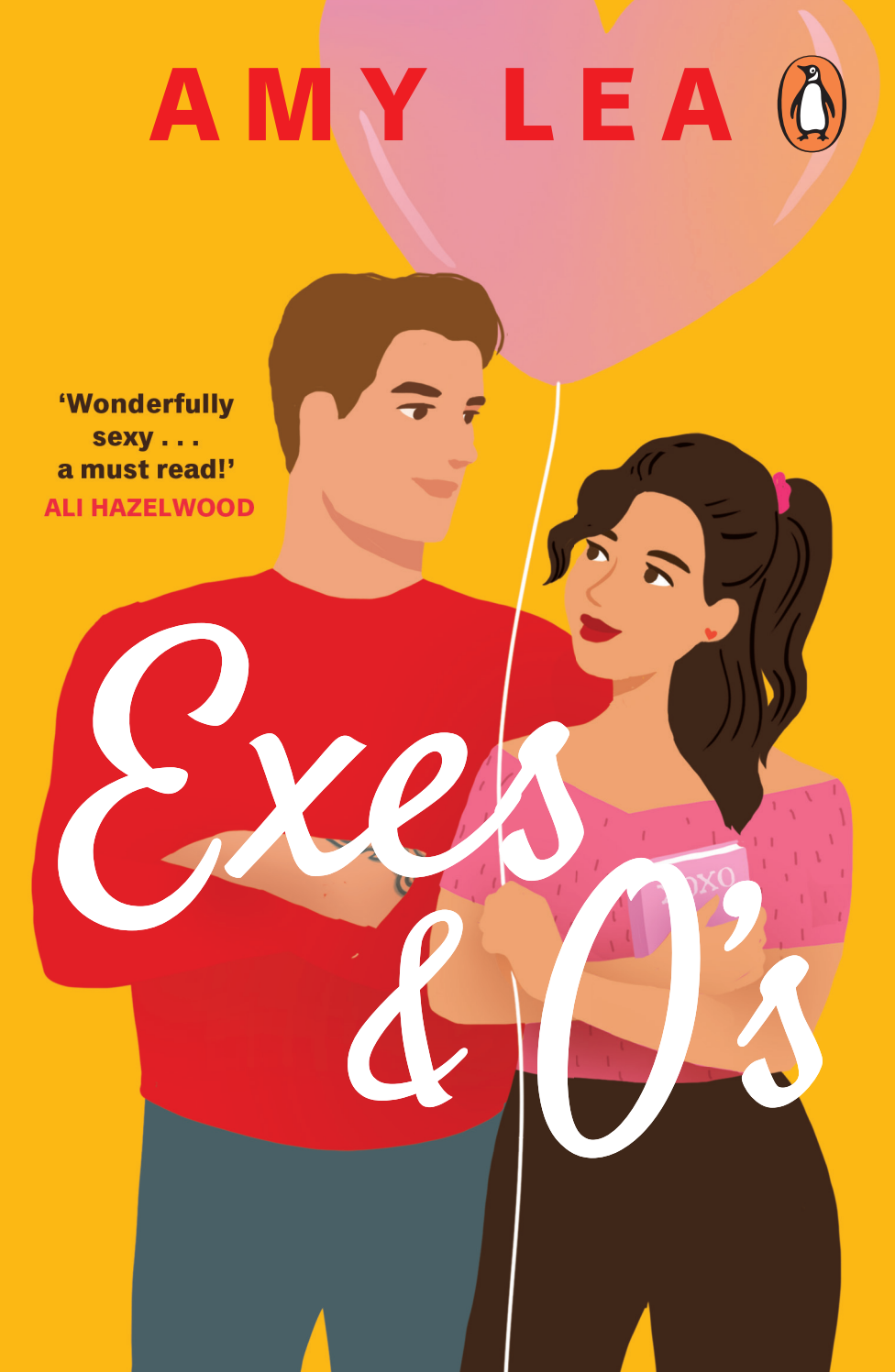
AMY LEA



'Wonderfully sexy . . . a must read!'
ALI HAZELWOOD

Exes & O's

PRAISE FOR

Set on You

"Just the right dose of delicious steam. Amy Lea has crafted an ode to all of us who struggle with self-acceptance while remaining determined to love ourselves."

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"Fresh, fun, and extremely sexy. *Set on You* is a romance of unexpected depth."

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"*Set on You* is energetic, steamy, bubbly, and so, so fun. But more than that, it's also a hugely important book that celebrates body positivity in the most joyous way possible."

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"*Set on You* is an incredibly fun and sexy slow-burn, enemies-to-lovers rom-com that had me invested from the first page. And in between all the steamy and swoony scenes, there's also a thoughtful exploration of body positivity and the true meaning of loving yourself."

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"*Set on You* is the best kind of workout: one that ups your heart rate with its swoony hero, makes you sweat with its slow-burn tension, and leaves you satisfied with its themes of empowerment and self-acceptance. With a fresh, hilarious voice and a deeply relatable protagonist, this romantic comedy is enemies-to-lovers gold."

—Rachel Lynn Solomon, national bestselling author of *The Ex Talk*

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"Authentic and full of heart, this book is a must-read for fans of Helen Hoang and Sally Thorne."

