinda nice. I should make soup more often. "So, since I have you here," *and to avoid dropping into awkward silence again*, "what's up with the pictures?"

"The pictures?"

"The black-and-white pictures of trees and lakes and stuff. Hanging on literally every single wall."

"I just like to take them."

"Wait. You took the pictures yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Does it mean that you've actually been to all those places?"

He swallows a spoonful of soup, nodding. "It's mostly national parks. A few state ones. Canada, too."

I'm a little shocked. Not only are the pictures good, professional-level good, but . . . "Okay"—I point at the frame behind the table, a mobius arc in what looks like Sierra Nevada—"this is not the work of someone who hates the environment."

He gives me a puzzled look. "And I hate the environment?"

"Yes!" I blink. "No?"

He shrugs. "I might not compost my own feces or hold my breath to avoid emitting CO₂, but I do like nature."

I'm a little dumbfounded. "Liam? Can I ask you a question that will possibly make you want to throw the bowl at me?"

"It won't."

"You haven't heard the question."

"But the soup is really good."

I beam. And then I immediately feel self-conscious at the surge of warmth that comes from knowing he likes my cooking. Who cares if he does? He's a random dude. He's Liam Harding. On paper, I hate him.

"You said you really respected Helena's work. And that she was your favorite aunt. And that you were close. But you work at FGP Corp, and I've been wondering . . ."

"How I'm still alive?"

I laugh. "Pretty much."

"I'm not quite sure why she spared me."

"A bit out of character, isn't it?"

"I hid the sharp knives every time she visited. But she mostly focused on sending me daily texts about all the evil FGP Corp is doing in the world. Maybe she was going for a slow grind?"

"I just . . . I don't understand how you love Helena and nature *and* working at a company that lobbies to eliminate carbon taxes like its aim is to plunge civilization into fiery darkness."

He huffs out a laugh. "You think I *enjoy* working there?"

"I assumed you did. Because you seem to work all the time." I flush—okay, fine, I noticed his hours, sue me—but he doesn't seem to care. "You . . . don't?"

"No. It's a shitty company and I hate everything it stands for."

"Oh. Then why . . ." I scratch my nose. Oh. I did *not* expect that. "You're a lawyer. Can't you, um, lawyer elsewhere?"

"It's complicated."

"Complicated?"

The spoon scrapes the bottom of the bowl for a moment. "My mentor recruited me."

"Your mentor?"

“He was one of my professors. I owe him a lot—he helped me get all my internships lined up, advised me during law school. When he asked me to take this job, I didn’t feel like I could say no. He’s my boss now, and . . .” He leans back in his chair and runs a hand through his hair. Tired. He looks very tired. “I have a lot of complicated feelings about what FGP Corp does. And I don’t like the company, or its mission. But in the end, it’s a good thing that I’m around. If it weren’t me, someone else would do my job just as well. And at least I can be there for the team I lead. And run interference between them and my boss when it’s necessary.”

I think about the words I overheard last night. *Unethical. Wrong.* “Is he the one you were arguing with? On the phone?” He lifts one eyebrow, and my cheeks warm. “I promise I wasn’t eavesdropping!” But Liam shrugs as though he doesn’t mind. So I smile, leaning forward across the table. “Okay, maybe I was. Just a bit. So, what’s his last name?”

“Whose name?”

“Your boss. Maybe *I* can talk to *him* while *you* talk to *Ted*? Some good old reciprocal proxy bullying? Mutual warn-off? Leave-My-Friend-Alone Sixty-Nine?”

He smiles at me then—a full, real smile. His first in my presence, I think, and it makes breathing that much harder, the temperature of the room that much hotter. How—*why* is he so handsome? I stare at him, speechless, unable to do anything but notice the clear brown of his eyes, the lopsided way his lips stretch, the fact that he seems to be studying me with a warm, kind expression, and—

Our eyes dart to his phone. Which is ringing again.

“Work?” I ask. My voice is hoarse.

“No. It’s . . .” He stands from the table and clears his throat. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

As he walks out, I hear him chuckle. On the other side of the phone, a female voice is saying his name.

Chapter 6

Four months ago

I take a careful step out of the shower, letting my toes dig deep into the thick, soft mat. It turns out to be a lethally poor choice, because I do it in the same exact moment Liam opens the bathroom door to take a step inside.

It leads to me jumping. And flailing. And yelling: “Aaaaaaaaah!”

“Mara? What—”

“Aaah!”

“Sorry—I didn’t—”

My entire body is slippery and frantic—not a good combination. I almost lose my balance trying to wrap the shower curtain around me. Then I *do* lose my balance, and I’m positive Liam can see everything.

The outie belly button Hannah always teases me about.

The sickle-shaped lacrosse scar above my right boob.

Said right boob, *and* the left one.

For a fraction of a second we both stand motionless. Staring at each other. Unable to react. Then I say, “Can you—could you, um, hand me that towel over there?”

“Ah—sure. Here you go. I . . .”

He extends his arm and turns the other way while I wrap the towel (his towel; Liam’s towel) around myself. It’s fluffy and clean and it smells good and—who uses black towels,

anyway? Who produces them? Where does he even buy them, Bloodbath and Beyond?

“Mara?” He is standing under the doorframe, pointedly looking away from me.

“Yes?”

“Why are you in my bathroom?”

Crap. “Sorry. I’m *so* sorry. My shower isn’t working, and . . . I think there’s something wrong with a pipe, and . . . I don’t know, but I called Bob.”

“Bob?”

“The plumber. Well, *a* plumber. He’s coming out tomorrow morning.”

“Oh.”

“But I went for a run earlier, and I was all sweaty and smelly, so . . .”

“I see.”

“Sorry. I should have asked before. You can turn now, by the way. I’m decent.”

Liam does turn. But only after about ten seconds of what looks like a pretty intense internal debate. His expressions are never the easiest to read, but he seems a little flustered.

A lot, actually. As in, even more than I am.

Which is odd. I’m the one who got boobspiced, and Liam is probably very used to being with naked women. That is, *actually* naked women. Way more naked than I currently am. Let’s be real—his ex is likely a Victoria’s Secret Angel who recently quit modeling to finish a doctorate in art history and become a junior curator at the Smithsonian. She has an impeccable belly button and knows what PlayStation button to press to throw a grenade. Did I say *his* ex? They’re still dating, for all I know. Having a very athletic sex life. I’m talking role play and toys. Butt action.

Lots of oral, which they both excel at. Okay, this train of thought needs to crash right now.

Maybe he's just embarrassed for me? Not that he should be. I'm pretty. I mean, I *think* I'm pretty. Cute, in a befreckled, wish-I-was-two-inches-taller, slightly-self-conscious-about-that-hump-on-my-nose way. Sometimes, usually after Sadie has put eyeliner on me, I even think I'm beautiful. But I'll never be as attractive as Liam. Is that why he's doing this weird thing—staring while obviously trying his best not to stare?

"I'm so sorry I didn't warn you. I thought you were out of town or something. Because you didn't come home last night, and . . ." I feel a bit embarrassed that I noticed. But how could I not? Ever since the snowstorm, we've gotten into this weird rhythm. Dinner together at seven. Not that there's an acknowledged agreement or anything, but I know from before that he used to eat a little later, and I know from my whole life that I used to eat a little earlier, and somehow we converged on a time that works for both of us . . . Maybe I was close to texting him last night. But decided not to, because it seemed like crossing some kind of unspoken line.

"No, I just . . . I had to be at work. Because of a deadline. I was going to warn you, but . . ." *You didn't want to cross some kind of unspoken line?* I want to ask. But one does not speak of unspoken things, so I just go with: "Of course." I clear my throat. "I'll go to my room. Get dressed."

"Right."

I make to leave. Except that Liam's still standing there, blocking the exit. The only exit, if one doesn't count the window, which I briefly consider before acknowledging that it's not a feasible option. Not in my current state of dishevelment. "You are . . ." He doesn't seem to understand

where he is. I'd gesticulate and point it out, but I have to clutch my towel with both hands to avoid flashing him, and — "Oh. Oh, right, I . . ." He takes a large step to the side. Too large—he's basically plastered against the sink now.

"Okay. Thanks again for letting me use your bathroom."

"No problem."

I really should leave now. "And I borrowed a bit of your shampoo. Well, stole. It's not as if I'm ever going to return it. But, you know."

"It's okay."

"I love Old Spice, by the way. Solid choice."

"Oh." Liam looks everywhere but at me. "I just grab the first one I see at the store."

I know in that moment, I simply know, that Old Spice is William K. Harding's favorite brand of personal hygiene products, and that he suffers deep shame because of it. "Right. Of course." He can be adorable, sometimes. "Hey, just FYI, I'm not embarrassed. So you shouldn't be, either."

"What?"

"I don't care that you saw me naked. Because I know you don't care. Just saying, we don't need to be weird about it. Believe me"—I laugh—"I know you're not going to use your annoying ginger roomie's tiny freckled boobs as spank bank material."

I expect him to reply with a joke, like he usually does, but he doesn't. He doesn't reply at all, in fact. Just presses his lips together, nods once, and all of a sudden things feel even more awkward. *Crap.*

"Anyway. Thanks again."

"You're welcome."

I step out with a small wave and notice two things: he's staring hard at his feet, and his left hand is a tight fist at his side.

Chapter 7

Three months ago

There's nothing wrong with the waveguide. That, I know for sure. The transformer and the stirrer seem fine, too, which has me thinking that the problem is in the magnetron. Now, I'm not really an expert, but I'm hoping that if I tinker with the filament the assembly will fix itself and— “Is this because last night we watched *Transformers*?”

