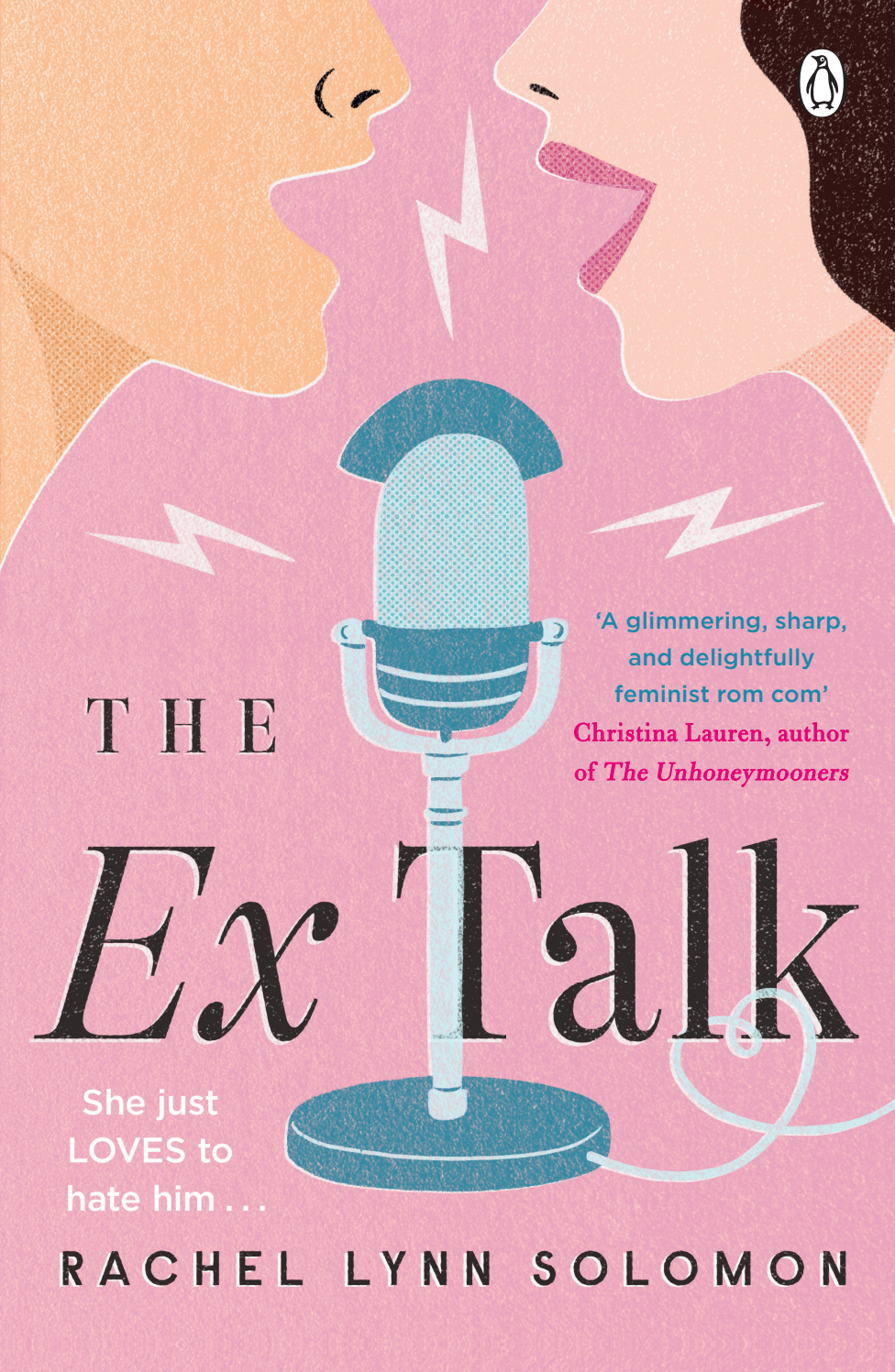

'A glimmering, sharp, and delightfully feminist rom com'
Christina Lauren, author of The Unhoneymooners
THE
Ex Talk
She just LOVES to hate him . . .
RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

THE *Ex* Talk

Rachel Lynn Solomon is the bestselling author of love stories for teens and adults, including *The Ex Talk*, *Today Tonight Tomorrow*, and *Weather Girl*. Originally from Seattle, she's currently navigating expat life with her husband in Amsterdam, where she's on a mission to try as many Dutch sweets as possible.

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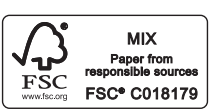
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For Ivan

Thank you for going on this journey with me, for the unwavering support, and for loving stories as much as I do. You always feel like home.

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I don't go looking for stories with the idea of wrongness in my head, no. But the fact is, a lot of great stories hinge on people being wrong. —IRA GLASS

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1



Dominic Yun is in my sound booth.

He knows it's my sound booth. He's been here four months, and there's no way he doesn't know it's my sound booth. It's on the station's shared calendar, the one connected to our email, in a blue bubble that reads BOOTH C: GOLDSTEIN, SHAY. REPEATS MONDAY–FRIDAY, 11 TO NOON. ENDS: NEVER.

