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EMILY HENRY

Book Lovers



One summer. Two rivals.
A plot twist they
didn't see coming . . .

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Noosha, this book isn't for you.
I already know which one will be for you, so you have to wait.

This book is for Amanda, Dache', Danielle, Jessica,
Sareer, and Taylor. This book would not exist without you.
And if somehow it did, then no one would be reading it.
Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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PROLOGUE



WHEN BOOKS ARE your life—or in my case, your job—you get pretty good at guessing where a story is going. The tropes, the archetypes, the common plot twists all start to organize themselves into a catalogue inside your brain, divided by category and genre.

The husband is the killer.

The nerd gets a makeover, and without her glasses, she's smoking hot.

The guy gets the girl—or the other girl does.

Someone explains a complicated scientific concept, and someone else says, "Um, in English, *please*?"

The details may change from book to book, but there's nothing truly new under the sun.

Take, for example, the small-town love story.

The kind where a cynical hotshot from New York or Los Angeles gets shipped off to Smalltown, USA—to, like, run a family-owned

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Christmas tree farm out of business to make room for a soulless corporation.

But while said City Person is in town, things don't go to plan. Because, *of course*, the Christmas tree farm—or bakery, or whatever the hero's been sent to destroy—is owned and operated by someone ridiculously attractive and suitably available for wooing.

Back in the city, the lead *has* a romantic partner. Someone ruthless who encourages him to do what he's set out to do and ruin some lives in exchange for that big promotion. He fields calls from her, during which she interrupts him, barking heartless advice from the seat of her Peloton bike.

You can tell she's evil because her hair is an unnatural blond, slicked back à la Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, and also, she hates Christmas decorations.

As the hero spends more time with the charming baker/seamstress/tree farm . . . *person*, things change for him. He learns the true meaning of life!

He returns home, *transformed* by the love of a good woman. There he asks his ice-queen girlfriend to take a walk with him. She gapes, says something like, *In* these *Manolos?*

It will be fun, he tells her. On the walk, he might ask her to look up at the stars.

She snaps, *You* know *I can't look up right now! I just got Botox!*

And then he realizes: he can't go back to his old life. He doesn't want to! He ends his cold, unsatisfying relationship and proposes to his new sweetheart. (Who needs dating?)

At this point, you find yourself screaming at the book, *You don't even know her! What's her middle name, bitch?* From across the room, your sister, Libby, hushes you, throws popcorn at your head without lifting her gaze from her own crinkly-covered library book.

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And that's why I'm running late to this lunch meeting.

Because that's my life. The trope that governs my days. The archetype over which my details are superimposed.

I'm the city person. Not the one who meets the hot farmer. The *other* one.

The uptight, manicured literary agent, reading manuscripts from atop her Peloton while a serene beach scene screen saver drifts, unnoticed, across her computer screen.

I'm the one who gets dumped.

I've read this story, and lived it, enough to know it's happening again right now, as I'm weaving through late-afternoon foot traffic in Midtown, my phone clutched to my ear.

He hasn't said it yet, but the hairs on the back of my neck are rising, the pit opening in my stomach as he maneuvers the conversation toward a cartoon-style drop off a cliff.

Grant was only supposed to be in Texas for two weeks, just long enough to help close a deal between his company and the boutique hotel they were trying to acquire outside San Antonio. Having already experienced two post–work trip breakups, I reacted to the news of his trip as if he'd announced he'd joined the navy and was shipping out in the morning.

Libby tried to convince me I was overreacting, but I wasn't surprised when Grant missed our nightly phone call three times in a row, or when he cut two others short. I knew how this ended.

And then, three days ago, hours before his return flight, it happened.

A force majeure intervened to keep him in San Antonio longer than planned. His appendix burst.

Theoretically, I could've booked a flight right then, met him at the hospital. But I was in the middle of a huge sale and needed to

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be glued to my phone with stable Wi-Fi access. My client was counting on me. This was a life-changing chance for her. And besides, Grant pointed out that an appendectomy was a routine procedure. His exact words were "no big deal."

So I stayed, and deep down, I knew I was releasing Grant to the small-town-romance-novel gods to do with what they do best.

Now, three days later, as I'm practically sprinting to lunch in my Good Luck heels, my knuckles white against my phone, the reverberation of the nail in my relationship's coffin rattles through me in the form of Grant's voice.

"Say that again." I mean to say it as a question. It comes out as an order.

Grant sighs. "I'm not coming back, Nora. Things have changed for me this past week." He chuckles. "I've changed."

A thud goes through my cold, city-person heart. "Is she a baker?" I ask.

He's silent for a beat. "What?"

"Is she a *baker*?" I say, like that's a perfectly reasonable first question to ask when your boyfriend dumps you over the phone. "The woman you're leaving me for."

After a brief silence, he gives in: "She's the daughter of the couple who own the hotel. They've decided not to sell. I'm going to stay on, help them run it."

I can't help it: I laugh. That's always been my reaction to bad news. It's probably how I won the role of Evil Villainess in my own life, but what else am I supposed to do? Melt into a crying puddle on this packed sidewalk? What good would that do?

I stop outside the restaurant and gently knead at my eyes. "So, to be clear," I say, "you're giving up your amazing job, your amazing apartment, *and me*, and you're moving to Texas. To be with someone

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whose career can best be described as *the daughter of the couple who own the hotel*?"