I look up. Liam, a soft smile on his face, is standing on the other side of the kitchen island, taking in the microwave oven parts I meticulously laid out over the marble countertop.

I might have made a mess.

“It was either this or writing Optimus Prime fanfiction.”

He nods. “Good choice, then.”

“But also, your microwave isn't working. I'm trying to fix it.”

“I can just buy a new one.” His head tilts. He studies the components with a slight frown. “Is this safe?”

I stiffen. “Are you asking because I'm a woman and therefore unable to do anything remotely scientific without causing radioactive pollution? Because if so, I—”

“I'm asking because *I* wouldn't know where to start, and because *I* am so ignorant about anything remotely scientific that you could be building an atomic bomb and I wouldn't

be able to tell," he says calmly. As though he doesn't even need to be defensive, because the idea that me being a puny-brained girl never even entered his mind. "But you clearly can." A pause. "Please don't build an atomic bomb."

"Don't tell me what to do."

He sighs. "I'll make room for the plutonium in the cheese drawer."

I laugh, and realize that it's the first time I've done it in hours. Which, in turn, makes me sigh. "It's just . . . Sean is being a total dick. Again."

His expression darkens with understanding. "What'd he do?"

"The usual. That deco project I told you about? I was explaining this really cool idea about how to fix it, but he only let me talk for half a minute before telling me why it wouldn't work." I fiddle with the magnetron, then start reassembling the oven. The second both my hands are occupied, a strand of hair decides to fall into my left eye. I blow it away. "Thing is, I'd already considered all of his objections and found solutions. But did he let me continue? Nope. So now we're going with a much-less-elegant method, and . . ." I trail off. At this point, Liam gets two to four Sean-related rants a week from me. The least I can do is keep them short. "Anyway. Sorry for being defensive."

"Mara. You should report him."

"I know. It's just . . . this constantly belittling behavior is so hard to prove, and . . ." I shrug—bad idea, since my hair is now back in my eyes. I feel a little stuck. A lot stuck.

"So, what's Sean's last name?" Liam asks.

"Why?"

"Just curious." He tries to sound casual, but he's so bad at it. He's clearly the worst liar in the world—how did he get through law school? It makes me smile every time.

“You need to practice,” I say, pointing my screwdriver at him.

“Practice?”

“Practice telling . . .”

My voice trails off. Because Liam is reaching up to brush his fingers against my cheekbone, a faint smile on his lips. My brain short-circuits. What—? Did he—?

Oh. *Oh*. My hair. My lost, wayward strand of hair. He tucked it behind my ear. He’s just being nice and helping his ginger klutz roommate, who in turn is having a major brain fart. *Classy, Mara. Very classy.*

“Practice telling what?” he asks, still staring at the shell of my ear. It’s probably misshapen, and I never even knew it.

“Nothing. Lies. I . . .” I clear my throat. *Get it together, Floyd.* “Hey, you know what?” I try to keep my tone light. Change the topic. “The beginning of this cohabitation was an absolute nightmare, but I like this a lot.”

“This?”

“This thing.” I begin to screw in the back plate of the microwave. “Where we chat without throwing chairs at each other and you offhandedly ask for the last names of dudes who are mean to me with the obvious idea of committing unsanctioned acts of vigilante justice against them.”

“That’s not what I—”

I lift my eyebrow. He blushes and looks away.

“Anyway, I like this much better. Being friends, I guess.”

He glares at me. “I’m *not* your friend.”

“Oh.” I almost recoil. Almost. “Oh. I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“The other night Eileen gave Bernie a rose, and you said that it was a good move. That’s not something I can accept

from a friend.”

I burst out laughing. “Come on, he’s cute. He is a dog trainer. He likes K-pop!”

“See, this? The reason you’re my sworn enemy.” He shakes his head at me, and I laugh harder, and then my laughter dies down and for a second we’re just smiling at each other and an unfamiliar, liquid warmth spills inside me.

“I am *positive* Helena would have rooted for Bernie.”

He snorts. “You say it like it’s an endorsement. Like she didn’t constantly try to set me up with random people I cared nothing for.”

“She did the same with me!”

“And when I was a teenager she dated this guy who had been on a four-month shower strike.”

“Oh God. Why?”

“Not sure. The environment?”

“No—why was she dating him?”

Liam winces. “Apparently—and I quote—‘astounding carnal chemistry.’ ”

I morbidly contemplate Helena’s sex life until Liam breaks the quiet and asks, “Do you ever think about switching jobs?”

I shake my head. “It’s the EPA. Where I always wanted to be. Seriously, fifteen-year-old Mara would travel through time to shank me if I were to quit.” I think I picked up on an odd note in his question, though. “Why did you ask? Do *you* ever think about switching jobs?”

He shakes his head, too. “I couldn’t,” he says. But I’m starting to know him, a little bit. I’m more attuned to his moods, his thoughts, the way he turns inward whenever he considers something serious. There is a wall of sorts that he builds between himself and everyone who tries to know

him. Sometimes I wish it weren't there. So I push gently against it and ask, "How are things at work?"

He is silent for a while, hands pressed wide against the island, watching me quietly as I finish screwing the pieces back together. My hair remains safely tucked behind my ear. "He asked me to fire someone today."

"Oh." I already know who *he* is. Mitch. Liam's boss. Whom I privately hate with the intensity of a thousand microwave ovens. Who's the reason Liam feels like he cannot pack up his black-market-organ-priced graduate degrees and his years of experience being a corporate meanie and find another job. "Why?"

"Someone on my team made a really stupid mistake. But fixable. And still . . . it's just a mistake. We all fuck up—I know *I* do." He absentmindedly rubs the back of his hand against his lips. "I really thought I could talk him out of it." He shakes his head, and I frown. And press my lips together. And order myself to count to five before I say anything, just to avoid being intrusive or aggressive. Five, four, three— "Honestly, your boss is a shit nugget and he doesn't deserve you and you should quit and leave him to stir in his shit broth!"

Liam looks up, surprised. And amused, I think. "A shit nugget?"

I flush. "A valuable but underrated insult. But Liam, really, you deserve to have a better job. And before you point out that it's hypocritical of me to tell you to switch jobs while I won't do it myself, let me say that it's a totally different situation. I *love* my job—I just hate the people I have to do it with. Including Sean. Especially Sean. Really, mostly Sean." Oh, how I'd love to boil my post-run socks, make soup out of them, and then feed it to Sean.

"You could ask for a transfer."

“I plan to. But it won’t help.” I shrug and plug the microwave back in. “The EPA’s opening a new unit. I’m applying to be transferred, but Sean the Asshole is, too.” I roll my eyes. “He’s impossible to shake off. Like a parasitic toenail fungus.”

“So you’ll be competing with him for the position?”

“Well, no. He’s applying to lead. I’d be among the plebs—a lowly team member.”

“You can’t lead because you don’t have enough seniority?”

“Oh, I don’t think there are seniority requirements.”

“Then why are you not applying to lead it?”

“Because—” I snap my mouth shut and look down at my screwdriver. Yes. Why? Why *wouldn’t* I apply for a leader position? What is wrong with me? It’s not like Sean is smarter than I am. He just loves to impose the sound of his own voice to unsuspecting passersby. And maybe I don’t have enough leadership experience to know that I’ll be a good boss, but I do have enough Sean experience to know that *he* won’t be. He keeps calling me Lara, for fuck’s sake. In *emails*. That he writes to my email address, marafloyd@epa.gov. Dude, you can literally *copy* and *paste*?

I look up. Liam is staring at me with a calm expression, as though patiently waiting for me to reach this very exact conclusion: I am better than Sean. Because *everyone* is better than Sean, and that includes me.

I feel a shiver of something warm run down my spine, as though I’m being held. Which is weird, since I haven’t hugged someone in . . . God, months. Not since Helena.

“Tell you what.” I put my hands on my hips, suddenly determined. “I’m going to apply for the leader position.”

“That’s exactly what you should—”

“If *you* leave your job.”

He pauses, then exhales a laugh. "If I leave my job, who'll keep you in the expensive multi-ply toilet paper lifestyle you're accustomed to?"

"You will, since you're probably sitting on generational piles of old New England money. Plus, you could totally still be a lawyer for other, slightly less disgusting corporations. If there are any, that is. And if we strike this blood pact and I get the job, there's something even better in it for you."

"You let me hold Sean's head in the toilet bowl?"

"No. Well, yes. But also, if I get a team leader position, I'd be making more money. And I'll finally be able to move out." *Without needing to sell my half of the house.*

Liam's expression shifts abruptly. "Mara—"

"Think about it! You, walking around naked in a pleasantly freezing house, scratching your butt in front of a fridge full of tartar sauce, cooking tacos at three A.M. while listening to postmodern industrial pop on your gramophone. All around are giant screens, broadcasting video game playthroughs twenty-four/seven. Sounds nice, huh?"

"No," he says flatly.

"That's because I forgot to mention the best part: your pesky ex-roommate is gone, nowhere to be seen." I beam. "Now, tell me you're not going to love every second of—"

"I won't, Mara. I—" He turns away, and I can see his jaw clench like it used to before, when my presence in this house annoyed him and he considered me the bane of anything good. But his hand tightens around the edge of the counter once, and he seems to collect himself. He studies me for a long moment.

"Please," I press. "I won't apply if you won't. Do you really want to condemn me to a lifetime of Sean?"

He closes his eyes. Then he opens them and nods. Once. "I won't leave my job—"

"Oh, come on!"

"—till I have another lined up. But I will start looking around."

I smile slowly. "Wait—for real?" I did *not* think this would work.

"Only if you apply for the leader position."

"Yes!" I clap my hands. "Liam, I'll help you. Are you on LinkedIn? I bet recruiters would be all over you."

"What's LinkedIn?"