I'd knock on the door, but—well, a sound booth's defining feature is that it's soundproof. And while I'm certain a list of my faults could fill a half hour of commercial-free radio, I'm not quite so awful that I'd storm inside and risk screwing up whatever Dominic is recording. He may be Pacific Public Radio's least qualified reporter, but I have too much respect for the art of audio mixing to do that. What happens inside that booth should be sacred.

Instead, I lean against the wall across from Booth C, quietly simmering, while the red **RECORDING** sign above the booth flashes on and off.

"Use another booth, Shay!" calls my show's host, Paloma Powers, on her way to lunch. (Veggie yakisoba from the hole-in-the-

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wall across the street, every Tuesday and Thursday for the past seven years. Ends: never.)

I could. But being passive-aggressive is much more fun.

Public radio is not solely filled with the kind of honey-voiced intellectuals who ask for money during pledge drives. For every job in this field, there are probably a hundred desperate journalism grads who "just *love This American Life*," and sometimes you have to be vicious if you want to survive.

I might be more stubborn than vicious. That stubbornness got me an internship here ten years ago, and now, at twenty-nine, I'm the station's youngest-ever senior producer. It's what I've wanted since I was a kid, even if, back then, I dreamed of being in front of a microphone instead of behind a computer.

It's eleven twenty when the sound booth door finally opens, after I've assured my assistant producer Ruthie Liao that the promos will be in before noon, and after environmental reporter Marlene Harrison-Yates takes one look at me and bursts out laughing before disappearing into the vastly inferior Booth B.

I see his shoe first, a shiny black oxford. The rest of his six-foot-something body follows, charcoal slacks and a maroon dress shirt with the top button undone. Framed in the doorway of Booth C and frowning down at his script, he could be a stock photo for business casual.

"Did you say all the right words in the right order?" I ask.

"I think so," Dominic says to the script instead of to me, completely serious. "Can I help you with anything?"

I fill my voice with as much sweetness as I can. "Just waiting for my booth."

Since he's blocking my path, I continue to scrutinize him. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows, and his black hair is slightly mussed. Maybe he dragged his hands through it, frustrated when his story

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didn't turn out precisely the way he wanted. It would be a refreshing contrast to his recent stories dominating our website, the ones that get clicks because of splashy headlines but lack any emotional depth. During those fateful twenty minutes he spent in Booth C, maybe he grew so fed up with public radio that he's on his way to tell Kent he's so sorry, but he wasn't cut out for this job.

He's barely been here long enough to understand the nuances between Booths A, B, and my beloved C: that the headphones in Booth C are perfectly broken in, that the weight of the faders on the board makes them easier to manipulate. He doesn't know the significance of Booth C, either—that it's where I mixed tracks for the first show I produced entirely solo, the one about being fatherless on Father's Day that tied up our phone lines for hours. Listening to those stories had made me feel, for the first time in years, a little less alone, had reminded me why I'd gone into radio in the first place.

I'd say it's not just about Booth C, but it's also possible that I've formed an unhealthy attachment to these twenty-four square feet of wires and knobs.

"It's all yours," he says, but he doesn't move, nor does he glance up from his script.

"It's supposed to be. Every weekday from eleven to noon. If your calendar isn't working, you should probably tell IT."

Finally, he wrenches his gaze from the script down to me. Way down. He settles into a lean against the doorframe, a slight hunch to his shoulders. He's always doing this, and I imagine it's because regular-size buildings are too small to confine him. I'm five two and never more aware of my height than when I'm standing next to him.

When our receptionist Emma took his photo for the website, she blushed the whole time, probably because he's the only guy

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here under thirty who isn't an intern. In the picture, he's serious except for one corner of his mouth, the tiniest parenthesis tugging his lips to one side. I stared at that corner for a long time when the photo was posted, wondering why Kent hired someone who'd never set foot inside a radio station. Kent swooned over Dominic's master's in journalism from Northwestern, consistently ranked the best program in the country, and the way he swept the collegiate journalism awards circuit.

Dominic gives me a tighter, more restrained version of that staff photo smile. "It was eleven oh five, and no one was in it. And I might have a big story to break later. Waiting on confirmation from one more source."

"Cool. I have to mix Paloma's intros, so—" I make a move to enter the booth, but he doesn't budge, his impossibly tall frame blocking me. I am a cub trying to get the attention of a grizzly.

That parenthesis pulls at his mouth a little more. "You're not going to ask what my story is?"

"I'm sure I'll read all about it in the *Seattle Times* tomorrow."

"Aw, where's your team spirit? Public radio *can* break news," he insists. We've had this argument a dozen times, dating back to his first week at the station, when he asked why none of our reporters regularly attended city council meetings. "Wouldn't it be great to get ahead of a story for once, instead of playing catch-up?"

Dominic can't seem to grasp that breaking news isn't our forte. When I told him during training that sometimes our reporters simply rewrite news briefs from the *Times*, he looked at me like I'd said we wouldn't be giving out tote bags during our next pledge drive. Our reporters do great work—important work—but I've always believed public radio is best when it focuses on longer features, deep dives, human-interest pieces. That's what my show, *Puget Sounds*, does, and we're good at it. Paloma came up with the

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name, a play on Puget Sound, the body of water along Washington's northwestern coast.