"There's more important things in life than money and a fancy career, Nora," he spits.

I laugh again. "I can't tell if you think you're being serious."

Grant is the son of a billionaire hotel mogul. "Raised with a silver spoon" doesn't even begin to cover it. He probably had gold-leaf toilet paper.

For Grant, college was a formality. Internships were a formality. Hell, wearing *pants* was a formality! He got his job through sheer nepotism.

Which is precisely what makes his last comment so rich, both figuratively and literally.

I must say this last part aloud, because he demands, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I peer through the window of the restaurant, then check the time on my phone. I'm late—I'm *never* late. Not the first impression I was aiming for.

"Grant, you're a thirty-four-year-old heir. For most of us, our jobs are tied directly to our ability to eat."

"See?" he says. "This is the kind of worldview I'm done with. You can be so cold sometimes, Nora. Chastity and I want to—"

It's not intentional—I'm not trying to be cutting—when I cackle out her name. It's just that, when hilariously bad things happen, I leave my body. I watch them happen from outside myself and think, *Really? This is what the universe has chosen to do? A bit on the nose, isn't it?*

In this case, it's chosen to guide my boyfriend into the arms of a woman named after the ability to keep a hymen intact. I mean, it *is* funny.

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He huffs on the other end of the line. "These people are good people, Nora. They're salt of the earth. That's the kind of person I want to be. Look, Nora, don't act upset—"

"Who's acting?"

"You've never needed me—"

"Of course I don't!" I've worked hard to build a life that's my own, that no one else could pull a plug on to send me swirling down a cosmic drain.

"You've never even stayed over at my place—" he says.

"My mattress is objectively better!" I researched it for nine and a half months before buying it. Of course, that's also pretty much how I date, and still, I end up here.

"—so don't pretend you're heartbroken," Grant says. "I'm not sure you're even capable of *being* heartbroken."

Again, I have to laugh.

Because on this, he's wrong. It's just that once you've had your heart *truly* shattered, a phone call like this is nothing. A heart-twinge, maybe a murmur. Certainly not a break.

Grant's on a roll now: "I've never even seen you cry."

You're welcome, I consider saying. How many times had Mom told us, laughing through her tears, that her latest beau had told her she was too emotional?

That's the thing about women. There's no good way to be one. Wear your emotions on your sleeve and you're hysterical. Keep them tucked away where your boyfriend doesn't have to tend to them and you're a heartless bitch.

"I've got to go, Grant," I say.

"Of course you do," he replies.

Apparently my following through with prior commitments is just more proof that I am a frigid, evil robot who sleeps in a bed of hundred-dollar bills and raw diamonds. (If only.)

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I hang up without a goodbye and tuck myself beneath the restaurant's awning. As I take a steadying breath, I wait to see if the tears will come. They don't. They never do. I'm okay with that.

I have a job to do, and unlike Grant, I'm going to do it, for myself and everyone else at Nguyen Literary Agency.

I smooth my hair, square my shoulders, and head inside, the blast of air-conditioning scrubbing goose bumps over my arms.

It's late in the day for lunch, so the crowd is thin, and I spot Charlie Lastra near the back, dressed in all black like publishing's own metropolitan vampire.

We've never met in person, but I double-checked the *Publishers Weekly* announcement about his promotion to executive editor at Wharton House Books and committed his photograph to memory: the stern, dark brows; the light brown eyes; the slight crease in his chin beneath his full lips. He has the kind of dark mole on one cheek that, if he were a woman, would definitely be considered a beauty mark.

He can't be much past his midthirties, with the kind of face you might describe as boyish, if not for how tired he looks and the gray that thoroughly peppers his black hair.

Also, he's scowling. Or pouting. His mouth is pouting. His forehead is scowling. Powling.

He glances at his watch.

Not a good sign. Right before I left the office, my boss, Amy, warned me Charlie is famously testy, but I wasn't worried. I'm always punctual.

Except when I'm getting dumped over the phone. Then I'm six and a half minutes late, apparently.

"Hi!" I stick out my hand to shake his as I approach. "Nora Stephens. So nice to meet you in person, finally."

He stands, his chair scraping over the floor. His black clothes, dark features, and general demeanor have the approximate effect on

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the room of a black hole, sucking all the light out of it and swallowing it entirely.

Most people wear black as a form of lazy professionalism, but he makes it look like a capital-c Choice, the combination of his relaxed merino sweater, trousers, and brogues giving him the air of a celebrity caught on the street by a paparazzo. I catch myself calculating how many American dollars he's wearing. Libby calls it my "disturbing middle-class party trick," but really it's just that I love pretty things and often online window-shop to self-soothe after a stressful day.

I'd put Charlie's outfit at somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand. Right in the range of mine, frankly, though everything I'm wearing except my shoes was purchased secondhand.

He examines my outstretched palm for two long seconds before shaking it. "You're late." He sits without bothering to meet my gaze.

Is there anything worse than a man who thinks he's above the laws of the social contract just because he was born with a decent face and a fat wallet? Grant has burned through my daily tolerance for self-important asshats. Still, I have to play this game, for my authors' sakes.

"I know," I say, beaming apologetically but not actually apologizing. "Thank you for waiting for me. My train got stopped on the tracks. You know how it is."

His eyes lift to mine. They look darker now, so dark I'm not sure there are irises around those pupils. His expression says he does *not* know how it is, re: trains stopping on the tracks for reasons both grisly and mundane.