"Ugh. Do you at least have a recent headshot?"

He stares at me blankly.

"Fine, I'll take a picture of you. In the garden. When there's good natural light. Wear the charcoal three-piece suit and that blue button-down—it looks amazing on you." He cocks his eyebrow, and I instantly regret saying that, but I'm too excited at the idea of this weird professional-suicide pact to blush too hard. "This is *amazing*. We've got to shake on it."

I thrust out my hand, and he takes it immediately, his own firm and warm and large around mine, and—it might be the first time we touch on purpose, as opposed to arms brushing while we're working at the stove, or fingers grazing as he sorts out my mail. It feels . . . nice. And right. And natural. I like it, and I look up to Liam's face to see whether he likes it, too, and . . . there are a thousand different expressions passing on his face. A million different emotions.

I can't begin to parse even one.

"Deal," he says, voice deep and a little hoarse.

He uses his free hand to turn on the microwave—which, lo and behold, is working again.

Chapter 8

One month, two weeks ago

Rain is my favorite kind of weather.

I am most partial to summer storms, their strong winds and hot air, the way they make me feel like I'm sitting on the humid inside of a balloon that's about to burst. As a kid, I'd run outside as soon as the rain started just to get all wet—which seemed to outrage my mother to no end.

But I'm not particular. It's barely February, early in the night, and the hard drops beating a tattoo on the plastic of my umbrella, they just make me happy. I smile when I unlock the front door. Hum, too. I walk down the hall, listening to the rain instead of what's happening inside the house, and that must be the reason I don't hear them.

Liam and a girl. No: a woman. They are in the kitchen. Together. He's leaning back against the counter. She's sitting on it, at his side, close enough to lay her cheek on his shoulder while she shows him something on her phone that has both of them smiling. It's the most relaxed I've seen Liam with anyone. Clearly a very intimate moment that I should *not* be interrupting, except that I can't make myself move. I feel my stomach sink and remain rooted to the floor, unable to retreat as the woman shakes her head and murmurs something in Liam's ear that I cannot hear, something that has him chuckling in low, deep tones, and—I must gasp. Or make some sort of noise, because one

moment they're laughing, arms pressed against each other, and the next they're both looking up. At me.

Shit.

I try really hard not to let my eyes take in how cozy and comfortable he looks, how familiar and at ease. It's nothing like what happens when he and I accidentally bump against each other in the hallway, like that charged, electric tension that seems to crackle between us when we forget ourselves and our hands happen to brush together. But that's the point, right? Any physical contact between me and Liam is probably unwanted on his part, while this . . .

This is mortifying. I want to get out of this room and never come back. Buy an insulated lunch bag and a camping stove, shove them in my bedroom, and be completely self-sufficient.

The woman, though, doesn't seem nearly as unsettled, or self-conscious about the fact that she's currently perched on a piece of furniture in a home that's not hers, her skirt riding up to show long, toned legs. She smiles at me, and somehow, somewhere, I find my voice. "Sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt . . . I wanted to get something to drink, and I . . ." And I? *And I will now go to my room to flush myself down the toilet. Good-bye, cruel world.*

"I thought you'd be . . ." Liam's voice seems deeper than usual. I wonder if they were about to take whatever this is to his bedroom. *Oh God. Oh God, I just interrupted my roommate and his girlfriend. I'm such a loser.* "Out. I thought you'd be out."

Oh. Right. I was supposed to go on a date myself. With Ted. Something I agreed to do the other day under the impetus of: meh, why not? This morning I told Liam why I'd be home late, except that I ended up canceling because . . . I didn't really feel like going.

For some reason.

That is unclear to me.

"No. I mean, yes. Yes, I was. But . . ." I gesture vaguely in the air. As good an explanation as I can come up with.

"Oh."

"Yeah. I . . ." I should really go to my room and do that self-flushing thing. But it's hard, with Liam staring at me like that. Half-curious, half-happy to see me, half-something else. It's the first time I find him with someone who's not Calvin or another one of his dude friends he's obviously known since forever, someone who's clearly . . . Okay. He's on a date. With a woman. About to get laid, probably. And I interrupted. *Shit.*

"I'm . . . I'm gonna go now, so you guys can—"

"No need," a voice says.

A voice? Ah. Yes. Right. There is a third person in the room. A beautiful woman with long dark hair, who's still sitting on the counter, glancing with captivated interest between me and Liam, and . . .

"I was *just* about to leave," she says. But it's a lie. She was definitely *not* about to leave. "Right, Liam?" She and Liam exchange a silent, loaded look that I'd give half a kidney to be able to decipher.

"Oh, no. You don't have to leave," I say weakly. "I—"

"By the way, I'm going to introduce myself, since Liam here is clearly not going to." She hops down with grace that I've seen only in ballet dancers and Olympic gymnasts before, and holds out her hand. I hate myself for trying to remember if it's the same hand that was wrapped around Liam's arm while her head was on his shoulder. "I'm Emma. You must be the famous Mara?"

Why she would know my name is an absolute mystery. Unless Emma and Liam are very serious, and then Liam

would have mentioned his annoying roommate once or twice, and will you look at that? It appears that I just cannot bear the thought. “Yes. Um . . . Nice to meet you.”

Emma’s handshake is cool and firm. She smiles briefly, nice and self-assured, then turns to pick up her jacket from a stool.

“Well. This was fun. Informative, too. Mara, I hope we’ll meet a *ton* more times. And you . . .” She turns to Liam. Her voice drops lower, but I can still make out the words. “Cheer up, buddy. I don’t think you’re as doomed to a lifetime of pining as you think. I’ll call you tomorrow.” She’s not very tall and has to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek, one hand pressing against his abs for balance, and if Liam minds having her up in his space, he doesn’t show it. Then there is a friendly wave, directed at me this time, a cheerful “Good night,” the sound of her heels against the parquet flooring on her way to the entrance, and then— Gone.

That noise was the front door opening and closing, which means that Liam and I are alone.

“Liam, I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .”

“To?” He scratches the back of his neck, looking confused by my reaction. He’s still leaning against the counter, and I can’t make myself move away from the entrance. I can’t make myself continue and apologize for interrupting his date. *I was going to leave. I promise. You guys could have continued in your room, Liam. I wouldn’t have minded.*

Really.

“How did the presentation go?”

I look up from inspecting my shoes. “What?”

“Your presentation, today? For the lead position?”

“Ah.” Right. The presentation. The one I’ve been complaining about for days. The one I practiced with him yesterday. And the day before. The one he probably knows by heart. “Um, very good. Good. Well, okay. Passable.”

“It’s getting worse by the word.”

I wince. “It was . . . I stumbled a bit.”

“I see.”

“But maybe I still did better than Sean?”

“Maybe?”

“Probably.”

Liam smiles. “Probably?”

I smile back. “Almost certainly.”

“What a speedy improvement.”

I chuckle, and he pushes away from the counter and comes to stand right in front of me. Like he wants to be closer for this conversation. Closer to me.

“It’s bad news for you, though,” I say.

“Is it?”

“If I get this position, you’re going to have to step up and find a new job, too.”

“Ah. Yes.”

“We made a deal.”

“A deal is a deal.”

“Also, after the interview they gave us information on the salary. It’s a big raise. I’ll definitely be able to move out.”

His eyes harden, then switch back to a neutral mask. “Right.”

“What?” I tease him. “You afraid you can’t afford to buy your own creamer?” *What does he even use it for? I still don’t know.*

“Just concerned I’ll have to watch Eileen make terrible life choices on my own.”

“Eileen knows what she’s doing. As I explained in my last blog post.”

“Which I have, of course, read.”

He’s not funny. He’s not *that* funny. I’m not half in love with his weird sense of humor. “I can’t believe you commented ‘delete your account.’ It’s cyberbullying, Liam.”

He is still smiling, and there is something warm unfurling in my chest now. Which really shouldn’t be there, because . . . Because. “Are you and your friend . . . ?” I ask.

“My friend?”

“Emma.”

“Ah.”

Silence. I wring my hands, realizing that I haven’t really formulated a question. *Is she your . . .* No. Too direct. *Are you two dating?* And what is this hiccup in my heart as I contemplate the thought? Maybe Liam has never mentioned a girlfriend. Or any girl. But what did I think? That he was living in celibacy? It’s not my business, anyway. We’re just friends. Good friends. But friends.

“What?” He gives me a long look, like I just asked a preposterous question that’s not grounded in reality. The reality that I just walked in on him PDAing her.

“I thought you two . . . ?”

“No.” He shakes his head once. Then he shakes it again. “No, Emma is . . . We were in kindergarten together. And she . . . No. We’re friends, good friends, but nothing like that.”

“Oh.” Oh? Really? No way. Way?

“We’re just friends,” he repeats again. Like he wants to make sure I know it. Like he’s afraid that I don’t believe him. Which, to be fair, I don’t. Look at her. Look at *him*. “She’s actually . . . She knows that I . . .” He wipes a hand down his face, like he always does when he’s overwhelmed

or tired. It's a gesture I'm seeing more of lately. Because Liam has been letting me see more of him. They're not all bad, the sharp edges and deep grooves of this man's personality. Unexpected, but not bad at all.

"Knows that you?"

"That I don't usually . . . I never . . . Well, *almost* never, apparently . . ." Liam shakes his head, as if to say *Never mind*, and I remain unsure as to what he almost never does, because he doesn't continue and I'm not certain that I want to probe. Plus, he's looking at me in a way I can't understand, and I'm suddenly feeling like it's time to skedaddle. "I'm gonna go to sleep, okay?" I smile. "I have an early morning, tomorrow."

He nods. "Okay. Sure." But when I'm almost out of the room, he calls after me. "Mara?"