"People don't turn to us for breaking news," I say, trying to keep my voice down. "We've done studies. And it doesn't matter where local breaking news comes from. Tomorrow it'll be on every station, blog, and Twitter account with twenty-seven followers, and no one will care where they saw it first."

He crosses his arms over his chest, which draws more attention to his bare forearms and the pattern of dark hair that disappears into his sleeves. I've always been a forearm girl—a man rolling his shirt to the elbows is basically foreplay for me—and it's a crime that such nice ones are wasted on him.

"Right, right," he says. "I have to remember that real radio focuses on—what's your segment today?"

"Ask a Trainer," I say with a thrust of my chin that I hope projects confidence. I refuse to be embarrassed by it. It's one of our most popular segments, a live call-in show where renowned animal behaviorist Mary Beth Barkley—98 percent chance that's not her real name—answers listener questions. She always brings her corgi, and it's a fact that dogs make everything better.

"You're providing a real public service, analyzing cat vomit on air." He pushes away from the booth, and the door closes behind him with a thud. "I must have been sick that day in grad school. Not a lot of other people can capture that nuance the way your show can."

Before I can answer, Kent strides down the hall in his trademark suspenders and novelty tie. Today it's tiny slices of pepperoni pizza. Kent O'Grady: the station's program director, and owner of a radio voice that made him a Seattle legend decades ago.

He claps a hand on Dominic's shoulder, but since Kent's only a few inches taller than I am, it lands on his bicep. "Just the people I

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was looking for. Dom, how's that story coming along? Do we have a scandal on our hands?"

Dom. In ten years, I've never seen Kent bust out a nickname so quickly.

"Scandal?" I ask, interest piqued.

"We just might," Dominic says. "I'm waiting on one more call to confirm."

"Excellent." Kent runs a hand through his graying beard. "Shay, does Paloma have time at the top of the show for a live interview with Dom?"

"Live?" Dominic says. "As in . . . not prerecorded?"

"Of course," Kent says. "We want to be the first to break this story."

"Gotta get on that breaking news," I say as Dominic pales. While I don't love the idea of ceding time to Dominic, if he's uncomfortable, I am definitely on board. "I guess we can give you a few minutes of Ask a Trainer."

Kent snaps his fingers. "Remind me to catch Mary Beth before she leaves. The only way Meatball eats her food these days is if she transfers every single nugget from the dish to the floor."

"Only a few minutes, right?" Dominic's voice wobbles.

"Five, tops. You'll be great." Kent flashes us a grin and turns back to his office.

"Please don't mess up my show," I say to Dominic before I slip into Booth C.

Dominic Yun is in my studio.

Technically, it's three adjoining studios: the one I'm in with the announcer and mixing console—aka "the board"—the small call-in studio, and Studio A, where Paloma's sitting right now with her show notes, a bottle of kombucha, and an empty glass of water.

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Dominic is next to her, wringing his hands after spilling said water on Paloma's notes. Ruthie had to race to print off another copy.

"Mary Beth's here," Ruthie says, coming into the studio behind me after mopping up Dominic's mess. "And yes, she has water, and her dog has water."

"Perfect. Thank you." I put on my headset and scan the show's rundown, my heart thumping its familiar preshow rhythm.

Puget Sounds is an hour-long burst of adrenaline every weekday from two to three p.m. As the senior producer, I direct the live show: cueing Paloma, calling guests and patching them through, tracking the time spent on each segment, and putting out any number of fires. Ruthie brings in the guests, and our intern, Griffin, works the call-in line in an adjoining booth.

Sometimes I can't believe I get to do this five times a week. Thousands of people across the city are turning their dials and apps and web browsers to 88.3 FM, and some of them will be so inspired, amused, or even furious that they'll call us to share a story or ask a question. That interactive element—hearing Paloma through your speakers one minute and chatting with her live the next—is why radio is the best form of journalism. It makes the world a little bit smaller. You can be listening to a show with hundreds of thousands of fans across the country, but it still feels like the host is talking directly to *you*. Almost, in some cases, like the two of you are friends.

I bounce my tan ankle boots up and down on the lowest rung of my usual stool. Next to me, Ruthie adjusts her headphones over her platinum blond pixie cut before placing a hand on my leg to stop my fidgeting.

"It's going to be fine," she says, nodding toward Dominic through the glass separating us. We try to keep our feud secret, but Ruthie, with all her brink-of-Gen-Z intuitiveness, picked up on it within weeks of his start date. "We've dealt with worse."

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"True. You're my eternal hero after rebooking all four guests on our irrational fears show last minute."

I adore Ruthie, who came to us via commercial radio, which is faster paced despite the near constant ad breaks. Every so often, I catch her humming the 1-877-KARS-4-KIDS jingle under her breath. She says she's haunted by it.

In the center of the studio, Jason Burns rises from his announcer chair, an ergonomic contraption he specially ordered from Sweden. The board stretches in front of him.

"Quiet in the studio, please," he says in that warm maple syrup voice of his, hands lingering over a couple of faders. Jason's a sweet thirtyish guy I've only ever seen in plaid flannel and jeans, the uniform of both lumberjacks and Seattle natives.