—Lynn Painter, author of *Mr. Wrong Number*

"The gym has never seemed such a sexy and romantic place as in this book!" —Denise Williams, author of *How to Fail at Flirting*

"Amy Lea's debut, *Set on You*, is a swoony, feel-good rom-com in its finest form. The prose is comforting as a hug, and the main character, Crystal, is a certified badass."

—Sarah Echavarre Smith, author of *On Location*

"A fantastic debut! You'll want to spend lots of time with Crystal and Scott (and their scorching chemistry!)."

—Jackie Lau, author of *Donut Fall in Love*

"This book's appealing characters and gym-bound setting will resonate with anyone who's ever mentally cursed a fellow gym-goer for failing to wipe down the machine post-use." —*USA Today*

"*Set on You* by Amy Lea is a fun, flirty, and hot AF romance."

—Culturess

"Lea's steamy debut romance features well-developed, likable characters with slow-build chemistry. . . . Hand this one to fans of Helen Hoang and Talia Hibbert." —*Library Journal*

"Lea's prose is clear, witty, and powerful, delivering an ode to all those who struggle with self-acceptance." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Lea's debut romance is a terrific rom-com that offers an essential message about accepting oneself, and it is a pleasure to read." —*Booklist*

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To all the "crazy" ex-girlfriends

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author's note

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for choosing my romantic comedy *Exes and O's* as your next read. While this story is generally light and humorous, I would be remiss if I did not include the following content warnings: emotionally abusive ex, on-page gaslighting, portrayal of child with illness, mentions of deaths of loved ones, and deliberate use of the word *crazy* throughout.

Note: this last one is vehemently condemned by me and the main characters. Please take care while reading.

With love,
Amy Lea

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Exes and O's

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chapter one

YOU KNOW YOUR day is going swimmingly when you've been projectile vomited on and someone stole your Greek yogurt from the staff room refrigerator. And it's only seven in the morning.

Eager to leave the memory of my hellish night shift behind, I'm in formation at the edge of the platform, stance wide, pointy elbows out, among hundreds of tired morning commuters primed to battle for a rare open seat on the subway.

I've learned a thing or two about navigating a crowd from witnessing five-foot-tall Grandma Flo barrel her way through the grocery store, whacking innocents with her faux-crocodile purse with no apologies.

Boston subway commuters may not be as ferocious as grocery store grannies, but they'll trample you for an open seat all the same. I have a grotesque scar on my left shin to prove it.

Thankfully, no blood is drawn in today's war. In a rare turn of

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events, I have my choice of three seats: one beside a man three-too-many edibles deep, passionately air drumming; another next to a woman with bubble-gum-pink hair open-mouth smiling; and one across from an adorable elderly couple bundled in matching red parkas thick enough for a perilous Arctic expedition.

I nab the seat across from the elderly couple and set my purse at my feet, eager to avoid all reality with my trusty worn paperback. This book has all my vices: a ball-busting heroine with a sharp tongue and a kind-eyed yet emotionally constipated ex-boyfriend.

A few paragraphs into a juicy yacht scene, my phone dings with a text. It's from my sister.

> CRYSTAL: Hope you had a good shift. We'll meet you at the apartment soon. Just loaded all your boxes in the car! Cheers to new beginnings. 🎉

Crystal is two years younger than me, though everyone assumes she's the older one because I've been overstaying my welcome in her one-bedroom condo for the past eight months.

"New beginnings," I mutter to no one in particular, trying to psych myself up for a morning of manual labor.

I've only recently peeled myself from rock bottom after my happily ever after plot twisted into a Nicholas Sparks tragedy. Truthfully, the prospect of more change triggers my gag reflex, but I'm trying to stay optimistic. Moving out means I'll be free to read on the couch for six straight hours without anyone throwing shade, and Crystal gets privacy with her new fiancé, Scott—who I'm swapping apartments with.

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The subway veers around a sharp curve with an earsplitting squeal, causing the entire length of my thigh to press against a complete stranger's. The luxury of public transit. When I brave a glance at my cozy neighbor, a pair of hooded, azure eyes ensnares mine from behind tortoiseshell-framed glasses. The striking sky-blue shade of his eyes offsets a full head of lusciously thick ginger hair.

As a lifelong connoisseur of romance novels, I'm keenly aware that eye contact lasting longer than three seconds is ripe with romantic potential.

"Good book?" His voice is thick, almost sleepy.

Stunned, I scrutinize his face for any sign of sarcasm. That's the thing about reading romance. Book covers depicting unfairly attractive, half-nude models embracing in a passionate lip-lock are perennial targets of mocking and snobbery. Welcome to the patriarchy.

Sweat pools into the underwire of my bra when he smiles, revealing teeth so white, they appear artificial under seizure-inducing subway lighting. His question takes me off guard, and he can tell, because he bashfully follows it up with, "I read a little romantic suspense, if you're wondering."

My toes curl inside my nursing shoes. Has fate gifted me an emotionally adept, romance-reading Prince Harry look-alike? Because I'm eternally void of all chill, I spew questions at rapid-fire speed. "You read romance? Who have you read? Which titles?"

I refrain from sudden movements as he tilts his head, dithering. "Okay, you got me. I lied. I just wanted an excuse to talk to you. I do read, though," he adds, his gaze falling to my purse at my feet.

"What's your genre of choice? And please don't say poetry," I

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beg. For the record, I hold no ill will toward poetry, but I was ghosted in college by a dude who did slam poetry and the wound still cuts deep.