I pause. Don't turn around. "Yeah?"

"I . . . Have a good night."

It doesn't sound like what he originally meant to say. But I answer, "You, too," and run back to my room anyway.

Chapter 9

One month ago

"I had lots of fun tonight."

"Good. Thank you. I mean . . ." I clear my throat. "So did I."

Ted is nothing if not predictable. He took me to the Ethiopian restaurant I told him I'd been wanting to try (excellent); he raised topics of conversation I know enough about to feel comfortable, but not so familiar that I got bored within a few minutes; and now, now that he's walked me to my door, he's going to lean in and kiss me, just like I could have anticipated when he picked me up exactly three hours ago.

It is, predictably, a good kiss. A solid kiss. It could probably lead into good sex if I decided to invite him inside for a drink. Solid sex. Long-time-no-have sex. We're talking years, here. Helena would pop the champagne and remind me to dust off the cobwebs.

And yet.

I have no intention to ask him to come in. It's truly been ages, but this thing with Ted is just . . . no.

He's a nice guy, but this is not going to work, for a variety of reasons. That, I tell myself, have nothing to do with how long Liam stared at me earlier today, before Ted pulled up our driveway. Or with the way he instantly averted his gaze when I caught him. Or with the hoarse

quality of his voice when he took in my dress and said, "I . . . You look beautiful."

He sounded like he wanted to say something else. A little wistful. Almost apologetic. It made me regret spending thirty minutes putting on makeup to go out with someone else, some poor guy I don't even want to impress for the simple reason that he isn't . . .

Yeah.

"I . . ." I take a deep breath and take a step back from Ted, whose only fault is . . . not being another guy. I cannot picture him watching *The Bachelor* with me, which is apparently a deal breaker. The more you know, huh? "I'm gonna go inside now. But thanks for everything. I had a lovely evening."

If Ted is disappointed, I can't tell. To his credit, he hesitates only briefly. Then he smiles and retreats to his car without any *I'll call you* or *See you next time* that we both know would be nothing more than lies of politeness. I silently thank the EPA gods for transferring him to another team last week, and make my way inside.

I'm surprised to find Liam in the living room, sitting on the couch with a beer in one hand, a stack of papers in another, ridiculously cute reading glasses perched on his nose. Or maybe I'm not. It's Saturday night, after all. We usually spend our Saturday nights on that very couch, watching TV, talking about everything and nothing. It makes sense that he's here, even though I was gone.

For the life of me, I can't remember a better activity than staying at home in my pj's and hanging out with my roommate.

"What are you reading?"

Liam glances up at me, takes in my short-but-not-too-short dress, my loose hair, my red lips, then immediately

looks back to his papers. “Just a guideline document for work.”

“How to achieve your very own oil spill in ten easy steps?”

His lips quirk upward. “I think you only need the one.”

“Listen, we’ve been over this. It’s okay if you don’t want to quit just yet, but the very least you can do is *not* work on weekends. Come on, Liam. Do it for the environment.”

He sighs, but he takes off his glasses and puts away the papers. I smile and reach forward to grab his beer and take a sip without bothering to ask. Liam studies me in silence, but doesn’t start reading again. When I lift one eyebrow—*what?*—he caves, and asks: “Isn’t he coming in?”

“Who?”

Liam looks toward the entrance.

“Ah.” Right. Other men exist, too. Hard to remember, sometimes. “No. Ted’s not . . . He went home.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not . . . We’re not . . .” How to put it? “We haven’t . . .”

Liam nods, though he cannot possibly have made sense of what I just mumbled. And then he says nothing. And then things seem to get a bit weird. There is an odd tension in the room. Like we’re both holding back something. I’d rather not search inside myself to figure out what.

“I should go to bed.”

“Okay.” He swallows. “Good night.”

It might be that two fuzzy navels were too many, or maybe I just never really got the hang of high heels. The fact remains that I lose my balance and stumble just as I try to walk past him. His hands, large and solid and warm even through my dress, close around my hips until I’m stable again. I’m standing, and he’s sitting down, and like this I’m

several inches taller than him, and . . . It's new, seeing him from this perspective. He looks younger, almost softer, and my first drunken instinct is to cup his face, trace the line of his nose, run my thumb over his lower lip.

I stop myself, but my slow, misfiring brain doesn't. It feeds me an odd image: Liam smiling and pulling me down in his lap. Pushing between my knees. His hands skimming up my thighs, under my dress, tickling my skin, making me laugh. He reaches my lower back and his grip tightens, long fingers sliding under the elastic of my panties, cupping my ass to press me to . . . *Oh*. He is hard. Big. Insistent. He arranges me exactly how he wants me and I exhale just as he groans in my ear, "Careful, Mara."

Wait. What?

I blink out of whatever the hell *that* was, just as Liam lets go of me. He says, "Careful, Mara," and I take a step back before I can humiliate myself with something moronic and utterly embarrassing.

"Thanks." Our eyes hold for what feels like too long. I clear my throat. "Are you going to bed, too?"

"Not yet."

"You are not allowed to read more oil spill stuff, Liam."

"Then maybe I'll just play a bit."

"Without Calvin?" I cock my head. "Didn't you say Calvin would come over?"

"He was supposed to."

"You know what?" I run a hand through my hair. It's a split-second decision. "I'm actually not that sleepy, either. Should I play with you?"

He laughs. "Really?"

"Yes. What?" I take off my shoes, grab a blanket—the one he put on me that first night, the one that's been in this room ever since—and let myself fall on the couch, right

next to him. A little too close, maybe, but Liam doesn't complain. "I have a Ph.D. I can pretend to kill bad guys using a . . . joystick?"

"Controller." He shakes his head, but he looks . . . happy, I think. "Have you ever played a video game?"

"Nope. Full disclosure, they look awful and I'm not sure why an obviously smart person with a bunch of Ivy League degrees that cost more than my internal organs could ever be so much into this pew-pew crap, but I run a *Bachelor* blog, so I have no leg to stand on." I shrug. "So, what happened to Calvin?"

"Couldn't make it."

"Playing with someone else?"

"A date."

I hum. "Maybe you should have joined him. Was Emma busy?"

He gives me a look that I cannot quite decipher. As though there's something catastrophically wrong about what I said. "I told you, Emma doesn't want to date me any more than I want to date her."

I doubt it. Who wouldn't? Also, how freaked out would you be if I told you that the other night I dreamt of you and Emma, sitting side by side in the kitchen, and I was sad? But only for a little. Because after a while it wasn't you and Emma. It was you and me and you were standing between my legs and you put your hands on my inner thighs and you pushed them open, wider, to make room for yourself and— "You could date someone else, then," I blurt out. To put a halt to what's going on in my head.

"I don't think I want to, Mara."

"Right." My heart hiccups. "You wouldn't enjoy good food and pleasant conversation and getting laid."

“Is that how your date went?” he asks softly, not looking at me anymore.

“I just meant—” I’m flustered. “You might enjoy dating the right person.”

“Stop channeling Helena.”

I laugh. “Gotta keep up the household tradition of being nosy about people’s personal lives.” Something occurs to me, and I gasp. “You know what’s *really* shocking?”

“What?”

“That Helena never tried to set us up. Like, you and me. Together.”

“Yeah, that’s—” Liam falls silent abruptly, as though something occurred to him, too. He stares into the middle distance for a moment and then lets out a low, deep laugh. “Helena.”

“What?” He doesn’t answer me. So I repeat, “Liam? What?”

“I just realized that . . .” He shakes his head, amused. “Nothing, Mara.” I want to insist till he explains what revelation he appears to have reached, but he puts a controller in my hand and says, “Let’s play.”

“Okay. Who am I supposed to kill, and how do I do it?”

He smiles at me, and a million little sparks crackle down my spine. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter 10

Three weeks ago

When Liam arrives home, I can barely feel my toes, my teeth are chattering, and I am more blanket than human. He studies me from the entrance of the living room while pulling off his tie, lips pressed together in what looks a lot like amusement.

Asshole.

He observes me for long moments before coming closer. Then he crouches in front of me, widens the gap between the layers of blankets to better see my eyes, and says, "I'm afraid to ask."

"Th-th-the heat isn't working. I already looked into it—I think a fuse has b-blown. I called the guy who fixed it last t-time, he should b-be here in half an hour."

Liam cocks his head. "You're under three Snuggies. Why are your lips blue?"

"It's freezing! I can't get warm."

"It's not that cold."

"Maybe it's not that cold when you have six hundred pounds of muscles to insulate you, but I'm gonna d-d-die."

"Are you."

"Of hypothermia."

He is *definitely* pressing his lips together to avoid smiling. "Would you like to borrow my baby-seal fur coat?"

I hesitate. "Do you really have one?"

“Would you want it, if I did?”

“I’m scared to find out.”

He shakes his head and sits next to me on the couch.

“Come here.”

“What?”

“Come here.”

“No. Why? Are you planning to steal my seat? Back off. It took me ages to warm it up—”

I don’t get to finish the sentence. Because he picks me up, Snuggies and all, and lifts me across his lap until my ass is resting on his thighs. Which . . .

Oh.

This is new.

For a moment, my spine stiffens and my muscles tense in surprise. But it’s very brief, because he’s so deliciously *toasty*. Way cozier than my stupid spot on the couch, and his skin . . . it smells familiar and good. So, so good. “You’re so warm.” I let my forehead fall against his cheek. “It’s like you generate heat.”

“I think all humans do.” His nose touches the icy tip of my ear. “It’s physics, or something.”

“First law of th-thermodynamics. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed.”

His hand travels up my spine to cup my nape, and the temperature is suddenly five, ten degrees higher. Heat licks down my spine and spreads around my torso. My breasts. My belly. I almost whimper. “Except by you, apparently,” he says.