The **ON AIR** sign next to the clock lights up.

"You're listening to 88.3 FM Pacific Public Radio," Jason says. "Coming up, a breaking local story on *Puget Sounds*. Plus, Paloma Powers asks a trainer your burning animal behavior questions. But first, here's your national news from NPR."

The **ON AIR** sign goes off. And then: *From NPR News in Washington, DC, I'm Shanti Gupta . . .*

There are few sounds more calming than the voice of an NPR news anchor, but Shanti Gupta doesn't soothe me the way she usually does. I'm too focused on the utter wrongness that is Dominic next to Paloma.

I hit the button on my line that connects me to Dominic. "Don't sit so close to the mic," I say, and he must be so startled by my voice in his ears that his eyebrows jump to his hairline. "Or all we'll hear is your heavy breathing."

His mouth moves, but I don't hear anything.

"You have to press the—"

"You really don't want me to be good at this, do you?"

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The question lingers in my ears. If Paloma's paying attention, she doesn't show it, instead making notes in the margins of her rundown. My sweater suddenly feels too warm.

Ten years ago, I was the wunderkind, the intern who crafted perfect rundowns and researched riveting show topics and proved to Paloma and to her former producer, a guy who retired before I took his job, that I was something special. "This good, and she's only nineteen!" Kent would bellow. "She's going to run this place someday."

I didn't want to run the place. I only wanted to tell good stories.

And here's Dominic: our newest employee, fresh off a master's program, already on the air.

"Live in ten," Jason says before I can answer Dominic, and I push away my jealousy so I can focus on what's always been the best part of my job.

I slide off my stool and make eye contact with Paloma, holding my arm straight up at an imaginary twelve o'clock. "Five, four, three, two—" Then I lower my arm, aiming a finger at her, and she's *on*.

"I'm Paloma Powers, and you're listening to *Puget Sounds*," she says in her practiced way. Her voice is dark chocolate, low and mature with a hint of femininity. There's so much power in a voice like that, in the ability to make people not just listen but *care*.

A music bed plays underneath her, a bright piano melody that Jason will fade out as soon as she finishes her intro.

"Today we have renowned animal behavior expert Mary Beth Barkley in the studio for all your pet-related questions. Maybe you're wondering how to introduce a new kitten to your home, or whether you really can teach an old dog new tricks. We want to hear from you, so call 206-555-8803, and we'll try to get that question answered. But first, some breaking news from reporter Dom-

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inic Yun, who joins us live in-studio. Dominic, welcome to *Puget Sounds*."

Dominic says nothing. He's not even looking at her, just staring down at his notes as though still waiting for a cue.

Dead air is not good. We can usually survive a few seconds of it without listener complaint, but any more than that, and we have a serious problem.

"Fuck," Ruthie says.

"*Say something*," I mutter into his ear. I wave my arms, but he's completely frozen.

Well, if he destroys my show, at least he'll go down with it.

"Dominic," Paloma prompts, still perfectly cheery. "We're so happy to have you with us!"

Then something kicks in, as though the adrenaline has finally reached his bloodstream. Dominic blinks to life and leans into the mic.

"Thank you, Paloma," he says, rocky at first, but then evening out. "I'm thrilled to be here. Yours was actually the first show I listened to before I moved to Seattle for this job."

"Wonderful," Paloma says. "What do you have for us?"

He straightens. "It started with an anonymous tip. And I know what you're thinking. Sometimes an anonymous tip can be complete hearsay, but if you ask the right questions, you can find the real story. This one, I had a feeling—call it a reporter's intuition—that it was right on. I investigated something similar about a faculty member when I was at Northwestern." A dramatic pause, and then: "What I found out is that Mayor Scott Healey has a second family. And while his private life is his business, he used campaign funds to keep it quiet."

"Shiiiiiit," Jason says, spinning in his chair to face Ruthie and me. Behind the scenes, we're not exactly FCC compliant.

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"I knew there was a reason I didn't vote for him," Ruthie says. "I didn't like his face."

"That—that is a big one, Dominic," Paloma says, clearly shocked, but recovering quickly. "We've had Mayor Healey on the show several times. Can you tell us how you figured this out?"

"It started at a council meeting last month . . ." He launches into the story—how he found the financial records and tracked where the money was going, how he eventually convinced the mayor's secret daughter to talk to him.

Two minutes go by. Three. As we approach five minutes, I try to signal Paloma to switch segments, but she's too focused on Dominic. I start to wonder if it's possible to sever a mic cord with my fingernails.

"I can't keep up with the phone lines," Griffin's voice says in my ear.

I press the button to talk directly to him. "Take down their questions and tell them Mary Beth will get to the ones she can."

"No—they're about the mayor. They want to talk to Dominic."

Oh. Okay. Gritting my teeth, I hop on our show chat.

Calls coming in, is D open to ?'s?

"It looks like we're getting a lot of questions," Paloma says after peeking at the screen. "Would you be open to taking some calls from listeners?"

"Sure, Paloma," Dominic says, with the ease of a seasoned reporter and not someone who played with a digital recorder a few times in college and decided why not go into radio.