"Horror. I have a sick addiction to it, actually," he admits, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

The seams of my proverbial corset threaten to burst with suppressed delight. I'm not a horror reader, but men south of sixty who regularly read fiction are an endangered species that must be protected at all costs.

"Malevolent spirits or blood and guts?"

He grimaces, struggling under the weight of his choices. "Can I say both? Is that creepy?"

"It is borderline morbid. But I'm okay with it." *More than okay with it.*

"I'm Nate." His introduction is followed by an enchanting Disney prince–like smile.

"I'm Tara." Our gazes lock again, kicking my heart into overdrive. It's hammering fast and furious. Either I'm going into cardiac arrest, or I'm having a meet-cute with the blueprint of square-jawed perfection. It's hard to say.

If I weren't wearing my most unflattering, shapeless nursing scrubs, I'd probably twirl around the subway aisle, arms outstretched, like a blissful middle-aged person in an allergy medication commercial who's finally experiencing life's joy without watery eyes and nasal congestion.

In the span of ten minutes, I've learned all there is to know about Nate. He's twenty-five (five years my junior, but I'm willing to embrace the Cougar Life), works at an investment firm, owns his very own condo, would choose mustard over ketchup if

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stranded on a remote island, and is secure enough in his manhood to admit his fondness for Taylor Swift's latest album. Creatures like him are a romance reader's wet dream. The man just oozes soul mate potential, and I'm eagerly absorbing it like a ShamWow.

In fact, peak soul mate status is reached when he waves enthusiastically at a cherub-faced toddler waddling up and down the aisle. Hello, dad material.

Cue the violins. I've just fallen in insta-love.

If this were a romance book, the clouds would part as we exit the subway at any given stop, lockstep, hand in hand. We'd spend the cool October day doing the usual things soul mates do: ignoring all responsibilities, discovering random dives around the city, drinking liquor wrapped in a brown paper bag, and revealing all our emotional baggage as the sun sets. At the end of the night, he'd fold me into a passionate embrace under the starry sky and bless me with a foot-popping kiss, preferably with a little tongue.

Turns out, this is no romance book. I don't even have the chance to name our golden retriever and four unborn children. In the nonfiction life of Tara Li Chen, the following events unfold in chronological order:

1) The subway comes to an abrupt halt. Hordes of people funnel to the exit.

2) A new group of commuters push and shove their way in. A lanky dude wearing a *May the Gains Be with You* T-shirt over a full Lycra getup beelines it for the only remaining seat, to the quiet dismay of a very pregnant woman.

3) By the time the crowd settles, Soulmate Nate is no longer next to me. In fact, he's vanished entirely.

4) And so has my purse.

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LIVE WITH TARAROMANCEQUEEN—THE DEATH OF THE MEET-CUTE

EXCERPT FROM TRANSCRIPT

[Tara appears on-screen at an upward chin angle, seemingly out of breath, hair slicked back in an unflattering founding fathers' ponytail. She power walks down a bustling city sidewalk in a seedy neighborhood.]

TARA: *Hello, romance book lovers, welcome back to my channel, where I talk all things romance. First, I'd like to apologize for my hiatus the past few days. I've been super busy with work and packing for my move, which happens to be today. Yay!*

Since I'll be spending the better part of my day schlepping boxes, this episode is going to be super brief. I want to talk about meet-cutes.

You all know I'm a sucker for a good meet-cute. I mean, they're a beloved staple in romance. The best ones involve the spilling of a scalding-hot beverage, or a near-death experience. Sometimes it even verges into meet-ugly territory, where they dawdle in mutual loathing and delightfully petty prejudice for half the book. That is . . . until they discover each other's emotional sides and fall head over heels in love.

[Tara waits impatiently at an intersection and stares into the camera of her brand-new phone, brow cocked.]

Thanks to the internet—don't even get me started on online dating—real-life meet-cutes are DEAD and I'm in mourning. In today's harsh world, any stranger, no matter how beautiful, who makes eye contact for longer than a few consecutive seconds most definitely

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has nefarious intentions and will mug you in broad daylight. I speak from experience.

Is all hope lost once you hit thirty? I'm beginning to think so. If anyone would like to prove me wrong with some adorable, real-life meet-cute stories, I'm all ears.

COMMENTS:

I met my husband online. We've been happily married for ten years. Meet-cutes are overrated. ♡

Tara, I completely agree with you. I'm waiting for my in-person meet-cute too. Preferably in between rows of dusty mahogany shelves in a public library. 😍 ♡

• • •

EVERYTHING IS FINE. *EVERYTHING IS FINE.*

I mentally repeat that phrase as I haul myself up the stairwell to my new apartment. To my new life.

It's fine that I got mugged. It's fine that I'll need to cancel all my credit cards. It's fine that I had to buy a new phone. It's fine that I'm moving into a new apartment, sight unseen. It's fine that it boasts a chronically broken elevator, even though I'm a staunch proponent of a sedentary lifestyle. IT'S ALL FINE.

When I reach the third flight, I take a momentary lean against the wobbly handrail, balancing my heart-shaped throw pillows. In between wheezes, I force my mouth into a smile, a trick I use to reset when I'm spiraling into a negativity vortex.