“It’s so unfair.” Liam’s thumb is tracing patterns on the skin of my throat, and I have no choice but to sigh. I’m already feeling better. I’m *glowing*.

“That you are where the heat goes to die?”

“Yeah.” I burrow closer into his chest. “Maybe my parents are secretly shark shapeshifters. Of the cold-blooded, poikilothermic variety. They forgot to warn me that I inherited zero thermoregulation skills and should never live on dry land.”

“It’s the only possible explanation.” His breath chuffs against my temples, a fine, pleasant itch.

“For my pathological inability to maintain thermal homeostasis?”

“For how little they appreciate you.” He’s suddenly holding me a little tighter. A little closer. “Also, for how rare you like your steak.”

“I . . . Medium rare.” My voice shakes. I tell myself that it’s because of the cold and not the fact that he remembers the things I told him about my family.

“Please. Basically raw.”

“Humph.” No point in arguing with him, not when he’s right. Not when his hand is running up and down my arm; a warming, calming gesture, even through the blankets. “Do you think he’ll be able to fix the fuse tonight?”

“I hope so. If not, I’ll run to the store and get you a heater.”

“You would do that?”

He shrugs. There are about ten layers between us (Liam vastly underestimated the Snugglies I can put on at once) but he feels so warm and solid. A few months ago, I thought him cold, in every possible way. Back when I used to believe that I hated him. “It feels like less work than driving you to the ER for frostbite treatment.” His cheek curves against my brow.

“You’re not as heartless as you think, Liam.”

“I’m not as heartless as *you* think.”

I laugh and lean back to take a look at him, because it feels like he might be smiling, a whole wide grin, and that's a rare and wondrous phenomenon that I want to savor. He's not, though. He's staring at me, too, studying me in that weighty, serious way he sometimes does. First my eyes, and then my lips, and what is this, this moment of heavy, full silence that has my heart racing and my skin tingling?

"Mara." His throat moves as he swallows. "I—"

Loud knocking makes us startle.

"The electrician."

"Oh. Yeah." My voice is both shrill and breathless.

"I'll get the door, okay?"

Please, don't. Stay. "Okay."

"Do you think you can avoid hypothermia if I let go of you?"

"Yes. Probably." *No.* "Maybe?"

He rolls his eyes in that put-upon way that reminds me so much of Helena. But his smile, the one I was looking for earlier—here it is. Finally. "Very well, then." Without letting go, he stands and carries me all the way to the entrance.

I hide my face into his neck, humming with warmth and something else, unfamiliar and unidentifiable.

Chapter 11

Two weeks ago

I get the phone call on a Wednesday night, before dinner but after I've returned from work.

I am remarkably composed throughout: I *oh* and *ah* in all the right places; I ask pertinent, important questions; I even remember to thank the caller for sharing the news with me. But after we both hang up, I completely lose it.

I don't call Sadie. I don't text Hannah in the hope that she has reception in the belly of whatever Nordic sperm whale is her current residence. I run upstairs, almost tripping on carpets and furniture that's been in the Harding family for five generations, and once I'm in front of Liam's office I throw the door open without knocking.

Which, in hindsight, is not my most polite moment. And neither is the next, when I run to Liam (who's talking on the phone by the window), throw my arms around his waist with utter disregard for whatever he's doing, and yell:

"I got it! Liam—I got the job!"

He doesn't skip a beat. "The team leader position?"

"Yes."

His grin is blinding. Then he tells, "I'll call you back," to whoever is on the line, totally ignores the fact that their reply is "Sir, this is a time-sensitive issue—" and tosses the phone on the nearest chair.

Then he hugs me back. He lifts me up like he's too happy for me to even consider stopping himself, like this phone call I just had that changed my life changed his, too, like he's been wanting this as much and as intensely as I have. And when he spins me around the room, one single, perfect whirl of pure happiness, that's when I realize it.

How incredibly, utterly gone for this man I am.

It's been there for weeks. Months. Whispering in my ear, creeping at me, hitting me in the face like a train on an iron track. It has grown too formidable and luminous for me to ignore, but that's okay.

I don't want to ignore it.

Liam sets me on my feet. His hands linger over me before he takes a step back—one hand trailing down my arm, the other pushing a lock of hair past my temple, behind my ear. When he lets go, I want to follow him. I want to beg him not to.

"Mara, you are fantastic. Brilliant."

I feel fantastic. I feel brilliant, when I'm with you. And I want you to feel the same. "I clearly deserve to choose what to watch on TV tonight."

"You choose what to watch on TV every night."

"But tonight I actually *deserve* it."

He laughs, shaking his head, holding my eyes. Time stretches. Heavy, sweet tension thickens between us. I want to kiss him. I want to kiss him so, so much. Should I ask him? Would he push me away? Or would he push right back, press me against his desk, turn me around and hold me down with a hand splayed between my shoulder blades and whisper to me *Finally*, and *Be still*, and *Let's celebrate*, and—

No. Stop.

I gasp. “Oh my God—what do you think Sean is doing right now?”

“Crying in the bathroom, I hope.”

“Hopefully he’s tweeting out his despair and listening to a My Chemical Romance playlist on Spotify. I *must* go stalk him on social media. Be right back.” I make to skip out of Liam’s office as fast as I ran in. He stops me, though, with a hand on my wrist.

“Mara?”

“Yes?”

I turn around. His happy, uncharacteristically open face has melted away into something else. Something more subdued. Opaque.

“You said . . . A few weeks ago, you said that if you got the job, you’d move out.”

Oh.

Oh.

The reminder stabs like a knife between my ribs. I *did* say that. I did. But it’s been weeks. Weeks of stealing food off each other’s plates and texting in the middle of the day to bicker about Eileen’s love life and that time he made me laugh so hard I couldn’t breathe for ten minutes.

Things . . . Haven’t things changed with us? Between us?

For a moment, I cannot speak. I don’t know what to say to the fact that his first thought was that I’d move out— No, that’s uncharitable. He was happy for me. Genuinely happy. His *second* thought was that he’ll finally go back to living alone.

I try to crack a joke. “Why? Are you kicking me out?”

“No. No, Mara, that’s not what I—” His phone rings, interrupting him. Liam gives it a frustrated glance, but by the time his eyes are on me again I’ve collected myself.

If Liam wants to live alone, that's fine. He likes me. He cares about me. He's a great guy—I know all of that. But being friends with someone doesn't equate with wanting to spend every single moment of your life with them, and . . . yeah.

I guess that's my own problem to solve. Something to work on once I move out and this part of my life is over.

"Of course I'm going to look for a new place." I try to sound cheerful. With poor results. "I cannot wait to walk around naked and gorge myself on creamer to celebrate Eileen's excellent life choices and . . ." I can't make myself continue, and my voice trails off.

Liam's eyes remain withdrawn. Absent, almost. But after a while he says, "Whatever you want, Mara," in a kind, gentle tone.

I manage one last smile and slip out of his office as the first tear hits my collarbone.

Chapter 12

One week ago

No dimensional plane exists in which apartment hunting (more precisely: apartment hunting while heartbroken) could ever be pleasant. I have to admit, however, that browsing Craigslist on the phone with my friends while I sip on the overpriced red wine Liam got from an FGP Corp retreat does dull the pain of the ordeal.

Sadie just spent an hour recounting in wrathful detail how she recently went on a date with some engineer who later turned out to be a total dick—a problem, given that she actually liked the guy (as in really, *really* liked the guy). Even though she's being uncharacteristically dodgy about it, I am 97 percent sure that sex happened, 98 percent sure that the sex was excellent, 99 percent sure that the sex was the best of her life. It appears to be fueling her plans to lace the guy's coffee with toad venom, which, if you know Sadie, is pretty on-brand.

Hannah is back in Houston, which is good for her Internet connection, but bad for her peace of mind. She has been butting heads with some NASA big-shot guy who has been vetoing her pet research project for no reason whatsoever. Hannah is, of course, ready for murder. I can't see her hands through FaceTime, but I'm almost positive she's sharpening a shiv.

There is something reassuring in hearing about their lives. It reminds me of grad school, when we couldn't afford therapy and we'd engage in some healthy communal bitching every other night, just to survive the madness. There were some bad moments—it was grad school: there were *a lot* of bad moments—but in the end, we were together. In the end, everything turned out to be all right.

So maybe that's what will happen this time, too. I'm on the verge of homelessness, my heart feels like a stone, and I want to be with someone way more than that someone wants to be with me. But Sadie and Hannah are (more or less) here, and therefore things will turn out to be (more or less) all right.

"Men were a mistake," Sadie says.

"Big mistake," Hannah adds.

"*Huge.*" I sink deeper into the living room couch, wondering if Liam, my personal mistake, will come home tonight. It's already past nine. Maybe he's out for dinner. Maybe, if he has something to celebrate, he'll sleep elsewhere. At Emma's, perhaps.

"Sometimes they're useful," Sadie points out. "Like that guy with a Korn T-shirt who helped me open a jar of pickled radishes in 2018."

"Oh yeah." I nod. "I remember that."

"Hands down my most profound experience with a man."

"In hindsight, you should have asked him to marry you."

"A missed opportunity."

"Could it be that we've just been exceptionally unlucky?" There is some noise on Hannah's side of the line. Maybe she *is* sharpening a shiv. "Could it be that the tides will turn and we'll finally meet dudes who don't deserve to be fed a bowl of thumbtacks?"

"It could be," I say. *Be positive*, Helena used to tell me. *Negativity is for old farts like me*. "Really, everything could be. It could be that we'll be randomly selected for a lifetime supply of Nutella."