Probably, he doesn't take the subway.

Probably, he goes everywhere in a shiny black limo, or a Gothic carriage pulled by a team of Clydesdales.

I shuck off my blazer (herringbone, Isabel Marant) and take the seat across from him. "Have you ordered?"

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"No," he says. Nothing else.

My hopes sink lower.

We'd scheduled this get-to-know-you lunch weeks ago. But last Friday, I'd sent him a new manuscript from one of my oldest clients, Dusty Fielding. Now I'm second-guessing whether I could subject one of my authors to this man.

I pick up my menu. "They have a goat cheese salad that's phenomenal."

Charlie closes his menu and regards me. "Before we go any further," he says, thick black brows furrowing, his voice low and innately hoarse, "I should just tell you, I found Fielding's new book unreadable."

My jaw drops. I'm not sure what to say. For one thing, I hadn't planned on bringing the book up. If Charlie wanted to reject it, he could've just done so in an email. And without using the word *unreadable*.

But even aside from that, any decent person would at least wait until there was some bread on the table before throwing out insults.

I close my own menu and fold my hands on the table. "I think it's her best yet."

Dusty's already published three others, each of them fantastic, though none sold well. Her last publisher wasn't willing to take another chance on her, so she's back in the water, looking for a new home for her next novel.

And okay, maybe it's not *my* favorite of hers, but it has immense commercial appeal. With the right editor, I know what this book can be.

Charlie sits back, the heavy, discerning quality of his gaze sending a prickling down my backbone. It feels like he's looking right through me, past the shiny politeness to the jagged edges underneath. His look says, *Wipe that frozen smile off your face. You're not* that *nice.*

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He turns his water glass in place. "Her best is *The Glory of Small Things*," he says, like three seconds of eye contact was enough to read my innermost thoughts and he knows he's speaking for both of us.

Frankly, *Glory* was one of my favorite books in the last decade, but that doesn't make this one chopped liver.

I say, "This book is every bit as good. It's just different—less subdued, maybe, but that gives it a cinematic edge."

"Less subdued?" Charlie squints. At least the golden brown has seeped back into his eyes so I feel less like they're going to burn holes in me. "That's like saying Charles Manson was a lifestyle guru. It might be true, but it's hardly the point. This book feels like someone watched that Sarah McLachlan commercial for animal cruelty prevention and thought, *But what if all the puppies died on camera?*"

An irritable laugh lurches out of me. "Fine. It's not your cup of tea. But maybe it would be helpful," I fume, "if you told me what you *liked* about the book. Then I know what to send you in the future."

Liar, my brain says. *You're not sending him more books.*

Liar, Charlie's unsettling, owlish eyes say. *You're not sending me more books.*

This lunch—this potential working relationship—is dead in the water.

Charlie doesn't want to work with me, and I don't want to work with him, but I guess he hasn't entirely abandoned the social contract, because he considers my question.

"It's overly sentimental for my taste," he says eventually. "And the cast is caricatured—"

"*Quirky*," I disagree. "We could scale them back, but it's a large cast—their quirks help distinguish them."

"And the setting—"

"What's wrong with the setting?" The setting in *Once in a Lifetime* sells the whole book. "Sunshine Falls is charming."

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Charlie scoffs, literally rolls his eyes. "It's completely unrealistic."

"It's a real place," I counter. Dusty had made the little mountain town sound so idyllic I'd actually googled it. Sunshine Falls, North Carolina, sits just a little ways outside Asheville.

Charlie shakes his head. He seems irritable. Well, that makes two of us.

I do not like him. If I'm the archetypical City Person, he is the Dour, Unappeasable Stick-in-the-Mud. He's the Growly Misanthrope, Oscar the Grouch, second-act Heathcliff, the worst parts of Mr. Knightley.

Which is a shame, because he's also got a reputation for having a magic touch. Several of my agent friends call him Midas. As in, "Everything he touches turns to gold." (Though admittedly, some others refer to him as the Storm Cloud. As in, "He makes it rain money, but at what cost?")

The point is, Charlie Lastra picks winners. And he isn't picking *Once in a Lifetime*. Determined to bolster my confidence, if not his, I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm telling you, no matter how contrived you found it, Sunshine Falls is real."

"It might exist," Charlie says, "but *I'm* telling *you* Dusty Fielding has never been there."

"Why does that matter?" I ask, no longer feigning politeness.

Charlie's mouth twitches in reaction to my outburst. "You wanted to know what I disliked about the book—"

"What you *liked*," I correct him.

"—and I disliked the setting."

The sting of anger races down my windpipe, rooting through my lungs. "So how about you just tell me what kind of books you *do* want, Mr. Lastra?"

He relaxes until he's leaned back, languid and sprawling like some jungle cat toying with its prey. He turns his water glass again.

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I'd thought it was a nervous tic, but maybe it's a low-grade torture tactic. I want to knock it off the table.

"I want," Charlie says, "*early* Fielding. *The Glory of Small Things*."

"That book didn't sell."

"Because her publisher didn't know how to sell it," Charlie says. "Wharton House could. I could."

My eyebrow arches, and I do my best to school it back into place.

Just then, the server approaches our table. "Can I get you anything while you're perusing the menu?" she asks sweetly.

"Goat cheese salad for me," Charlie says, without looking at either of us.