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There's no reason to hate on my brand-new digs. It may not be the Ritz, but from what I've seen of the run-down, orange-tiled entryway and probably haunted concrete stairwell, it's the nicest place I can afford on the direct subway line to the hospital that isn't a roach-infested basement apartment. And Scott was charitable enough to leave me his gently used bedroom furniture, free of charge.

As I press on and upward, I remind myself change is good. This move is more than just the apartment. It's a new chapter of my life. A chance to start anew, after eight months of wallowing, mourning the life I was supposed to have with my ex-fiancé, Seth.

This time last year, I was blissfully engaged, planning an elaborate Cinderella-inspired dream wedding from the comfort of our Beacon Hill condo. Then, six months before the wedding, Seth decided the season finale of *Survivor* was as good a time as any to pick a dramatic fight, concluding he "couldn't tolerate me anymore."

The tribe had spoken.

Seth Reinhart would be the tenth man to break my heart.

Starting my life over was a trip, to say the least. But after months of therapy and star-fishing on Crystal's floor, I've finally come into my own.

I've embraced a morsel of change, starting with a bold haircut (a long blunt bob). My bookstagram and BookTok accounts—niche corners of the internet where literature-obsessed folks bond over books—are thriving. I've secured my trusted inner social circle of exactly two—my sister and Mel—the respective Carrie and Samantha to my Charlotte (even though we're all probably Miranda).

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Maybe this year I'll surprise everyone and take up a new hobby, like looming, archery, or mountain biking. Seth always resented my lack of hobbies, aside from reading. Maybe I'll purchase a succulent, or seven, and name them after the von Trapp children from *The Sound of Music*.

I'm reinvigorated with endless possibilities by the time I reach unit 404. So much so, I open the unlocked apartment door with triple the force necessary, like a pro dancer taking center stage, making an impassioned entrance into my shiny new life.

The moment I enter, it's clear that this new chapter is no improvement from the last. In fact, it's worse.

Before me is a magnificently muscled, entirely naked, tattooed man bending an auburn-haired woman over the kitchen island.

Welcome home, Tara.

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chapter two

THINGS GO TITS up from there. Literally.

I let out a bloodcurdling screech from the depths of my gut, tossing my throw pillows in the air. The auburn-haired woman yelps, endeavoring to cover at least half her enviably ample bosom. The tattooed man curses and dives for cover behind the butcher block island, like a World War I soldier under siege in the muddy trenches.

But it's too late for me. I saw *it*.

The penis belonging to my new roommate, Trevor Metcalfe.

It's not like I expected to cross the threshold into a *Sex and the City*–worthy life of fabulous riches, cosmos, whirlwind romance, and girlfriends who are readily available to drop their lives at a moment's notice whenever disaster strikes. But I was not expecting *this*.

Normally, I wouldn't entertain the prospect of moving in with

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a stranger. But the rent was cheap, I have student debt, and anywhere was preferable to my parents' place, where I'd be forced to compete for attention with Hillary, Mom's ankle-biting, narcissistic Chihuahua. Besides, Trevor is Scott's best friend and coworker at the firehouse. I figured it was safe to trust my soon-to-be brother-in-law, but apparently you can't trust family.

You'll never see each other with your shift work. It'll be the same as living alone, Scott had assured me.

The illusion of living alone seemed plausible, given that my and Trevor's conflicting shift schedules prevented us from meeting prior to today. I rotate between day and night shift every two weeks, and apparently, so does he. So far, we've only exchanged a couple of texts, which consist of my request for the dimensions of my new room for my bookshelf. No small talk.

The topless woman gapes at me, justifiably peeved I interrupted her Big O. Aside from disappearing into the void, I do the next best, highly logical thing: mumble a vague yet sincere apology, cover my eyes, and sprint away in the only direction possible—down a short hallway.

"This is fine. It's all fine," I mutter, taking refuge through the first door on the right. I slam it shut, savoring the relative coolness of the door against my searing skin.

As a nurse, I see genitals aplenty, particularly during my stint in the ER before I transferred to the neonatal ward. But making eye contact with a live human (a mega-ripped human, to be precise) in the throes of passion a mere ten feet away is a first.

When slowing my breath becomes a herculean task, I try a technique my therapist taught me. *Take in your surroundings. Note everything logically, with no judgment.*

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I'm in a tiny, outdated bathroom. It's white from floor to ceiling, save for a plush navy-blue towel hanging behind the door and the matching hand towel next to the sink, both probably belonging to a man with a nice, sizable— Nope. We're not going there. Focus, Tara.

Cracked yet clean ceramic subway tiles adorn the wall in the gleaming glass shower. For a bathroom formerly shared by Scott and Trevor, two thirtysomething men, it's impossibly clean. I run my index finger along the rim of the smooth porcelain sink. It's spotless. Not a stray man hair or glob of dried toothpaste to be found.

Weak and weary, I park myself on the porcelain throne. I should probably commence a new search for another place to live, but the very prospect of probing the bowels of Craigslist prompts a heaving gag. Instead, I self–eye bleach to videos of baby farm animals until my feet lose all circulation.

I know I have to go out and face the music at some point. But like a coward, I delay the inevitable by FaceTiming Mel.

She answers immediately, preening her ultra-lush lash extensions. She's a curvy influencer, like Crystal, except instead of fitness, Mel's specialty is fashion and beauty and all things aesthetically pleasing. Today, a shimmery purple shadow sweeps across her eyelids, accentuating her dark eyes. Her contour is also on point, showcasing her bone structure. She's so stunning, it's frankly offensive.

