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KRISTAN
HIGGINS

*Good
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*This one is for all of us who've cried when looking in the mirror.
Here's to never doing that again.*

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PROLOGUE

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO

For once, no one was thinking of food.

From above, they were just three teenage girls, bobbing in the middle of the clear blue lake, a rowboat drifting lazily nearby as they splashed and laughed. A blonde and two brunettes, one with black hair, one with brown. Their voices rose and fell. Occasionally, one of them would slip underwater, then pop up a few yards away. Hair would be slicked back, and the swimmer might flip on her back and look up at the sky, so pure and deep that day, the thick white clouds floating slowly past on the lazy breeze.

Just the three of them out in the lake, an unauthorized swim time, rebels all, at least for the moment, free from the constraints and prescribed activities of Camp Copperbrook, where girls ages eleven to eighteen were sent to lose weight. For now, the three weren't fat girls . . . they were just normal, and they were enjoying that elusive state of simply *being* as they goofed around in the lake. Emerson floating, ever dreamy; Georgia sidestroking efficiently; Marley twisting and wriggling like an otter.

They'd lost the oars to the rowboat, so one by one, they'd jumped in the water to fetch them. The lake was so silky and cool

against their skin that no one wanted to get back out. They were weightless, and graceful. They were practically mermaids. After a while, they just floated on their backs, swishing their hands once in a while, kicking lackadaisically.

The sun was bright but behind the mountain; birds dipped and wheeled above the lake. From the pine-ringed beach came the far-off sound of the occasional whistle from one of the counselors, some laughter from other campers, a snatch of music.

Tomorrow, everyone would be going home.

"I love it here," Emerson said, a wistful note in her soft voice. "This is my happy place. Right here, right now. I can't believe we won't be back next year."

"Me too," Georgia said. "It sucks to age out."

"This has been the best summer," Marley said.

Georgia lifted her head, checking to see how far away the boat was, then settled back into the water like it was a mattress.

None of them felt their weight in the clear stillness of the lake. There was no chafing, no sweating, no lumbering. No aching joints, no straining muscles and, at this moment, no labored breathing.

True peace was rare when you were fat. When you were fat, you wore armor to protect and deflect. You were either sharp and bitter, inspiring fear in potential bullies, or you were extra cheerful to show nothing mattered at all, not the snubs or the insults or the degradation. When you were fat, you worked so hard to be invisible. You lived in fear of being noticed, singled out, of having someone point out what you already knew.

You're fat.

And these three girls were all fat.

But at this moment, they just *were*.

A black-and-white loon popped up right next to Marley's

head. She shrieked and flapped her hands, and the bird dove, disappearing into the depths.

“It tried to peck me!” Marley sputtered.

“You scared it to death,” Georgia said, snorting with laughter. “Relax. It’s just a bird.”

“I thought it was a shark,” she said.

“I’m pretty sure we’re safe from shark attacks,” Emerson said.

“Unless it’s a lake shark,” Marley said, and they all laughed again, the sounds floating up into the endless sky to join the creamy clouds.

Then a long whistle blast came from the camp, and a voice magnified by a bullhorn. “Marley, Georgia, Emerson! Get back to shore now!” It was their bitchy head counselor.

The three girls groaned in unison.

“She’s so mean,” Emerson said.

“She’s skinny,” Georgia added. “She shouldn’t be here. It’s bad for morale.” They laughed again at the truth of her words.

Georgia was the first to obey, flipping over and swimming neatly to the boat, gathering the errant oars on the way. Getting in wasn’t so pretty. “Party’s over, girls,” she said as she settled herself in the seat. Marley was next, able to raise herself over the side with ease, the most athletic one of the three.

Emerson . . . Emerson needed help from both of them, and even then, it was hard. Whatever grace the three girls had in the lake was shed like drops of water as the reality of their bodies returned to the gravity of the water-free world.

“When I’m skinny, I’m going to swim every day,” Emerson said, panting from the exertion.

“When I’m skinny, I’m going to rock a bathing suit,” Marley said, pulling her sturdy one-piece away from her body. “This thing is worse than a corset. I can’t wait to take it off.”

Georgia didn't say anything, just picked up the oars and fitted them in the locks.

"Let's make a list when we get back," Emerson said. "All the things we'll do when we're not fat anymore. Things we can't even dream of now."