Probably he's looking forward to pronouncing my favorite salad in the city *inedible*.

"And for you, ma'am?" the server asks.

I stifle the shiver that runs down my spine whenever a twenty-something calls me *ma'am*. This must be how ghosts feel when people walk over their graves.

"I'll have that too," I say, and then, because this has been one hell of a day and there is no one here to impress—and because I'm trapped here for at least forty more minutes with a man I have no intention of *ever* working with—I say, "And a gin martini. Dirty."

Charlie's brow just barely lifts. It's three p.m. on a Thursday, not exactly happy hour, but given that publishing shuts down in the summer and most people take Fridays off, it's practically the weekend.

"Bad day," I say under my breath as the server disappears with our order.

"Not as bad as mine," Charlie replies. The rest hangs in the air, unsaid: *I read eighty pages of* Once in a Lifetime*, then sat down with* you.

I scoff. "You really didn't like the setting?"

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"I can hardly imagine anywhere I'd less enjoy spending four hundred pages."

"You know," I say, "you're every bit as pleasant as I was told you would be."

"I can't control how I feel," he says coolly.

I bristle. "That's like Charles Manson saying he's not the one who committed the murders. It might be true on a technical level, but it's hardly the point."

The server drops off my martini, and Charlie grumbles, "Could I get one of those too?"



Later that night, my phone pings with an email.

> Hi, Nora,
>
> Feel free to keep me in mind for Dusty's future projects.
>
> -Charlie

I can't help rolling my eyes. No *Nice meeting you*. No *Hope you're well*. He couldn't even be bothered with basic niceties. Gritting my teeth, I type back, mimicking his style.

> Charlie,
>
> If she writes anything about lifestyle guru Charlie Manson, you'll be the first to know.
>
> -Nora

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I tuck my phone into my sweatpants' pocket and nudge open my bathroom door to start my ten-step skin care routine (also known as the best forty-five minutes of my day). My phone vibrates and I pull it out.

N,

Joke's on you: very much want to read that.

-C

Hell-bent on having the last word, I write, Night.

(*Good* night is decidedly not what I mean.)

Best, Charlie writes back, like he's signing an email that doesn't exist.

If there's one thing I hate more than shoes with no heels, it's losing. I write back, x.

No reply. Checkmate. After a day from hell, this small victory makes me feel like all is right in the world. I finish my skin care routine. I read five blissful chapters of a grisly mystery novel, and I drift off on my perfect mattress, without a thought to spare for Grant or his new life in Texas. I sleep like a baby.

Or an ice queen.

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TWO YEARS LATER

THE CITY IS baking. The asphalt sizzles. The trash on the sidewalk reeks. The families we pass carry ice pops that shrink with every step, melting down their fingers. Sunlight glances off buildings like a laser-based security system in an out-of-date heist movie, and I feel like a glazed donut that's been left out in the heat for four days.

Meanwhile, even five months pregnant and despite the temperature, Libby looks like the star of a shampoo commercial.

"Three times." She sounds awed. "How does a person get dumped in a full lifestyle-swap *three times*?"

"Just lucky, I guess," I say. Really, it's four, but I never could bring myself to tell her the whole story about Jakob. It's been years and I can still barely tell *myself* that story.

Libby sighs and loops her arm through mine. My skin is sticky from the heat and humidity of midsummer, but my baby sister's is miraculously dry and silky.

I might've gotten Mom's five feet and eleven inches of height, but

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the rest of her features all funneled down to my sister, from the strawberry gold hair to the wide, Mediterranean Sea–blue eyes and the splash of freckles across her nose. Her short, curvy stature must've come from Dad's gene pool—not that we would know; he left when I was three and Libby was months from being born. When it's natural, my hair is a dull, ashy blond, and my eyes' shade of blue is less idyllic-vacation-water and more last-thing-you-see-before-the-ice-freezes-over-and-you-drown.

She's the Marianne to my Elinor, the Meg Ryan to my Parker Posey.

She is also my absolute favorite person on the planet.

"Oh, Nora." Libby squeezes me to her as we come to a crosswalk, and I bask in the closeness. No matter how hectic life and work sometimes get, it's always felt like there were some internal metronomes keeping us in sync. I'd pick up my phone to call her, and it would already be ringing, or she'd text me about grabbing lunch and we'd realize we were already in the same part of the city. The last few months, though, we've been ships passing in the night. Actually, more like a submarine and a paddleboat in entirely separate lakes.

I miss her calls while I'm in meetings, and she's already asleep by the time I call back. She finally invites me to dinner on a night I've promised to take a client out. Worse than that is the faint, uncanny *off* feeling when we're actually together. Like she's only halfway here. Like those metronomes have fallen into different rhythms, and even when we're right next to each other, they never manage to match up.

At first I'd chalked it up to stress about the new baby, but as time has worn on, my sister's seemed *more* distant rather than closer. We're fundamentally out of sync in a way I can't seem to name, and not even my dream mattress and a cloud of diffused lavender oil are enough to keep me from lying awake, turning over our last few conversations like I'm looking for faint cracks.

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The sign has changed to *WALK*, but a slew of drivers rushes through the newly red light. When a guy in a nice suit strides into the street, Libby pulls me along after him.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that cabdrivers won't clip people who look like this guy. His outfit says, *I am a man with a lawyer*. Or possibly just *I am a lawyer*.