When his eyes lock with mine through the glass barrier, all my loathing for him burns hot in my chest, turning my heart wild. The cut of his jaw makes him look more resolute than I've ever

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seen him, like he knows how badly I used to want this. His mouth tilts upward in a triumphant half smile. Delivering live commentary: another thing Dominic Yun is instantly perfect at.

Kent bursts through the door. "Shay, we're gonna have to reschedule Mary Beth. This is good motherfucking radio."

"Ruthie," I say, but she's already halfway out the door.

"Great work, everyone," Kent says, slapping Jason on the shoulder. "I'm glad we were able to get to this today."

I jostle my glasses as I rub at the space between my eyes where a headache is brewing. "This isn't right," I say after Kent leaves.

"It's good motherfucking radio," Jason says in a singsong, imitating Kent.

"It feels invasive."

"The public doesn't have a right to know that the mayor's a shady piece of shit?"

"They do, but not on our show."

Jason follows my gaze, glancing between Dominic and me. Jason and I were hired within a couple weeks of each other, and he knows me too well not to realize why I'm upset. "You hate that Dominic is so good at this," he says. "You hate that he's a natural, that he's live on the air a few months after he started working here."

"I'm—" I start, but stumble over my words. It makes me sound so shitty when he puts it that way. "It doesn't matter how I feel about it. I have no desire to be on air." Not anymore, at least. No point in wanting something I know will never happen.

Ruthie comes back in, cheeks flushed.

"Mary Beth's pissed." She clamps her headphones over her ears. "She says she had to cancel a private training session with one of Bill Gates's kids to be here."

"We'll send a groveling email later. No—I'll call her."

"I don't have enough lines," Griffin says in my ear.

"Ruthie, can you help Griffin? I'll pitch in if I need to."

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"On it."

"Thank you."

Dominic reads off each illicit payment one by one. The numbers are staggering. It's not that this is a bad show—it's that somehow, it's become Dominic's show, and I'm no longer in control. He is the star.

So I sit back and let Paloma and Dominic take over. Dominic will win accolades and audiences, and I'll stay right here behind the scenes.

Ends: never.

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2



Even though he was never on the air, my dad had the best radio voice. It was powerful but soft, a crackling fire on the coldest night of the year. He grew up fixing radios and owned an electronics repair shop, though of course he eventually learned how to fix laptops and phones, too. Goldstein Gadgets: my favorite place in the world.

I inherited his love for public radio but not his voice. Mine is the kind of high-pitched voice men love to weaponize against women. Shrill. Unintelligent. *Girly*, as though being a girl is the worst kind of insult. I've been teased my whole life, and I still brace myself for cleverly disguised insults when I'm talking to someone for the first time.

My dad never cared. We hosted radio shows in our kitchen ("Tell me, Shay Goldstein, what kind of cereal are you having this morning?") and on road trips ("Can you describe the scenery at this middle-of-nowhere rest stop?"). I'd spend afternoons with him at Goldstein Gadgets, doing my homework and listening to game shows, *Car Talk*, *This American Life*. All we needed was a great story.

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I wanted him to hear me on the radio so badly, even if no one else did.

When he died my senior year of high school after a sudden cardiac arrest, it shattered me. Classes didn't matter. Friends didn't matter. I didn't turn on the radio for weeks. Somehow, I managed a B-minus average for the University of Washington, but I couldn't even celebrate getting in. I was still submerged in depression when I landed my internship at Pacific Public Radio, and slowly, slowly, I climbed out of darkness and into a conviction that the only way forward was to try to rebuild what I'd lost. Here I am, twenty-nine and clinging to that childish dream.

"Make people cry, and then make them laugh," my dad would say. "But most of all, make sure you're telling a good story."

I'm not sure how he would have felt about Ask a Trainer.

I'm the fifth wheel at dinner tonight. My mother and her boyfriend Phil, and my best friend, Ameena, and her boyfriend, TJ are already seated at a Capitol Hill French-Vietnamese fusion restaurant by the time I emerge from rush hour traffic. Ameena Chaudhry and I grew up across the street from each other, and she's been a constant in my life for more than twenty years.

"Only ten minutes late," Ameena says, jumping out of her chair to lasso me into a tight hug. "That's got to be a new record, right?"

TJ pulls out his phone to check the notes app. "There was one time last March we were all on time except for Shay, who was only three minutes late."

I roll my eyes at this, but guilt twists my stomach. "It's great to see you, too. And I really am sorry. I was rushing to finish one last thing and lost track of time."

We try to schedule dinners as regularly as we can, but my mother and Phil are violinists in the Seattle Symphony with regu-

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lar evening performances, Ameena is a recruiter at Microsoft, and TJ does something important-sounding in finance that I've never fully understood. On occasion—fine, most occasions—I stay late at the station to make sure everything's prepped for the next day's show. Today I was on the phone apologizing to Mary Beth Barkley for an hour.

I hug my mom and TJ, then shake hands with Phil. I'm still not sure how to navigate my mother having a boyfriend. Until Phil, she didn't seem interested in dating. They'd been friends for ages, though, and he lost his wife a few years after we lost Dad. They supported each other during the grieving process, which of course never really ends, until they eventually became a different kind of support system.

I should be used to it by now, but by the time they started dating last year, I'd only just gotten used to the idea of my mother as a widow.