Sadie snorts. "It could be that the surrealist slam poem I wrote in third grade will win me the Nobel Prize for literature."

"That my cactus will actually bloom this year."

"That they'll start producing Twizzlers ice cream."

"That *Firefly* will get the final season it deserves."

No one talks for a few seconds. Until Hannah says: "Mara, you broke the flow. Come up with something delightful and yet unobtainable."

"Oh, right. Uhm, it could be that Liam will come home, and ask me not to move out, and then he'll bend me over the nearest piece of furniture and fuck me hard and fast." By the time I've finished the sentence, Sadie is laughing and Hannah is whistling.

"Hard and fast, huh?"

"Yup." I shake my head. "Absolutely preposterous, though."

"Nah. Well, no more than my slam poem," Sadie concedes. "So, how goes the unrequited crush?"

"It's not *really* a crush." Plenty unrequited, though.

"I thought we had agreed that fantasizing about being bent over the kitchen sink *does*, in fact, constitute a crush?"

I huff. "Fine. It's . . . good. Barely there, really. I don't really daydream about having sex with him that often." Liar. What a liar. "Still in the larval stage." It's hitting its teenage years and is strong as an ox. "I think that some distance will be good. I have a lead on a cheap-ish apartment downtown." I'll miss this place. I'll miss feeling

close to Helena. I'll miss the way Liam makes fun of me for being unable to learn the buttons of the stupid PlayStation controllers. So, so much.

"And you're sure Liam's okay with you leaving?"

"It's what he wants." Things have been a little weird in the past week. Awkward. A bit of a step back for us, but . . . I'll be fine. It'll be fine. "I think it'll go away. The crush."

"Right," Sadie agrees, without looking much like she does agree.

"Very soon," I add.

"I'm sure."

"I just need him to . . . never find out about the furniture fantasies," I explain.

"Hm."

"Because it would make things weird for us," I explain. "For him."

"Yeah."

"And he doesn't deserve it."

"No."

"He's a good friend. Also, he's in the middle of making lots of life changes. I want to be supportive. And I like hanging out with him."

"Yup."

"Basically, I don't want him to feel uncomfortable around me."

"Nope."

"Anyway." My cheeks feel warm. It must be all the wine. "We should talk about something else."

"Okay."

"Like. Literally anything else."

"Fine."

"One of you should propose a topic."

If they were here in person, Sadie and Hannah would exchange a long, loaded look. As it is, they are silent for a few moments. Then Hannah says, “Can I tell you a story?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about a friend of mine.”

I frown. “Which friend?”

“Ah . . . Sarah.”

“Sarah?”

“Sarah.”

“I don’t think I know her. Since when do you have friends I don’t know about?”

“Not important. So, a couple of years ago my friend Sarah moved in with this guy, um . . . Will. And initially they really hated each other, but then they figured out that they were more similar than they thought, and she started talking about him more and more, in increasingly positive terms. So Sadie and I—Sadie knows her, too—well, we were like, *Jeez, is she falling for this dude?* And then one night my friend confessed to me that she had very filthy, very elaborate-sounding fantasies about Will bending her over the kitchen table and—”

“Bye, Hannah.”

“Wait,” Sadie says, “we haven’t heard the ending!”

“You guys are shit friends and I’m not sure why I love you so much.” I hang up on them, laughing despite myself. I toss my phone away and get up to refill my glass of wine, thinking that when Hannah and Sadie fall for someone I’ll tease them mercilessly and make up fake stories about fake people, and then they’ll know how it feels, to be— “Mara.”

Liam is standing in the entrance of the living room, necktie in one hand, looking tired and handsome and tall and— *Oh shit.* “Liam?”

“Hi.”

“W-when did you get here?”

“Just now.”

“Oh.” *Thank fuck.* “How was your . . . The interview, how did it go?”

“Good, I think.”

“Oh. Good.”

He just got here, he said. He can't have possibly overheard me. I haven't said anything compromising in the past few seconds. And Hannah's knockoff fairy tale used different names.

Why is he staring at me like that, then?

“When will you know if you got the job?”

He shrugs. “A few days, I assume.” He cut his hair last week. Not too short, but shorter than it ever was. Sometimes—often—I'll see him in a certain light, or I'll catch him making one of those faces that I'm sure he doesn't let anyone else see, and my breath will hitch from the wonder of it.

“Are you hungry? I made a stir-fry. There's leftovers.”

He studies me and says nothing.

“No carrots. I promise.” What will I do with all this knowledge I have of his likes and dislikes? This knowledge of *him*? Where will it go once he's not in my life anymore?

“I'm not hungry, but thanks.”

“Okay.” I walk around the couch, looking for something to do with myself, and lean against the doorjamb. Just a few feet away from him. “I think I've found a place. To move, I mean.”

“You have?” Unreadable, his expression.

“Yeah. But I won't know till a few days from now.”

Silence. And a long, thoughtful stare.

“I still won't sell my half. Sorry, I know you want to buy me out, but—”

“I don’t.”

I frown. “What do you mean, you don’t?”

“I don’t.”

I laugh. “Liam, you’ve been offering to buy me out for a million years.”

His mouth quirks. “A million years ago the house didn’t exist and this place was a swamp, but it’s not as if you’re an environmental scientist and could possibly know—”

“Oh, shut up. All I’m saying is, for a long time . . .” Though, now that I think about it, his lawyer hasn’t emailed me in . . . weeks. Months, maybe? “Oh my God. Liam, are you broke?” I lean forward. “Is it the stock market? Have you gambled away all your money? Have you bet the entirety of your savings on the U.S. male soccer team winning the World Cup and only belatedly realized that they didn’t even qualify? Have you become involved in a LuLaRoe pyramid scheme and can’t stop buying new leggings—”

“Are you drunk?”

“No. Well, I had some of your wine. A lot. Why?”

“You get annoying when you’re drunk.” There’s a hint of a smile in his eyes. “But cute.”

I stick my tongue out. “You’re annoying all the time.”
And cute, too.

Liam’s smile widens a little, and he looks down at his feet. Then: “Good night, Mara.” He turns around and heads for his room. The yellow light of the lamp casts a warm, golden glow over the breadth of his shoulders.

“By the way,” I call after him, “I bought a new creamer. It’s cinnamon. You’ll hate it!”

Liam doesn’t answer and doesn’t pause on his way out. I don’t see him until the following night, and that . . .

That’s when it happens.

Chapter 13

Present

The weirdest part is how quickly everything changes.

One minute, I'm in the middle of cleaning up the kitchen, wondering whether the smoothie blender is dishwasher safe, thinking about my ongoing pining and my upcoming move, about how much I'll miss this—coming home after work, finding twelve forks and a colander in the sink, wondering how many of them are Liam's.

The next, he is standing behind me. Liam Harding is standing right behind me, on *purpose*, and pressing me into the counter. As though he *wants* to be here, close, touching me, as much as I want him to be. I am too stupefied to do anything about the water running in the kitchen, but he leans forward to turn it off, and all of sudden the room is silent.

His hand closes around my hip, and I cannot think. I cannot comprehend what is happening. I'm breathing. He's breathing. We're breathing together—same rhythm, same air—and for a moment I just feel it. This. It's nice. It's good. It's what I've been wanting.

Then he shifts my hair behind my shoulder; uncovers the base of my throat. I feel something—teeth, maybe?—grazing at my skin.

"Liam?" I half moan.

"It's me." He is kissing me. There. "Is this okay?"

I'm nodding—*Yes*—to what, I don't know. *Yes, you're Liam. Yes, this is okay. Yes, I'm about to melt to the floor.*

"You smell so good, Mara."

Thank God for the kitchen sink to hold on to, because my knees are about to give out. Thank God for Liam's hands, too. Except that one is sliding under my shirt. I've never thought of myself as dainty, but it somehow manages to cover my entire torso, and his thumb . . .

It's brushing against the underside of my breast, and—
Oh.

He licks the pulse in the dip of my throat, and I'm mortified to hear myself whimper.

"You are so soft." His breath is hot in my ear, and I shiver. Exactly once. "I think I imagined you wouldn't be. You're always running, working out. You always look so strong, but . . ."

He lets go of me for a fraction of a second, and every single cell in my body revolts at once.

No.

Wait.

Stay.

But he's only adjusting me. His hand presses on my lower back, angling me just so: slightly bent forward, like . . . God, like he's about to—

He's back on me immediately. Begins to undo the zipper of my jeans, the catch of it like a drum in the silence. Air rushes out of my lungs in a sharp exhale.

"Okay?" he asks again, soft, deafening, and it *is* okay. Even if my jeans are sliding down my thighs, and I have never, ever felt less in control. I think we're about to have sex, but sex is *not* like this. Sex is awkwardly pulling off clothes, and negotiating positions, and hours of foreplay peppered with *Are you sure you shouldn't be on top?* and

Wait, that's my elbow. Sex is not going from zero to a million this way. Not for me. It's not gripping the edge of the sink to stop myself from moaning, or needing to grind against something—anything—or feeling my knees weaken to jelly.

"Is this what you wanted, Mara?" He slides a finger under my panties and parts my folds. One single finger. "What you— *Oh.*"

For a moment, I panic. I cannot possibly be wet, not yet. But then I realize that I am, and I can feel it and hear it, the slick slide of skin against skin, my own body already beginning to flutter.

And Liam makes it clear that he likes it. "You," he grunts into my ear. "You wouldn't believe it, the things I've thought about doing."

"The . . . ?"

"Is this how you wanted it?"

"Wanted . . . what?"

"You said you wanted to be fucked. Hard and fast." Did I say that? I can't recall. I can't remember my own name, and then things get even worse: behind me, he goes on his knees. What is he—? "Off." Liam tugs at my jeans and panties until they're pooling around my ankles, then tosses them on the other side of the room once I've stepped out of them. "Good girl."