Based on the floor-to-ceiling window behind her, she's at home in her bougie apartment in the theater district. "Where the hell are you?" she asks.

"I'm hiding in my new bathroom," I whisper.

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"Why are we whispering?" She lowers her voice conspiratorially.

"Because. I just walked in on my new roommate. Naked."

She lets out a strangled gasp and slaps a hand over her violet-painted lips. "Naked? As in, ass out?"

"Penis out," I correct. "Actually, he was more than naked. He was boning a girl in the kitchen," I explain, taking it upon myself to snoop in the shower.

The moment I open the hefty glass door, I'm hit with a zesty, far-too-sexy spiciness that's surely a biohazard. I sniff the body wash to confirm the origins of the scent, and it immediately clears my airways. *Cinnamon and cedarwood*, according to the bottle. Next to the body wash is a basic two-in-one shampoo-and-conditioner combo.

Poking around a virtual stranger's shower feels illicit, but technically this is *my* shower now. I've already seen this man's nether regions, so does it really matter if I know his preferred brand of toothpaste (Colgate—Max White Expert Complete)?

"Jesus, take me." Mel clasps a hand over her chest and pretends to faint on her chaise. She quickly rights herself, fully alert and ready to sip the proverbial tea, which she likes piping hot. "Okay, tell me everything. On a scale of Danny DeVito to Henry Cavill, how attractive is he? Spare no detail."

"I wasn't looking at his face." His face was but a blur on account of his naked body, which definitely leans in favor of the Cavill side of Mel's scale. The memory will live on forever, seared onto my retinas.

"I take it you're gonna hide in there until the end of time?"

"Yes. I think I'll just rot in here." I examine the glittery soap

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dispenser next to the sink, which doesn't belong among the rest of the practical, low-maintenance products. It's labeled *Toasted Vanilla Chai*. This is a woman's touch if I ever saw one. Maybe it belongs to the big-breasted, auburn-haired woman.

As Mel tells me about a time she accidently walked in on her brother doing the dirty, I swiftly move on to the medicine cabinet. Before opening it, I catch my hopeful reflection in the mirror and cringe. What was previously a perky ponytail this morning has sagged. I try tightening it to add volume, inadvertently making it worse. There's zero volume to be had here. Each strand is dead slick to my scalp and severely pulled back, accentuating my shiny forehead. I really need to blot.

Giving up on myself entirely, I explore the cabinet. Inside is an opened packet of assorted color toothbrushes, a shaving set, a single razor, a bottle of shaving cream, Listerine mouthwash (Cool Mint) and a jumbo bottle of Tylenol.

As I pluck the bottle from the shelf to examine the expiration date (expired in July 2021), a floorboard creaks in the hallway, right outside the door. Panicked, I fling the Tylenol back where I found it and side-shuffle away from the sink. A few beats of silence tick by before there's a knock.

"Tara?" Trevor's voice is gravelly and baritone. Very audiobook worthy.

"Mel, I gotta go," I whisper, frantically ending the call before she can respond.

"You okay in there?" he asks.

"Totally fine. More than fine. Why wouldn't I be?" Yikes. I sound like Minnie Mouse on uppers. I make a point to lower my voice. "Was she your girlfriend?"

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There's a beat of silence. "No. She's not my girlfriend. She just left, by the way."

"Oh," I say, mildly disappointed. It would have been nice to have another woman around, like an unofficial roommate of sorts, especially since the majority of Crystal's and Mel's time is devoted to their respective long-term, committed relationships and full-time thriving social media careers—both of which I lack. While I love being a book influencer on Instagram and TikTok, it's a hobby, not a career.

There's another extended silence before Trevor says, "Listen, I'm sorry we had to meet like that. I didn't think you were moving in until later today. I feel like an asshole."

I sink to the floor behind the door, noodle legs pulled to my chest. "It's fine. I mean, it's your apartment, technically."

"It's half yours now."

"Do you regularly have sex in communal living areas?"

"Well, not anymore." Based on his half chuckle, I picture a charming, tilted grin that could melt the panties off any given straight woman. "I swear I'll disinfect the whole kitchen. Thoroughly."

"Much appreciated," I say genuinely. It's nice knowing the surface I eat my Pop-Tarts over will be void of bodily fluids.

A few beats go by. "So, uh, are you ever gonna come out of the bathroom?"

"That depends. Are you still naked?"

"I'm fully decent, I swear."

I press my cheek closer to the door, craving the vibrations of his voice. "I might stay in here a little longer. It's comfortable." This tiny space is actually kind of soothing, reminiscent of a Scandinavian spa.

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His footsteps disappear down the hall, only to return a few seconds later. "I have Cheetos. And don't worry, I washed my hands."

My mouth waters instantly at the tried-and-true sound of a crunching bag. Be still my heart. I reach to turn the knob, opening the door wide enough to make a grabby-hands motion through the crack. He's still not visible, with the exception of his hand as he passes the bag like a dicey drug deal. There's a light dusting of ashy-brown hair on his wrist and knuckles. His palm is massive, almost twice the size of mine. I catch the tail end of a detailed, dark-gray tattoo in the area below his thumb, but before I can make out the design, his hand disappears behind the door.