"I thought you and Andrew were good together," Libby says, seamlessly reentering the conversation. As long as you're willing to overlook that my ex's name was Aaron, not Andrew. "I don't understand what went wrong. Was it work stuff?"

Her eyes flicker toward me on the words *work stuff*, and it triggers another memory: me slipping back into the apartment during Bea's fourth birthday party and Libby giving me a look like an injured Pixar puppy as she guessed, *Work call?*

When I apologized, she brushed it off, but now I find myself wondering if *that* was the moment I'd started to lose her, the exact second when our diverging paths pulled just a little too far from each other and the seams started splitting.

"What went wrong," I say, recovering my place in the conversation, "is that, in a past life, I betrayed a very powerful witch, and she's put a curse on my love life. He's moving to Prince Edward Island."

We pause at the next cross street, waiting for traffic to slow. It's a Saturday in mid-July and absolutely everyone is out, wearing as few clothes as legally possible, eating dripping ice cream cones from Big Gay or artisanal ice pops filled with things that have no business being anywhere near a dessert.

"Do you know what's on Prince Edward Island?" I ask.

"Anne of Green Gables?" Libby says.

"Anne of Green Gables would be dead by now," I say.

"Wow," she says. *"Spoiler."*

"How does a person go from living *here* to moving to a place

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where the hottest destination is the Canadian Potato Museum? I would immediately die of boredom."

Libby sighs. "I don't know. I'd take a little boredom right about now."

I glance sidelong at her, and my heart trips over its next beat. Her hair is still perfect and her skin is prettily flushed, but now new details jump out at me, signs I missed at first.

The drawn corners of her mouth. The subtle thinning of her cheeks. She looks tired, older than usual.

"Sorry," she says, almost to herself. "I don't mean to be Sad, Droopy Mom—I just . . . I *really* need some sleep."

My mind is already spinning, searching for places I could pick up the slack. Brendan and Libby's evergreen concern is money, but they've refused help in that department for years, so I've had to find creative ways of supporting them.

Actually, the phone call she may or may not be peeved about was a Birthday Present Trojan Horse. A "client" "canceled" "a trip" and "the room at the St. Regis" was "nonrefundable" so "it only made sense" to have a midweek slumber party with the girls there.

"You're not Sad, Droopy Mom," I say now, squeezing her arm again. "You're Supermom. You're the regulation hottie in the jumpsuit at the Brooklyn Flea, carrying her five hundred beautiful children, a giant bouquet of wildflowers, and a basket full of lumpy tomatoes. It's okay to get tired, Lib."

She squints at me. "When was the last time you counted my kids, Sissy? Because there are two."

"Not to make you feel like a terrible parent," I say, poking her belly, "but I'm eighty percent sure there's another one in there."

"Fine, two and a half." Her eyes dart toward mine, cautious. "So how are you, really? About the breakup, I mean."

"We were only together four months. It wasn't serious."

"*Serious* is the nature of how you date," she says. "If someone

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makes it to a third dinner with you, then he's already met four hundred and fifty separate criteria. It's not casual dating if you know the other person's blood type."

"I do *not* know my dates' blood types," I say. "All I need from them is a full credit report, a psych eval, and a blood oath."

Libby throws her head back, cackling. As ever, making my sister laugh is a shot of serotonin straight into my heart. Or brain? Probably brain. Serotonin in your heart is probably not a good a thing. The point is, Libby's laugh makes me feel like the world is under my thumb, like I'm in complete control of The Situation.

Maybe that makes me a narcissist, or maybe it just makes me a thirty-two-year-old woman who remembers full weeks when she couldn't coax her grieving sister out of bed.

"Hey," Libby says, slowing as she realizes where we are, what we've been subconsciously moving toward. "Look."

If we got blindfolded and air-dropped into the city, we'd probably still end up here: gazing wistfully at Freeman Books, the West Village shop we used to live over. The tiny apartment where Mom spun us through the kitchen, all three of us singing the Supremes' "Baby Love" into kitchen utensils. The place where we spent countless nights curled up on a pink-and-cream floral couch watching Katharine Hepburn movies with a smorgasbord of junk food spread across the coffee table she'd found on the street, its busted leg replaced by a stack of hardcovers.

In books and movies, characters like me always live in cement-floored lofts with bleak modern art and four-foot vases filled with, like, scraggly black twigs, for some inexplicable reason.

But in real life, I chose my current apartment because it looks so much like this one: old wooden floors and soft wallpaper, a hissing radiator in one corner and built-in bookshelves stuffed to the brim with secondhand paperbacks. Its crown molding has been painted

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over so many times it's lost its crisp edges, and time has warped its high, narrow windows.

This little bookstore and its upstairs apartment are my favorite places on earth.

Even if it's also where our lives were torn in half twelve years ago, I love this place.

"Oh my gosh!" Libby grips my forearm, waving at the display in the bookstore's window: a pyramid of Dusty Fielding's runaway hit, *Once in a Lifetime*, with its new movie tie-in cover.

She pulls out her phone. "We have to take a picture!"

There is no one who loves Dusty's book as much as my sister. And that's saying something, since, in six months, it's sold a million copies already. People are calling it *the* book of the year. *A Man Called Ove* meets *A Little Life*.

Take that, Charlie Lastra, I think, as I do every so often when I remember that fateful lunch. Or whenever I pass his shut-tight office door (all the sweeter since he moved to work at the publishing house that put out *Once*, where he's now surrounded by constant reminders of my success).