"As much as I love bullying Shay," my mother says with a half smile in my direction, "I'm starving. Appetizers?"

Phil points at the menu. "The chili cumin pork ribs are supposed to be incredible," he says in his Nigerian accent.

After we order and exchange how-was-your-days, Ameena and TJ share a quick sideways glance. Before they started dating, Ameena and I were the ones sharing sideways glances, inside jokes. Being the fifth wheel is only slightly crushing when I realize I'm not anyone's person. Ameena and TJ live together, so it's natural that she shares secrets with him before me, and my mother has Phil. I am a solid second, but I'm no one's first.

I'm on a dating app hiatus, something I implement every so often when swiping becomes especially frustrating. My relationships seem doomed to never last longer than a handful of months. I want so badly to get to that place where Ameena and TJ are, five years of dating after they accidentally swapped orders at a coffee

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shop, that it's possible I rush things. I've never not been the first to say *I love you*, and there are only so many times you can stomach total silence in response.

But I won't lie—I want to be that first person someone tells everything to.

"I have some news," Ameena says. "I'm interviewing with the Nature Conservancy tomorrow. So it's not news, exactly, but news adjacent. It's just the first phone interview, but . . ." She trails off with a shrug, but her dark eyes are bright with excitement.

When Ameena started at Microsoft, her goal was to gain enough experience to ultimately recruit for an organization that does good, ideally for the environment. She was the president and founder of our high school's Compost Club. By default, I was the vice president. She's a slow-fashion aficionado who buys all her clothes at thrift shops and rummage sales, and she and TJ have an impressive herb garden on their apartment balcony.

"Are you serious? That's incredible!" I say, reaching for a rib the server places in the center of the table. "They have a Seattle office?"

Her expression falters. "Well, no," she says. "They're in Virginia. I mean, I doubt I'll get the job."

"Don't reject yourself before you've even interviewed," Phil says. "Do you know how many people audition for the symphony? The odds were never in our favor, either, although I still claim it's nonsense Leanna had to audition three times."

My mother squeezes his arm, but she beams at the compliment.

"Virginia is . . . far," I say intelligently.

"Let's just ignore the Virginia part for now." Ameena brushes a stray thread from the vintage charcoal blazer we fought over at an estate sale last month. "I'm really not going to get it, though. I'm the youngest recruiter on my team. They're probably going to want someone with more experience."

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"I miss being the youngest," I say, taking to heart Ameena's "let's just ignore the Virginia part" suggestion. Virginia isn't something I can even wrap my mind around. "It feels like the interns are getting younger and younger every year. And they're all so earnest and fresh faced. One of them actually told me the other day that he didn't know what a tape looked like."

"Like that reporter you're always going on about?" my mother says. "What's his name again?"

"Dominic something, right?" Phil says. "I did like that piece he did on arts funding in Seattle compared to other cities."

"He's not an intern, he's Kent's favorite reporter." And apparently the new star of *Puget Sounds*, based on the social media snooping I did after the show. Twitter loved him, which proves Twitter is a hellsite.

"Talk to me when you're thirty," Ameena says. We celebrated her thirtieth two months ago, in December, and it'll be my turn in October. I'm still in denial.

My mother waves a hand. "Please. You're both still babies." She says this, but my mother is gorgeous: dark red hair, sharp cheekbones, and a closet full of chic black dresses that would make Audrey Hepburn quietly, beautifully weep. In a symphony of fifty musicians, she steals the show every night.

I tug my hair out of its usual low ponytail and finger comb my long bangs that skim the top of my tortoiseshell glasses. *Thick*, *brown*, and *coarse*: the only adjectives that describe my hair, and all of them are tragic. I thought I'd have learned to style it by now, but some days I fight with a straightener and other days I fight with a curling iron before I resign myself to another ponytail.

It's only when I examine my mother, searching for the physical similarities between us—spoiler: there are none—that I notice she's acting strangely. She keeps rubbing at the hollow of her throat, one of her telltale signs of nerves, and when the food arrives, she

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pushes it around on her plate instead of eating it. She and Phil are usually pretty affectionate. We had a body language expert on the show a while back, and the way she talked about people falling in love described the two of them perfectly. Phil is always resting his hand in the small of her back, and she'll often cup the side of his face and skim her thumb along his cheek.

There's none of that tonight.

"How's the house?" Phil asks, and I respond with a dramatic groan. He holds up his hands and lets out a soft laugh. "Ah, I'm sorry. Didn't realize it was a sore subject."

"No, no," I say, even if it is a bit of a sore subject. "The house is fine, though I wish I'd waited for something smaller."

"Isn't it a three bedroom? One bath?"

"Yeah, but. . . ."

For years, Ameena and I shared an apartment in Ballard before she moved in with TJ. Buying a house seemed like the right next step: I was nearly thirty, had saved up enough money, and wasn't leaving Seattle anytime soon. Working in public radio is like serving on the Supreme Court—most people are there for a very long time. Even if I wanted to be on the air, I wouldn't be able to find a job at another station. It's impossible to get a hosting gig without experience, but you can't get that experience unless you already have some experience under your belt. The joys of job hunting as a millennial.