Starved, I descend on the bag, ripping it open like an ape. In the span of under three minutes, I've demolished at least a quarter. Ashamed of my blatant gluttony, I slide it back through the crack. "Sorry, I've had a traumatic day."

The bag crunches. "Shit. Because of me?"

"No. My day was already a wash before you."

"Why?" he asks, passing the bag back.

"Today was supposed to mark a brand-new start. A turning point in my life. But I got mugged on the subway," I admit through a crunch, "by a guy with some serious soul mate potential. The meet-cute was going so well until he stole my purse."

"Wait, you got mugged? And what's a meet-cute?" He repeats *meet-cute* slowly, like it's a foreign concept. I watch his large hand reach through the crack for the Cheetos. There's a Roman numeral tattoo on his wrist, partially obscured by his sleeve. I take a mental photo so I can decipher it later.

"A meet-cute is when two love interests meet for the first time,"

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I rattle off impatiently. "But yes. I got mugged. I was reading on the subway when this guy next to me started chatting me up. You should have seen this guy, Metcalfe. He was a snack. Definitely didn't look like a mugger. Not that muggers have a particular look, but you know what I mean . . ."

We pass the bag back and forth as I rehash the story of Nate, from that initial moment of eye contact to when he jacked my purse (and all my hopes and dreams).

"Well, that's shit luck either way," he says, sympathetic to my plight.

"Right? I'm starting to lose hope. Every time I meet a potential man, something goes horribly wrong. The last guy I met through a friend seemed normal, until he requested photos of my feet."

"Foot fetish?"

"Apparently. I don't want to fetish-shame, but I think I'm cursed. Today it's a mugging. Tomorrow, probably a kidnapping. Some guy will lure me to his car with candy. I'll go because I like free food. And he'll toss me in the trunk and set my body on fire." I grimace at the missed opportunity of flaunting my latest favorite number, a high-neck pink dress, in an open-casket funeral. I've already advised Crystal of my wish to be buried in it, and she's assured me she'll make it happen.

"Okay, that got dark real fast. This is why you should never trust strangers with candy," Trevor warns.

"Technically you're a stranger, with Cheetos," I remind him, fishing a rogue Cheeto from the floor. I toss it in the trash can next to the sink.

"You're a stranger too. In my bathroom. Who knows what you've done to my toothbrush."

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I have the sudden urge to change our stranger status. The hinges squeak as I pull the door open, poking my head out like a meerkat emerging from the protection of its sandy burrow.

Trevor is, indeed, fully clothed, back resting against the wall, long legs extended in front of him.

The top of his effortlessly tousled mop of dark hair juxtaposes with the short, neatly trimmed sides. Even through his Boston Fire Department hoodie, his biceps are mature, unyielding tree trunks. In comparison, mine are flimsier than a rice noodle.

His Adam's apple bobs as he takes in my disheveled ponytail riddled with dry shampoo, scanning downward over my oversize maroon sweatshirt, which reads *Nonfictional feelings for fictional men* in Times New Roman font.

Now that he isn't nude and his tattoos are adequately covered, I'm able to assess his eyes. They're the color of honey, like an inferno of crackling firewood resisting merciless golden flames. They probably take on a mossy hue when the light hits them just right. Under the protective swoop of dense lashes, they're foreboding, guarded. And when his gaze meets mine, my stomach betrays me with an uncalled-for barrel roll.

In an effort to maintain an iota of normalcy, I squint to blur his face out of focus, distracting myself with a humungous Cheeto. "Should I trust you, deliriously handsome stranger?"

His mouth shapes into a crooked smile as he stands, towering over me on the bathroom floor. "Nah. Probably not."

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chapter three

One month later

ACCORDING TO GRANDMA Flo, the first moment you open your eyes sets the tone for the rest of the day. I liken it to an ill-advised opening scene of a novel, or a rom-com where the main character wakes up in full makeup; unstained, crisp pajamas; and perfectly intact barrel locks.

Though in reality, I routinely wake up looking like a cadaver from a grisly crime scene. Sickly, pale, and disheveled.

A blue, pre-sunrise glow peeks through the blinds, which tells me it's one hour too early for consciousness and definitely far too late for the rhythmic squeak of the mattress and the steady drum of the headboard slamming against the wall across the hall.

It's been one month since I moved in, and this is the third woman Trevor has brought home (not including the redhead from

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move-in day). One look at Trevor and it's easy to understand his success with the ladies. Not only is he a heroic firefighter, but I've deduced he resembles a mildly less tortured, darker-haired version of the lead *Sons of Anarchy* outlaw biker, ready to whisk you away for a life of crime on his Harley-Davidson. In reality, Trevor doesn't actually own a motorcycle. He owns a plum-colored used Toyota Corolla with like-new, spotless interior. But he does have the foreboding, tattooed-badass look going for him.

I certainly don't resent Trevor for having a healthy sex life. In fact, after over a year of celibacy, I'm seething with jealousy. But cobwebs on my downstairs aside, sleep is a precious commodity as a shift worker. After back-to-back night shifts, I was looking forward to sleeping in today before transitioning to day shifts.

I fold my pillow over my head in a sad attempt to muffle the cries of pleasure. But somehow, they just grow louder. There's only so much *Yes*, *Oh God*, and *Fuck* I can withstand before morbid curiosity sets in.

Is Trevor Metcalfe really that good in bed? Or is this woman faking it for the sake of his fragile male ego?

Must be faking it, I decide.