Fine, I think *Take that, Charlie Lastra* a lot. One never really forgets the first time a colleague drove her to extreme unprofessionalism.

"I'm going to see this movie five hundred times," Libby tells me. "Consecutively."

"Wear a diaper," I advise.

"Not necessary," she says. "I'll be crying too much. There won't be any pee in my body."

"I had no idea you had such a . . . comprehensive understanding of science," I say.

"The last time I read it, I cried so hard I pulled a muscle in my back."

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"You should consider exercising more."

"Rude." She waves at her pregnant belly, then starts us toward the juice bar again. "Anyway, back to your love life. You just need to get back out there."

"Libby," I say. "I understand that you met the love of your life when you were twenty years old, and thus have never truly dated. But imagine for a moment, if you will, a world in which thirty percent of your dates end with the revelation that the man across the table from you has a foot, elbow, or kneecap fetish."

It was the shock of my life when my whimsical, romantic sister fell in love with a nine-years-older-than-her accountant who is *very* into reading about trains, but Brendan's also the most solid man I've ever met in my life, and I've long since accepted that somehow, against all odds, he and my sister are soul mates.

"Thirty percent?!" she cries. "What the hell kind of dating apps are you on, Nora?"

"The normal ones!" I say.

In the interest of full discretion, *yes*, I outright inquire about fetishes up front. It's not that thirty percent of men announce their kinks twenty minutes after meeting, but that's my point. The last time my boss, Amy, went home with an un-vetted woman, she turned out to have a room that was entirely dolls. Floor-to-ceiling ceramic dolls.

How inconvenient would it be to fall in love with a person only to find out they had a doll room? The answer is "very."

"Can we sit for a second?" Libby asks, a little out of breath, and we sidestep a group of German tourists to perch on the edge of a coffee shop's windowsill.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "Can I get you something? Water?"

She shakes her head, brushes her hair behind her ears. "I'm just tired. I need a break."

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"Maybe we should have a spa day," I suggest. "I have a gift certificate—"

"First of all," she says, "you're lying, and I can tell. And second of all . . ." Her teeth worry over her pink-glossed lip. "I had something else in mind."

"*Two* spa days?" I guess.

She cracks a tentative smile. "You know how you're always complaining about how publishing pretty much shuts down in August and you have nothing to do?"

"I have *plenty* to do," I argue.

"Nothing that requires you to be in the city," she amends. "So what if we went somewhere? Got away for a few weeks and just *relaxed*? I can go a day without getting anyone else's bodily fluids on me, and *you* can forget about what happened with Aaron, and we can just . . . take a break from being the Tired Supermom and Fancy Career Lady we have to be the other eleven months out of the year. Maybe you can even take a page out of your exes' books and have a whirlwind romance with a local . . . lobster hunter?"

I stare at her, trying to parse out how serious she is.

"Fisher? Lobster fisher?" she says. "Fisherman?"

"But we never go anywhere," I point out.

"*Exactly*," she says, a ragged edge creeping into her voice. She grabs for my hand, and I note the way her nails are bitten down. I try to swallow, but it's like my esophagus is inside a vise. Because, right then, I'm suddenly sure there's more going on with Libby than run-of-the-mill money problems, lack of sleep, or irritation with my work schedule.

Six months ago, I'd have known exactly what was going on. I wouldn't have even had to ask. She would've stopped by my apartment, unannounced, and flopped onto my couch dramatically and said, *"You know what's bothering me lately, Sissy?"* and I would pull

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her head into my lap and tease my fingers through her hair while she poured out her worries over a glass of crisp white wine. Things are different now.

"This is our chance, Nora," she says quietly, urgently. "Let's take a trip. Just the two of us. The last time we did that was California."

My stomach plummets, then rebounds. That trip—like my relationship with Jakob—is part of the time in my life I do my best not to revisit.

Pretty much everything I do, actually, is to ensure Libby and I never find ourselves back in that dark place we were in after Mom died. But the undeniable truth is I haven't seen her look like this, like she's at her breaking point, since then.

I swallow hard. "Can you get away right now?"

"Brendan's parents will help with the girls." She squeezes my hands, her wide blue eyes practically burning with hope. "When this baby gets here, I'm going to be an empty shell of a person for a while, and before that happens, I really, really want to spend time with you, like it used to be. And also I'm like three sleepless nights away from snapping and pulling a *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, if not the full *Gone Girl*. I need this."

My chest squeezes. An image of a heart in a too-small metal cage flashes over my mind. I've always been incapable of saying no to her. Not when she was five and wanted the last bite of Junior's cheesecake, or when she was fifteen and wanted to borrow my favorite jeans (the seat of which never recovered from her superior curves), or when she was sixteen and she said through tears, *I just want to not be here*, and I swept her off to Los Angeles.

She never actually asked for any of those things, but she's asking now, her palms pressed together and her lower lip jutted, and it makes me feel panicky and breathless, even more out of control than the thought of leaving the city. *"Please."*

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Her fatigue has made her look insubstantial, faded, like if I tried to brush her hair away from her brow, my fingers might pass through her. I didn't know it was possible to miss a person this much while she was sitting right next to you, so badly everything in you aches.

She's right here, I tell myself, *and she's okay. Whatever it is, you'll fix it.*

I swallow every excuse, complaint, and argument bubbling up in me. "Let's take a trip."