I gasp. Did he just say that? To me? But I can't ask him to repeat himself, since he clearly got a little distracted on his way up. His hand travels along my inner thigh, long fingers grip the soft skin of my backside. It occurs to me in that moment that I am now bare. Completely naked except for a flimsy T-shirt and an even flimsier bra. And that this person softly biting into the flesh of my ass as though I am a piece of ripe fruit, this person is Liam Harding.

Liam. Harding. Who touches me as though he already knows my body. Who spreads me apart like I'm a law school book and buries his face into me. Who groans into my flesh and mutters, "Sorry." He manages to sound genuinely apologetic as he pulls back to lick and suck the skin of my right buttock. "I know you want it hard and fast. Just, I think about this a lot. About you." A heartbeat, and he's on his feet again, chest pressed against my back. One hand tightens sweetly around my hip, and he pushes a knee between my legs, until most of my weight is resting on his thigh. I hear vaguely obscene sounds: something clinking, something fumbling, something being shoved aside. Then it's hot flesh pushing against mine and a murmured, "Okay?" that I must have nodded to, because—

Friction.

My vision blurs around the edges. Liam is inside me. Barely. Just the tip. He's also enormous—no room, *no room*—relentless, lovely, magnificent. *Deep.*

"Fuck, Mara. This is *unreal.*"

There's a lot of harsh breathing, and "Just a bit more," and tight muscles clenching and releasing, but he bottoms out, and it's just this side of too much. It *would* be too much, but it helps that Liam holds on to me like letting go would kill him, or that his fingers are unsteady as he pushes my hair away from my shoulder. But my body seems to be into this, unused, hidden spaces stuffed full, fluttering around . . . God.

Around Liam's cock.

"I can't think when you're around." His voice is rough. He holds still inside me, as though he's in no hurry to start, but I can feel him vibrate with tension. The heel of his palm slides down to rest against my clit. "I can't think when you're *not* around. It's been a problem. I feel like I haven't

formulated a coherent thought in months. I feel like you won't stop being in my head, and—"

Just like that, it's all over. Liam hasn't even moved yet, but my mind goes blank. The world recedes and I start coming without warning, arching against him, biting into my lip to silence a scream. Pleasure sinks into me, and I'm helpless to stop it.

I don't know how long passes before I'm back to myself, his breath sharp in my ear. "Did you just—?" Liam sounds in pain. "Did you really come, just from me . . ."

I'm dazed. My nerve endings are still tingling. I shut my eyes tight and nod my embarrassment just as his teeth close around the fleshy part of my shoulder. He grunts like an animal, like he's desperate to keep whatever control he can.

"Fuck, Mara, you . . . can I take you to bed?"

His tone is unlike anything I've ever heard from him, pleading and a little raw. He's still twitching inside me; every few seconds or so he seems to lose whatever grip he has on himself and rolls his hips. It doesn't help my focus. Or his focus. *Our* focus.

Which we maybe should keep. This should stop right now, maybe. As good as it's been—and it has just redefined sex for me—I'm not quite sure why Liam wants this, and if it's just some impromptu fucking that means nothing to him but has lots of heartbreak in store for me . . . Maybe we should stop here?

"I'll try to keep it fast." He's licking away the sting of his earlier bite. "But let me take you to bed."

The thing is, I don't want to stop. I've come once, already, just from him sliding into me and stretching me too tight, from the feel of his hand clutching my hip bone—a small miracle in and of itself, because it usually takes me

forever. But if I let him take me to bed, he's going to wreck me. He is going to ruin me for anyone else. He is going to destroy me in each and every possible way.

"Please," he murmurs.

I don't really have a choice: I want to say yes, so I nod. *Whatever you want, you can have, Liam.*

It's not pretty, when he pulls out. He gasps a breath of pure frustration and it's clear that he hates it. I hate it, too, and I'm the one who just had a life-altering orgasm. Liam's the one who gave it to me and took very little for himself—which doesn't even come as a surprise.

I wouldn't have fallen for an unkind man.

He takes my top and bra off, and I'm too stupid with aftershocks of pleasure to do anything but stand there and let him, watch him stare his fill with dark, unreadable eyes, even though I'm completely naked and my belly button is still an outie and the lacrosse scar is there, gleaming white in the dim lights of the room.

"Come here. Mara, you . . . Fuck. Come here." His jaw is tense as he picks me up and carries me to his room. My first time here, but I know this place—because I know Liam. Dark colors. Framed pictures of semihostile nature from the trips he told me about. Sparse furniture. A stack of books on his bedside table. Reading glasses, the ones I tease him about, unfolded in the middle of his desk. I want to explore every corner, but there's no time. The mattress bounces underneath my back, and then he's taking up my entire field of view.

"Can I kiss you?" His mouth is hovering a few inches above mine, so I press my hands down his nape and arch into him, kissing him myself.

It's slow, and warm, and achingly careful. He was fucking me less than a minute ago. He was so deep inside

me that I felt deliciously split in two. But now there's this gentle sliding of lips and tongues, Liam nibbling on me, holding first my chin, then the back of my head, and my heart sings for him.

I am catastrophically, ruinously in love with you.

"I love kissing you," I sigh in his mouth.

"Mara." His lips. His voice. "I want to kiss you everywhere." He moves back, as if something occurs to him just then. "Can I go down on you?"

I feel my cheeks heat. Does he really want to?

"Just for a minute," he adds, and then . . . Incredible, how he's waiting for my answer. He just bent me over the kitchen sink and slid into me and made me come on his cock, but he's asking for permission to eat me out like I'd be doing *him* a favor.

"Are you sure?"

"Thirty seconds. Please."

"Yes. I mean, if . . . if you're sure that you— Oh."

He's very good at it. Not . . . Maybe not deftly skilled, but he is completely lost to it, so thorough, so noisy in his utter, amazed enjoyment of the act, of me. My hips arch and he has to hold me down, carry me through the pleasure. It lasts more than thirty seconds. It lasts more than three minutes, maybe more than ten—but my thighs are trembling and my pussy spasms and I start to come like an ocean wave, and when I think the pleasure is finally subsiding he slides two fingers inside me and my hips buck up, because it's not over. My entire world is spinning. I've officially had more orgasms in the past twenty minutes than in the last year.

Fingers still inside me, he looks up, eyes soft and earnest and swallowed by his pupils. "Thank you."

Oh. “I think . . .” I clear my throat. My voice remains scratchy. “Maybe I should be the one thanking you.”

He shakes his head and lifts himself over me, balanced on one arm, and my eyes widen. He strokes himself with the other hand while staring down at my breasts with an awestruck expression. “This is so good, Mara. You are so good. Why do you want it to be fast?” He leans forward to kiss me again, licking the inside of my mouth, nibbling down my throat. “I just want to make it last,” he rasps against my skin.

I have no idea what he’s referring to. I don’t want this to be fast. I’ve never said I did, but he keeps telling me that . . .

Except that I *did* say it. Shit, I did say it. Just not to *him*. “You heard me.”

Liam is preoccupied. Licking one of my nipples. Biting gently. Licking again. Doing a *fantastic* job.

“You heard me,” I repeat. I twine my finger in his hair to slow him down. “On the phone.”

He stops, but doesn’t lift his head. His breath, warm against my breast, has me shivering. “Remember when I found you in my bathroom? I haven’t stopped thinking about your tits ever since—”

“Liam, you heard me tell my friends about . . .” He’s currently busy sucking on the underside of my breast, but for some reason I cannot bring myself to repeat the words. “About what I wanted you to do. You heard me.”

He looks up. He’s flushed, turned on, and more beautiful than ever. “I can do it, Mara. I can do it for you. What you want.”

“I don’t—” This is mortifying. I push him away, but he barely budes. “If this is some kind of charity, I don’t need a pity fuck. I am perfectly capable of—”

He takes my palm and drags it down his chest, past his abdomen, until his cock is hot in my hand. He is massive, and almost automatically my fingers close around him. Liam grimaces, biting his lower lip, and I have the sudden realization that he's been touching me in all sorts of manners, but I haven't touched him yet, not at all. It seems sad, and unfair, and unbearably stupid. Something to remedy.

"Does this feel like I'm giving you a pity fuck?"

No. No, it definitely does not. But. "I don't know."

Of its own free will, my hand starts moving up and down his length, simple strokes that have him gasping and shutting his eyes. His lips part as I circle around the damp head with my thumb. The arm he's leaning on shakes. Visibly.

"Come on, Mara." His hips are thrusting, now. In and out of my fist. He's getting closer. Closer to something. "You must know."

"Know what?"

"How hard it's been, to—*fuck*—to keep my hands off you. How much I've wanted this, almost since the very beginning."

Oh.

Oh *God*.

His eyes are glazed, muscles taut. He is on the verge of coming, that much is obvious. So obvious that I'm shocked when his fingers wrap around my wrist to stop me.

"Please, let me fuck you. Let me give you what you need. Let me try, at least." He kisses a spot under my jaw. "Hard and fast."

I'm not about to tell him no. I'm not about to tell *myself* no. Instead I smile and pull him on top of me, arms twined around his neck as I silently mouth against the flesh of his

shoulder how much I like him, how much I love this, and Liam adjusts us and angles himself until he's almost inside again, hot and wet and . . . the most annoying thought occurs to me. *Shit.*

"Condom! We need—do you—?"

Liam groans. "*Fuck.*" His biceps are shaking, fingers white as they fist in the sheets. Then he takes a deep breath and shifts, rearranging until he can slide one finger—two—deep inside me, curling them upward so that he is thrumming exactly where I need him.