Without notice, my traitorous imagination gifts me a visual to accompany the audio. Trevor's tattooed, sinewy forearms cage me in as his lustful gaze sweeps over the contours of my body. His thumb makes languished strokes on the underside of my wrist as he pins my hands above my head. The weight of his solid, muscled body puts pressure exactly where I want it. He presses the softest bite into my neck, sending a trill of electricity to the forgotten corners of my body before he—

I snap my eyes open, loosening my death grip around my blan-

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ket I didn't know I was clutching. Where the hell did that come from? Am I that hard done by?

I refuse to be remotely turned on by the sounds of my roommate and a random woman going at it. Not today, Satan.

Despite being objectively hot, tattooed bad boys like Trevor are not normally my type. It's the white-collar sort with front-pleated chinos, cross-country runner bods, and boy-next-door-turned-respectable-plant-daddy energy that usually make me feel some type of way. And while Trevor is an exception to this, I have no intention of crossing that line with him. After the year I've had, platonic, drama-free cohabitation is just what I need. Besides, given the gorgeous women he brings home, he's certainly categorized me as nothing more than an obnoxious, sexless human.

Bleary-eyed and frustrated with the uninvited tension between my thighs, I throw on my favorite cable-knit sweaterdress from the floor and snap a cute bow over yesterday's French braid. I even apply an extra layer of mascara, full foundation, and bronzer in preparation for my Live video session this morning with Grandma Flo.

By the time I drift into the kitchen for my morning Pop-Tart, the screaming coming from Trevor's bedroom has thankfully dissipated, replaced by a relative calm. As I toss the singed pastry onto my plate, I catch Trevor's hookup tiptoeing toward the front door. Aside from the wildly matted hair and general fatigue from physical exertion, her professional-grade winged eyeliner is smudge-free. The beam of light from the tiny kitchen window above the sink gives her tanned skin a luminous, postorgasmic glow.

When our eyes meet, she stops in her tracks. "Morning," she whispers, promptly averting her gaze to her bare feet, as if bracing for judgment.

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Because I'm an emotional beacon with far too many feelings, I won't touch a man's penis if I don't know his middle name. But I don't judge others for partaking in casual sex. In fact, I envy their ability to take what they need while avoiding emotional damage.

"Hi. I'm Trevor's roommate." I'm about to wish her well and continue on about my day, but for reasons beyond me, I thrust my plate in her direction. "Want a Pop-Tart? It's raspberry."

She eyes it like it's a rare delicacy. "You are doing the lord's work. I'm starving." She plucks the Pop-Tart from the plate, basking in the underrated glory of that first sugary bite.

The familiar creak of the pipes and sputtering water down the hall tells me Trevor's taking a shower, so I don't bother using a hushed voice. "Not surprised, from what I heard. You need to replenish your calories."

She half chokes on her bite. "Sorry." She pauses. "I'm Gabby, by the way."

I don't bother to hide my eager smile. "Tara."

Two Pop-Tarts later, Gabby and I are besties. Turns out, she's a badass. At the ripe age of twenty-four, she already runs an Etsy business selling handmade jewelry (I've ordered a dainty gold necklace). She's also a member at the same fancy gym as Crystal. And despite my initial protest against physical activity, she's convinced me to join her for an aerial yoga class later this week.

The moment Gabby leaves to catch her Uber, Trevor sneaks down the hallway, freshly showered. His ashy hair is damp, unsure which way it wants to fall. A pair of gray sweatpants hangs low on his hips, and of course he's shirtless.

When he spots me parked on the stool at the island, I zero in on the intricate bird wing sweeping from his robust right shoulder

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and over part of his sculpted chest. He has a smattering of other tattoos on his arms and back, as well as another set of Roman numerals on his left rib. And while he makes a regular habit of waltzing around shirtless, identifying the particulars of each design is like solving a jigsaw puzzle, slowly but surely, piece by piece.

Today, I follow the sweeping wing leading to the bird's expressive eyes. Even colorless, there's a ferocity that screams to be noticed.

"Is she gone?" he whispers before so much as setting a toe into the open-concept kitchen and living area.

"No. I asked her to be our third roommate." My tone is far too sarcastic for early morning, but I don't know how else to act after hearing *that* (and accidently visualizing it). As he enters the kitchen, my chest erupts in ugly red blotches, heat dotting the crests of my cheeks. I think I need to lie down. "Didn't we talk about nudity in common areas?"

"I'll throw on a shirt if you clean up your books." He waves a vague hand toward the stack of paperbacks in the corner under the living room window. I used them for a book-stack-challenge photo shoot two days ago and have yet to move them back to my room, despite his numerous requests. In the meantime, he's piled them alphabetically.

Trevor has a phobia of clutter, which I'm discreetly desensitizing him to by adding a few personal touches one by one, so as not to spook him. My first add was my heart-shaped throw pillows, then the succulents, and, most recently, an admittedly revolting starry-sky canvas painted by yours truly at a wine-and-paint night. Trevor says it hurts his eyes.

"I told you the other day, I have no more room on my book-

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shelf. And you should be thanking me for adding character to the place. Your apartment was a cliché barren wasteland of nothingness before I moved in," I rightly point out.