Libby's lips split into a grin. She shifts on the windowsill to wriggle something out of her back pocket. "Okay, good. Because I already bought these and I'm not sure they're refundable." She slaps the printed plane tickets in my lap, and it's like the moment never happened. Like in the matter of point five seconds, I got my carefree baby sister back, and I'd trade any number of organs to cement us both into this moment, to live here always where she's shining bright. My chest loosens. My next breath comes easy.

"Aren't you even going to look where we're going?" Libby asks, amused.

I tear my gaze from her and read the ticket. "Asheville, North Carolina?"

She shakes her head. "It's the airport closest to Sunshine Falls. This is going to be a . . . *once-in-a-lifetime* trip."

I groan and she throws her arms around me, laughing. "We're going to have so much fun, Sissy! And you're going to fall in love with a lumberjack."

"If there's one thing that makes me horny," I say, "it's deforestation."

"An ethical, sustainable, organic, gluten-free lumberjack," Libby amends.

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2

ON THE AIRPLANE, Libby insists we order Bloody Marys. Actually, she tries to pressure me into taking shots, but she settles for a Bloody Mary (and a plain tomato juice for herself). I'm not a big drinker myself, and morning alcohol has *never* been my thing. But this is my first vacation in a decade, and I'm so anxious I chug the drink in the first twenty minutes of our flight.

I don't like traveling, I don't like time off work, and I don't like leaving my clients in the lurch. Or, in this case, one rather indispensable client: I spent the forty-eight hours pre-takeoff alternating between trying to talk Dusty down and pump her up.

We've already bumped the deadline for her next book back six months, and if she can't start getting her editor pages this week, the whole publishing schedule will be thrown off.

She's so superstitious about the drafting process that we don't even know what she's working on, but I fire off another encouraging *you-can-do-it* email on my phone anyway.

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Libby shoots me a pointed look, brow arched. I set my phone down and hold up my hands, hoping to signal *I'm present*.

"So," she says, appeased, and drags her cartoonishly large purse onto the folding tray table, "I figure now is as good a time as any to go over the plan." She fishes out an actual, full-sized folder and flops it open.

"Oh my god, what is that?" I say. "Are you planning a bank robbery?"

"*Heist*, Sissy. *Robbery* sounds so déclassé, and we're going to be wearing three-piece suits the whole time," she says, not missing a beat as she pulls out two identical laminated sheets with the typed heading ***LIFE-CHANGING VACATION LIST***.

"Who are you and where did you bury my sister?" I ask.

"I know how much you love a checklist," she says brightly. "So I took the liberty of crafting one to create our perfect small-town adventure."

I reach for one of the sheets. "I hope number one is 'dance atop a Coyote Ugly bar.' Though I'm not sure any manager worth her salt will allow that in your condition."

She feigns offense. "Am I showing much?"

"Noooo," I coo. "Not at all."

"You're so bad at lying. It looks like your face muscles are being controlled by a half dozen amateur puppeteers. Now, back to the bucket list."

"Bucket list? Which of us is dying?"

She looks up, eyes sparkling. I'd say it's the glint of mischief, but her eyes are pretty much always sparkly. "Birth is a kind of death," she says, rubbing her tummy. "Death of the self. Death of sleep. Death of your ability not to pee yourself a little when you laugh. But I guess it's more like a *small-town romance novel experience* list than

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a bucket list. It's how we're both going to be *transformed* via small-town magic into more relaxed versions of ourselves."

I eye the list again. Before Libby got pregnant the first time, she briefly worked for a top-tier events planner (among many, many, many other things), so despite her natural tendency toward spontaneity (read: chaos), she'd made some strides in organization, even pre-motherhood. But this level of planning is so extremely . . . *me*, and I'm weirdly touched she's put so much thought into this.

Also shocked to discover the first item on the list is *Wear a flannel shirt*. "I don't own a flannel shirt," I say.

Libby shrugs. "Me neither. We'll have to thrift some—maybe we can find some cowgirl boots too."

When we were teenagers, we'd spend hours sorting through junk for gems at our favorite Goodwill. I'd go for the sleek designer pieces and she'd beeline toward anything with color, fringe, or rhinestones.

Again I feel that heart-pinch sensation, like I'm missing her, like all our best moments are behind us. That, I remind myself, is why I'm doing this. By the time we get back to the city, whatever little gaps have cropped up between us will be stitched closed again.

"Flannel," I say. "Got it." The second item on the list is *Bake something*. Continuing the trend of us being polar opposites, my sister *loves* cooking, but since she's usually beholden to the taste buds of a four- and three-year-old, she's always saved her more adventurous recipes for our nights in together. My eyes skim down the list.

3. General makeover (let hair down/get bangs?)
4. Build something (literal, not figurative)

The first four items almost directly correlate to Libby's Graveyard of Abandoned Potential Careers. Before her event-planning job,

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she'd briefly run an online vintage store that curated thrift store finds; and before that, she'd wanted to be a baker; and before that, a hairstylist; and for one very brief summer, she'd decided she wanted to be a carpenter because there weren't "enough women in that field." She was eight.

So everything so far makes sense—at least as much as this entire thing makes sense (which is to say, *only in Libby's brain*)—but then my gaze catches on number five. "Ummm, what is *this*?"