So because it seemed like the next step in the how-to-adult manual, I bought a house, a Wallingford Craftsman my real estate agent called cozy but more often feels too large for one person. It's always cold, and six months after picking out the kind of furniture I thought I wanted, it still feels empty. Lonely.

"I guess I just have a lot of work to do on it," I finish, though I'm unsure what exactly "it" means.

"It was a good financial decision," Phil says. "Buying a house is

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always a good investment. And one of my kids would be more than happy to help you out with any painting or repairs."

Phil has three sons and a daughter. All the Adelekes are tall and fit and happily married, most with kids of their own. A couple months ago, my mother and I had our first Christmas with Phil's large family, forgoing the Jewish tradition of Chinese food and a movie. I'd been hesitant at first, if only because I liked spending that time with my mother, but everyone had been warm and welcoming, and it was impossible to stay bitter.

"Thanks," I say. "Maybe I'll take you up on that."

A water glass shatters, and my mother offers up a sheepish grin. "Sorry," she says as a waiter rushes over to clean it up.

"Are you all right, Leanna?" Phil asks.

She presses her ruby lips together and nods. "All right. Yes. I'm great." Her hand is at her throat again. "Phil, I—there's something I want to say."

Oh no. She wouldn't be breaking up with him like this, would she? Not in front of a whole group, not in public. My mother is too classy to do something like that.

Ameena looks as puzzled as I do. All of us set down our forks, watching as my mother pushes out her chair and gets to her feet, visibly shaking. Oh god—is she sick? Maybe that's why she wanted to have this dinner, so she could tell all of us at once.

My stomach clenches, and I suddenly feel like I might throw up. My mother is all I have. I can't lose her, too.

But then she grins, and my shoulders sag with relief as she starts talking. "Phil," she says in this tone I don't think I've heard before. She places her hand on his arm. "I know it's only been eleven months, but they've been the best months I've had in a long, long time."

"For me, too," he says. A smile settles into the fine lines in his dark skin. As though maybe he knows what's coming, and now I think I might, too. She'll ask him to move in, I'm sure of it. Odd to

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do it in public, but my mother has always had a certain way of doing things. *That's just Leanna*, my dad would say with a shrug when she made soup in a blender before zapping it in the microwave or insisted on carving jack-o'-lanterns in early September.

"After Dan passed away, I didn't think I'd get a second chance. I thought I'd found my person, and he was gone, and I was done. But you were always right there, weren't you? Sitting next to me, playing the violin. I fell in love with your music, and then I fell in love with you. You know as well as I do that the grief never goes away, but you have made me realize love can live alongside grief. I don't want to spend any more time not being married to you. So . . ." Here she trails off, takes a breath. "Philip Adeleke, will you marry me?"

The room goes dead silent, everyone's eyes trained on our table, watching this proposal. My heart is pounding heavier than it does before a show, and in the corner of my vision, TJ clasps a hand over Ameena's.

Phil leaps out of his chair so quickly he knocks over his own glass of water, and maybe they really are meant for each other. "Yes, Leanna, yes," he says. "I love you so much. Yes, yes, yes."

When they kiss, the restaurant bursts into applause. A waiter brings out glasses of champagne. Ameena dabs at her eyes, asking if I knew this was going to happen, if I knew my mother was planning this, and no. No, I did not.

I force myself out of my seat to congratulate them, my mother and my—stepfather? Too many emotions swirl through me, and I can only name a few of them. I'm happy for them, of course I am. I want my mother to be happy. She deserves it.

I've just spent so many years convinced no one could replace my father that I never imagined anyone would.

Ameena peppers them with questions about the wedding. Turns out, Phil had been planning to propose this weekend, but my mother managed to beat him to it. They want it to happen soon,

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they say. Naturally, a quartet from the symphony will play the reception.

Eventually, Phil whisks my mother out of the restaurant to "celebrate"—like we don't all know exactly what that means—leaving Ameena and TJ and me to polish off the champagne.

"Leanna Goldstein is my hero," Ameena says. "I can't believe we got to be part of that."

I want to be able to say that too, that Leanna Goldstein is my hero—and she is, for so many reasons. For how she let me process Dad's death on my own time, with my own therapist, before the two of us went to family counseling together. For convincing me that we could still *be* a family even if it was just the two of us. Small but mighty, she'd say. She always knew I'd work in radio, though sometimes she jokes that I could have at least compromised and found a job at a classical music station.

"You okay?" TJ asks as we pack up. He tucks his blond hair into a knit beanie. "It's weird, I know. My parents are both remarried, and it definitely takes some getting used to."

"I guess I never thought I'd go to my mom's wedding before my own." In my head, it sounds like a joke. When I say it, it does not.

Ameena squeezes my hand. "This is a lot. Take the time you need to process it, okay?"

I nod. "Good luck on the interview," I tell her, digging into my bag for my keys as we step into the chilly Seattle night. My house is going to be so quiet when I get home. It always is. "Are you sure you don't want to come over and watch bad TV or something?"

"Shay. I love you, but you need to learn to be alone in your own house. Do I need to check for monsters under your bed again?

"Maybe."

Ameena shakes her head. "Get a dog."