If I had to describe my new apartment in one word, it would be *minimalist*, and even that's being too kind. Before I moved in, every wall and surface was bare, void of any clutter, color, or décor. To be fair, it wasn't always this way. Apparently, Scott took lots of stuff with him when he moved in with Crystal, leaving only a limited amount of basic furniture in the form of exactly one worn leather couch and matching armchair, a flat-screen television, and a small maple dining table tucked in the corner of the equally bland off-white kitchen.

I continue on. "And if you're going to keep having loud sex while I'm across the hall, the least you could do is let me decorate." My expression is pointed. The man disturbed my much-needed tranquility, after all.

He smirks as he opens the fridge. "Hey, I can't control other people's volumes."

"Sounded like Gabby had a good time, at least."

He tosses a ziplock bag of frozen kale on the counter, narrowing a suspicious gaze at the crumb-filled plates on the island. "Did you give her a Pop-Tart?"

I lift a shoulder, watching as he dumps a handful of kale into the blender. "She was hungry, and you didn't feed her."

His eyes bulge, like I've just suggested he take her hand in marriage, which I'm half-tempted to do. "Why would I feed her afterward?"

I make a sour face, pinning my stare at the swirly design on my plate and definitely not the swirly design on his immaculate bod.

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"To thank her for the sex? You could have at least walked her out. She's so cool. Did you know she has a scuba diving certification?"

There's a break in the conversation as he blends his smoothie to a puree. "That's not how a one-night stand works."

"Do you mind if I invite her over this weekend? We're best friends now," I gloat, mesmerized as he pours his healthy concoction into a tall glass. "I think you'd like her, if you got to know her. She's wifey material." I give him what I already know is a nauseating wink, mostly to get a reaction out of him.

He maintains his death glare as he tips his head back, guzzling. "I'm not looking for *wifey* material, Chen." He sets the empty glass on the counter and marches down the hall, but not before casting one last glower at the Pop-Tart crumbs on the plates.

I follow him to his room, leaning on the doorframe like a swoony romance hero. A glimpse into Trevor's room is a rare opportunity, given that he usually keeps his door closed. The moment my big toe crosses the threshold, I'm giddy, tempted to snort that spicy signature scent like Leo, *Wolf of Wall Street*–style.

With an effortless tug, he pulls the fitted steel-gray sheet from his mattress, tossing it into the laundry basket nestled in his intensely organized, color-coded closet.

Meanwhile, I've declared a state of emergency in my room. Books are strewn haphazardly on my nightstand and every available surface. At least seven throw pillows have taken up permanent real estate on the floor. Trevor must think I'm a disaster.

I fold my arms over my chest, unable to take him seriously. "Can I ask you a question?"

"No," he grumbles, his eyes fixed on his phone. I catch a brief

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half smile as he scans a text and quickly fires off a response. I idly wonder if he's texting Gabby, or someone new already.

"Please."

He rolls his eyes. "Fine. But don't ask me if you can ask questions."

"I feel like I have to ask, because you don't seem to like questions."

"Sorry. I'm not a morning person." He definitely is not. Over the past month, I've discovered he's practically mute until midday. If I strike up a conversation before nine in the morning, it usually doesn't go much further than a few garbled mumbles. He gestures toward me, sighing, like he's given up. "What's your question?"

"What's it like to be the *dumper*?" I ask point-blank.

"What's a *dumper*?"

"In every relationship, there's the dumper and the dumpee—the one who gets their heart broken. Take me, for example. I'm always the dumpee. Never the dumper," I explain, omitting the detail that I've had the unfortunate pleasure of being dumped ten separate times, by ten separate men. "But I assume you're most often the *dumper*."

He grunts, fussing over his pillow. "You can only be a dumper if there's a relationship to dump. I don't do relationships."

"Let me guess: you don't believe in happily ever afters because of your mysterious, turbulent past?"

Based on my extensive knowledge of rakes and playboys in romance novels, I'd say it's a fair deduction. Though truthfully, even after rooming together for a month, I don't know much about him, aside from the fact that he's a firefighter, he drinks green smoothies, he has a lot of sex, and he's averse to clutter and mess.

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His jaw flexes as he chucks the pillow onto the bed. It lands crooked, and he doesn't even bother to fix it. I've definitely hit a nerve.

I bite my lip, suppressing my morbid curiosity. "Sorry. That was too far. Crystal says I have an annoying tendency to box people into romance tropes and stereotypes."

He sits on the edge of the bed and watches me curiously. "And which romance stereotype are you?"

I stroke my chin, pretending to contemplate, even though I already know the answer. "I'm too broke to be a divorcée starting over with an inherited fixer-upper in the European countryside. I'm probably the clumsy sidekick who cracks blunt jokes at all the wrong times. The disheveled one who provides emotional support to the more desirable and levelheaded heroine." When I say it out loud to Trevor, my life does fit perfectly into a rom-com trope (hold the rom).

He slow-blinks. "You really think *you're* a sidekick?"

I drop my shoulders, resigned to my fate. "We can't all be main characters, Metcalfe. Some of us are nameless background people who are just . . . there."

"I'll take your word for it."

"I would like to get out of sidekick territory, though. Try something new. Actually, I just made a Tinder. Wanna judge my profile?" I toss my phone toward him. It lands with a soft *thud* on the mattress.

Since my meet-cute-turned-mugging on move-in day, my DMs have been flooded with people serving up the cold, hard truth: online dating is my only option. In a moment of weakness, I caved and downloaded all the apps.

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