"Go on at least two dates with locals," she reads, visibly excited. "That one's not for me." She lifts her copy of the list, on which number five is struck through.

"Well, that doesn't seem fair," I say.

"You'll recall that I'm married," she says, "and five trillion weeks pregnant."

"And I'm a career woman with a weekly housekeeping service, a spare bedroom I turned into a shoe closet, and a Sephora credit card. I don't imagine my dream man is a lobster hunter."

Libby lights up and scooches forward in her seat. "Exactly!" she says. "Look, Nora, you know I love your beautiful, Dewey-decimal-organized brain, but you date like you're shopping for cars."

"Thank you," I say.

"And it *always* ends badly."

"Oh, thank god." I clutch my chest. "I was worried that wouldn't come up soon."

She tries to turn in her seat and grabs my hands on the armrest between us. "I'm just saying, you keep dating these guys who are exactly like you, with all the same priorities."

"You can really shorten that sentence if you just say 'men I'm compatible with.'"

"Sometimes opposites attract," she says. "Think about all your exes. Think about Jakob and his cowgirl wife!"

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Something cold lances through me at the mention of him; Libby doesn't notice.

"The whole point of this trip is to step outside our comfort zones," she insists. "To get a chance to . . . to be someone different! Besides, who knows? Maybe if you branch out a little, you'll find your own *life-changing* love story instead of another walking checklist of a boyfriend."

"I *like* dating checklists, thank you very much," I say. "Checklists keep things simple. I mean, think about Mom, Lib." She was constantly falling in love, and never with men who made any sense for her. It always came crashing down spectacularly, usually leaving her so broken she'd miss work or auditions, or do so badly at either that she'd get fired or cut.

"You're nothing like Mom." She says it flippantly, but it still stings. I'm well aware how little I take after our mother. I felt those shortcomings every second of every day after we lost her, when I was trying to keep us afloat.

And I know that's not what Libby's saying, but it still doesn't feel all too different from every breakup I can remember: a long-winded monologue ending with something along the lines of ***FOR ALL I KNOW, YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE FEELINGS.***

"I mean, how often do you get to just *let loose* and not worry about how it fits into your perfect little plan?" Libby goes on. "You deserve to have some low-pressure fun, and frankly, *I* deserve to live vicariously through you. Ergo, the dates."

"So am I allowed to take the earpiece out after dinner, or . . ."

Libby throws up her hands. "You know what, fine, forget number five! Even though it would be good for you. Even though I basically designed this whole trip for you to have your small-town romance novel experience, I guess—"

"Okay, okay!" I cry. "I'll do the lumberjack dates, but they'd better look like Robert Redford."

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She squeals excitedly. "Young or old?"

I stare at her.

"Right," she says. "Got it. So, moving on. Number six: *Go skinny-dipping in a natural body of water*."

"What if there are bacteria that affect the baby or something?" I ask.

"Damn it," she grumbles, frowning. "I really didn't think all of this through as well as I thought."

"Nonsense," I say. "It's an amazing list."

"You'll just have to go skinny-dipping without me," she says, distracted.

"A lone thirty-two-year-old woman, naked in the local swimming hole. Sounds like a good way to get arrested."

"Seven," she reads. "*Sleep under the stars*. Eight: *Attend a town function—i.e. local wedding or festival of some kind*."

I find a Sharpie in my bag and add *funeral, bris, ladies' night at the local roller rink*.

"Trying to meet a hot ER doctor, are we?" Libby says, and I scratch out the part about the roller rink. Then I notice number nine.

Ride a horse.

"Again." I wave vaguely toward Libby's stomach. I cross out *ride* and change it to *pet*, and she gives a resigned sigh.

10. Start a fire (controlled)
11. Hike???? (Worth it???)

When she was sixteen, Libby had announced she'd be following her boyfriend out to work at Yellowstone for the summer, and Mom and I had howled with laughter. If there was one thing all Stephens girls had in common—aside from our love of books, vitamin-C serums, and pretty clothes—it was our avoidance of the great outdoors.

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The closest we ever came to hiking was a brisk walk in Central Park's Ramble, and even then, there were usually paper bowls filled with food truck waffles and ice cream involved. Not exactly roughing it.

Needless to say, Libby dumped that guy two weeks before she was supposed to leave.

I tap the final line on the list: *Save a local business.* "You do realize we're only here for a month." Three weeks of just the two of us, and then Brendan and the girls will join. We've gotten a steep discount by staying so long, though how I'll make it past week one, I have no idea.

The last time I traveled, I went home after two days. Even letting my mind wander toward that trip with Jakob is a mistake. I jerk my focus back to the present. This won't be like that. I won't let it. I can do this, for Libby.

"They always save a local business in small-town romances," she's saying. "We literally have no choice. I'm hoping for a down-on-its-luck goat farm."

"Ooh," I say. "Maybe we can get the ritualistic sacrifice community to band together in dramatic fashion to save the goats. For now, I mean. Eventually, they'll have to die on the altar."

"Well, of course." Libby takes a swig of tomato juice. "That's the biz, baby."

~

Our taxi driver looks like Santa Claus, down to the red T-shirt and the suspenders holding his faded jeans up. But he drives like the cigar-smoking cabbie from Bill Murray's *Scrooged*.

Little squeaks keep sneaking out of Libby when he takes a corner too fast, and at one point, I catch her whispering promises of safety to her belly.

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