"What are you—?" God, this feels insanely good.

"I don't have any condoms." His words are a bit slurred. "I'm just going to make you come like this and then get myself off." He sounds like he's doing the single hardest thing in his life, and yet it's clear that he's absolutely fine with it. Which . . . No. No, no, no, *no.*

"Liam, are you—*Ah*—are you clean?" His thumb brushes my clit. I moan. "Because I'm on the pill, and . . ."

"I have no idea."

How does he not know? I reach down to hold his forearm still. Problem is, he can still curve his fingers. His long, beautiful fingers.

"Have you been tested, since the last time you . . . ?"

I brace for all sorts of horrifying answers, ranging from *Why, of course not, my last one-night stand was yesterday,* to *Everyone has HPV, anyway.* But what comes is, "I've had a bunch of yearly physicals for work. I— Mara, it doesn't matter." He kisses me on the cheek, and a clever twist of his wrist makes my brain go blank. "I think I can make you come with my fingers. That's safe. And you don't have to be around later, when I . . ."

Yearly physicals? *Plural?* "When was the last time you had sex? Can you—*ah*, please, please stop that."

“I have no idea.” Liam pulls out his fingers. For a second, the friction is distracting. Then my pussy clenches in protest. “I don’t have sex, Mara.”

“You . . . You what?”

He looks away. We are both breathing too hard. “I don’t like sex.”

I look down. He is so hard. His cock is so heavy on my thigh. There is pre-come on my skin. “You seem to . . . um, you seem to like it fine.”

“Yeah. But I really don’t. It’s just . . .” He holds my eyes. His are a dark, beautiful brown. “I like *you* very much, Mara. I like talking to you. I like watching you do yoga. I like the way you always smell like sunscreen. I like how you manage to say pretty much whatever you want while still being unbelievably kind. I like being in this house with you, and everything we do in here.” His throat bobs. “I don’t think it’s a surprise that I really, *really* like the idea of fucking you.”

Oh my God. Oh my God oh my God oh my God—

“But I don’t need to . . . I’m enjoying this”—he grimaces, as if appalled by the understatement—“maybe too much, since I almost lost it . . . a number of times, just by being near you, so I’ll be more than fine if you just let me take care of you and—”

No.

I push at his shoulder, his chest, and then keep pushing through his first resigned, then confused, then shocked expression. Once his back is on the mattress, he lets me straddle his hips and groans. “What are you doing?”

I lean over and whisper in his ear, “Hard and fast, Liam.”

There is a long moment in which he just stares up at me, disoriented. Then he must realize: we are perfectly lined up. I’m working to take him inside, struggling a little,

because he's so *big* this way. But I'm moving now, balancing my palms on his chest, up and down and up again, and a few minutes later, on the downstroke, he's completely wedged inside me.

The angle is so deep, my vision spots. Liam's grip digs almost painfully around my waist.

"Mara." He is panting. "I'm not going to be able to pull out."

"It's fine." It's *perfect*. "Just do what feels good."

Everything does, anyway. The slide of flesh, the wet friction—even within the clumsy mess of our movements, as he slips out and has to nudge himself back in, this feels like perfection. The way he stares at my face, my breasts, the rise and fall of my hips, looking stunned; the wet, filthy sounds of us moving together; the things he says about how beautiful I am, how precious, about all the times he has imagined doing this—and there are so many.

I feel my pulse spike, and I smile at him as I lean forward. *I love you*, I think. *And I suspect that you love me, too. And I cannot wait for us to admit it to each other. I cannot wait to see what happens next.*

"I think," he grunts against my throat. "Mara, I think I'm going to come now."

I nod, too close to speak, and let him roll us over.

* * *

"Well. That was certainly fast." Liam hasn't caught his breath yet. His tone is mildly self-deprecating.

"Yup." Delicious. It was *delicious*.

"I can do better," he says. I'm pretty sure he has no clue that this *was* better. Best. Ever. "I think. Maybe with

practice.”

I’m not even sure it’s over yet. My nerve endings are still twitching. My entire body is flooded with an electric sort of pleasure, wrenched out of me and then poured back in again. “It wasn’t *that* fast,” I say.

Liam buries his face in my neck and curls around me, dwarfing me. Yeah. It *was* fast.

“I mean,” I mumble against his chest, “that it wasn’t *too* fast. It was . . .” Extraordinary. Spectacular. Transcendent. “Good. Very good.” He presses a kiss to my throat, and I add, “But it wasn’t that hard, either.”

He tenses. “I’m sorry. Do you—”

“That is to say, we should do it again.” He pulls back to meet my eyes. He looks very, *very* serious. I’m feeling considerably less so. “And again. And again. Until we get it right. Perfectly hard, and perfectly fast. You know?”

His smile unfurls slowly. “Yeah?” Hopeful and happy, he looks younger than ever. I grin and pull him in for a kiss.

“Yeah, Liam.”

Epilogue

Six months later “Who puts coffee creamer in their smoothies, anyway?”

“People.”

“No way.”

“Plenty of people.”

“Name one.”

“Me.”

I roll my eyes. “Name two.”

Silence.

“See?”

Liam sighs. “It doesn’t mean anything, Mara. Normal people don’t have conversations about coffee creamer.”

“You and I certainly do. Hazelnut or vanilla?”

“Vanilla.”

I put two bottles in the cart. Then I push up on my toes and plant a kiss on Liam’s mouth, short and hard. Liam follows me for a bit when I step back, as if reluctant to let me go.

“Okay.” I smile. Lately, I’m always smiling. “What else?”

Liam browses the list I wrote earlier today, sitting between his thighs while he was busy killing bad guys on the PlayStation. He squints a little at my terrible handwriting, and I try not to laugh. “I think we’re done. Unless you need a few more family-size Cheez-It boxes?”

I stick my tongue out at him. My hand falls to my side, until it's brushing against his. He starts pushing the shopping cart and twines our fingers together. "Ready to go?" he asks.

"Yeah." I beam. "Let's go home."

Don't miss

Love on the Brain

coming soon from Berkley Jove!

“By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos.”

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. “Really?”

“Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they’re giving it back to us.” She shrugs. “Revenge and cold dishes and all that.”

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she’s lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. “Is this for real?”

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off.” And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she’ll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn't. And I slept significantly better.

"Don't believe me, then." She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. "Go pet the leper armadillos and die."

She's such a weirdo. I adore her.

"Hey, you sure you're going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?" I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I'd have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins's neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won't hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I'm sure she deeply regrets.

"Fine? Are you kidding?" She looks at me like I'm insane. "Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I'll get to see La Llorona?"

"La . . . what?"

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. "You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts."

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I'm bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she's not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I'm not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I've never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she's been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair “unnatural colors,” get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was “ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick.” (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from

reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her)*. I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

@WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?

@198888 She would shorten his half-life.

@annahhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

@emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.

@bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM

@lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

@BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

@DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

@AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

@TheGeologist Going through the same situation rn
@BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

@SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER 🙄

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

@Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.

@Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

@SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.

@WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.

@Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says “he/him,” and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMLords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure

when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.

Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

Shmac: Weird.

Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?

Shmac: Nothing, really.

Marie: Oh, come on!

Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?

Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!

Shmac: !!!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!

Marie: Shmac.

Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

Marie: I bet. Tell me!

Shmac: It's a girl.

Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!

Shmac: There isn't much to tell.

Marie: Did you just meet her?

Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

Shmac: And she is married.

Marie: To you?

Shmac: Depressingly, no.

Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman

Shmac: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to*

working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.



WE'RE PUT UP in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take

pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says “I’m pretty rad”), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It’s still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I’m one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I’m still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It’s Friday, and I’m not due to check in until Monday, but I’m brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No.*) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses.*).

She’s so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can’t believe I’m going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It’s wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can’t quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will

have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. ". . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. "I love your work! I've read all your articles—you'll be such an asset to the project."

"Likewise. I can't wait to collaborate."

If I weren't dehydrated from the flight, I'd probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-

lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn't have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

"Why don't I show you around? You can come in as my guest." He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

"I wouldn't want to take you away from . . . astronauting?"

"I'm between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day." He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We'll get along great, I already know it.

"Have you lived in Houston long?" I ask as we step into the elevator.

"About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission." I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. "The past two or so, I worked on BLINK's precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. "That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?"

"No, thanks."

"You sure? It's on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad."

“I don’t really eat eggs.”

“Let me guess, a vegan?”

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word “vegan” in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they’re the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

“I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won’t eat animal products anymore.” He sighs. “Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn’t know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch.”

“How old is she?”

“Just turned six.”

I laugh. “Good luck with that.”

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn’t nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that “Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them,” she just nodded thoughtfully and said, “What you’re saying is, we should eat the whole family?” I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life’s goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person’s carbon footprint.

“The engineering labs are down this hallway,” Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. “A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we’re shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We’ve got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK’s everyone’s favorite child. The other

astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready.”

I grin. “For real?”

“Yep.”

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

“The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—” His phone rings. “Sorry—mind if I take it?”

“Not at all.” I smile at his beaver phone case (“Nature’s Engineer”) and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I’m lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It’s soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

“Meow.”

I glance back at Guy. He’s busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

“Meow.”

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

“And who might you be?” I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. “You’re such a sweet girl.” I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful

love bite. "Aren't you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you."

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

"Come on, I was just *kitten*." Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. "Where are you going?"

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that's when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it's falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain's commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I am going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill “meow” somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I’m looking up into the greenest eyes I’ve ever seen. Eyes that I’ve seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that’s angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that’s offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it’s holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven’t seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA’s Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

“Levi!” someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. “Are you okay?”

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

“Levi? Levi, is she—”

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.



Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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