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The moment I get home, I flip on every single light and cue up the latest episode of my favorite comedy podcast. It's almost nine o'clock, and I've been away from my email for too long, despite the few times I checked it in the bathroom. (Enough that my mother asked me if I was okay, which is only slightly embarrassing as an adult, to think your mom is concerned about your bowels.)

I make some tea and settle onto the couch with my work laptop. I really am content helping others tell stories as opposed to telling them myself. Paloma does it better than I ever could, even if sometimes we're not telling the kinds of stories I love, sweeping epics about the human experience you can only hear on stations with a bigger budget. Sometimes I wonder if *content* is really just a synonym for *complacent*.

I try not to think about that, though.

After my dad died, I sought comfort anywhere I could. I smoked pot with Ameena, hooked up with the cute guy across the hall freshman year, had one bad experience with alcohol that taught me how much alcohol my body could handle. It wasn't anything outrageously unhealthy; I didn't want to go off the rails, but I wanted to get close enough to see what was on the other side of them.

The only thing that made me feel like myself again was my internship at PPR. That was when I realized the solution wasn't impulse—it was consistency. And of course it was; radio had always made me feel closer to my dad. I'd get the stable job, the house in a walkable neighborhood, and the devoted boyfriend, one day husband. Ameena remained my best friend; my mother remained single. With the exception of my dating life, everything's gone pretty much according to plan.

Phil becoming my stepfather, though—that's going to change things.

And historically, I have not been great at change.

A house was always part of my plan, and it should have felt like

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this tremendous accomplishment. I've had it six months, but I'm forever in the middle of making it *mine*. I'll spend hours scouring antique shops for the right kind of artwork before buying some mass-produced abstract blobs at Target, or try a dozen paint samples for the living room before realizing none of them feel quite right and never getting the energy to paint over them. In our early twenties, Ameena and I dreamed of hosting dinner parties when we had the space, but now we're always exhausted. Most of the time, I end up cooking something with prepackaged ingredients that show up on my doorstep twice a week.

Every time I imagined adulthood, it looked different from this reality. All the important people in my life have their person. I have an empty house and my supposed dream job that doesn't always love me back.

Against my better judgment, I listen to today's show. I did this all the time when I started out, eager for ways to improve, but I haven't done it in a while. Over and over, I rewind Dominic's answers, trying to pinpoint what, exactly, listeners found so appealing. It takes him a few minutes to find his footing; the cadence of his voice changes, and his words become smooth, buttercream frosting over red velvet cake. He's not a robot, the way I might have assumed before I heard him on the air. *It's almost like he didn't want someone to find out he was doing something illegal*, he says in such a mock-surprised tone that it makes me crack a smile. He responds to listener questions as though he genuinely cares about their concerns, and even when he doesn't know the answer, he does his best to convince them he's going to find out.

As much as I hate to admit it, Dominic Yun on *Puget Sounds* was good radio.

Even my dad would have agreed.

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3



"Emergency meeting," Kent O'Grady announces the next morning, before I've even unzipped my coat. "Conference room. Five minutes. Senior staff only."

I've never been senior enough to go to a PPR emergency meeting. My promotion, in title and slight salary increase, happened a few months ago. The way Kent's M. C. Escher–patterned tie lies crooked, as though he was so frazzled this morning that he didn't notice, is troubling, but it still feels kind of great to be included.

I hang my coat on the hook next to my desk and remove the laptop, phone, and notepad from my messenger bag. My phone lights up with a notification from one of the dating apps I haven't gotten around to deleting.

We miss you! 27 matches are waiting

I swipe it away and drag the app to the trash. That's the only action I've had lately: Tinder and Bumble desperately trying to win me back.

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Our newsroom has an open floor plan, offices reserved for the most senior of senior staff. My space is littered with empty coffee cups I'll definitely put in the dishwasher later today. The staff rotates kitchen duty, and for my first two years at PPR, I somehow got stuck cleaning it every Friday. I assumed I was just paying my dues as a newbie, but I've never seen Griffin, our *Puget Sounds* intern, on the schedule, which is drafted weekly by our office manager. It's never seemed important enough to bring up with HR.

Then there's my intricate filing system for past rundowns, and pinned next to my computer, a PodCon poster signed by the hosts of my favorite movie podcast. PodCon is an annual radio and podcasting festival, and if it sounds nerdy, that's because it is, and it's also the best. I went a couple of years ago when it was held in Seattle, and while it would be a dream to go as a presenter, obviously a local newsmagazine doesn't have national appeal.

At the desk across from mine, Paloma is adding flax and chia seeds to a cup of Icelandic yogurt. She's here at eight sharp every morning and out the door at four, right after we finish our afternoon show debrief.

"Emergency meeting?" I ask her. We're on a hiring freeze right now; Dominic was the last person brought on before it went into effect. I wonder if this meeting has to do with the station's finances.

She stirs her yogurt. "It's just Kent being dramatic. You know he loves a good show. We're probably pushing up a pledge drive or something." Paloma's been here for more than two decades, so if she isn't worried, maybe I shouldn't be. "You don't happen to have any extra chia seeds lying around, do you? Just ran out."

And although I have never eaten a chia seed in my life, I reach into the drawer beneath my desk and pull out a bag filled with them.

This is what a good producer does. I've trained myself to know what Paloma wants before even she does, to anticipate her every

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