"We can dream," Georgia said, pulling on the oars. The boat slid forward, and Marley trailed a hand in the water. "Nothing wrong with dreams."

"A list sounds like fun," Marley said. "It'll motivate us to lose weight. We can call each other when we cross stuff off."

Little waves slapped against the bow as they got closer to shore. Georgia's strokes slowed, and she docked the oars for a moment as all three of them looked back at the purple and pink clouds burnished by the setting sun, the pine trees turning black in silhouette.

Sitting there for one last moment, they all knew the magical afternoon was over, yet no one could quite let it go. After all, how many days like this do you get in life? How often can you really be free, alive . . . weightless?

That's the problem with perfect moments. They end.

Though no one would say it, all three girls knew things would never be quite the same again.

CHAPTER 1

FOUR YEARS AGO

Dear Diary,

I love starting a new journal. It feels so clean! Like, who knows what I can fill up these pages with? Maybe you'll be the diary where I write about my first love, my trip to Rome, my engagement ring, my babies! Okay, that's probably getting ahead of myself, but you never know. I was watching Ellen the other day and this woman was talking about how fast her life changed when she lost weight. So maybe mine will, too.

Emerson Lydia Duval.

Emerson Lydia Duval.

I love my name. I still can fill pages of a notebook writing it over and over. Lydia was my mother's great-aunt; she died in the Holocaust. She'd been a ballet dancer, apparently. I love carrying her name, though I try not to imagine what she'd think of my outer self.

Emerson Lydia Duval. Someone with that name is definitely elegant and beautiful, hip without being trendy. She clearly went to Smith College, don't you think? She's tall, beautiful, slim. (God, I love that word!) But she can eat anything she wants, of course. Sometimes,

though, she's so busy she forgets to eat, because unless it's a really special meal, food is an afterthought, not 98 percent of what she thinks about. She played on the volleyball team in college. Or no, she played field hockey, the ultimate rich-girl sport. (Georgia played, now that I think of it.)

Yes, Emerson Lydia Duval played field hockey at prep school and college, because she loves being outside. She founded her college's hiking club. Still an avid outdoorswoman, she adores animals, but her heavy travel schedule doesn't let her have a pet. Her clothes are loose fitting and effortless, but so stylish, and when she does put on a black cocktail dress and her Christian Louboutins, you can hear men's jaws hitting the pavement all over the city.

This other Emerson Duval lives in New York. No, San Francisco, in a sleek high-rise building. She flies first class but uses the time and extra space to work tirelessly for the nonprofit she founded while in graduate school at Stanford. She doesn't need the money; Other Emerson has a trust fund. (Not that I'm knocking the plain old inheritance I have.) But Other Emerson barely touches it. Her one indulgence is that apartment. Gotta have a nice place to live, and occasionally, to entertain as part of her job. It's her haven, tastefully furnished with a view of the Bay Bridge, and when the fog rolls in . . . perfection!

Emerson's parents have a small (huge!) place in Paris, and she visits when she can. Her mother, a professor at La Sorbonne, takes Emerson shopping for chic clothing, and her dad asks for her input on the latest building he's designing. Emerson's bilingual, of course. Tri-, really, but she doesn't feel her Mandarin is up to snuff. (She's modest. It's flawless.) She's just as comfortable discussing the economics of sub-Saharan countries as she is dressing up for the Met Gala.

She has a boyfriend, bien sûr. He's funny and devoted and looks like a young Idris Elba. He's a surgeon, probably, or a tech genius. He loves her desperately and is waiting for the day when her life will allow her to say yes. He bought the ring after their first date.

Yeah.

I'm not saying I'll ever become that Emerson. I mean, I know I won't. I just like thinking about her. She keeps me company.

In my imagination, Other Emerson could be friends with someone like me — someone who gets stared at every time she leaves the house. Someone who's judged and found disgusting every single day. Someone who weighs three times what she should. She would see the real me, not just the fat. She wouldn't see the fat at all. She'd see the funny, kind, sweet person I know I am but who no one else tries to see. My mom did, of course, but she's gone now. Georgia and Marley, they do, too.

I wish they lived closer. I guess I could move, but I love this house. Mama's house. Except for college, I've never lived anywhere else.

Ah, well. Hang with me, Other Emerson. Who knows what life will be like by the time this diary is filled up?

CHAPTER 2

Marley

PRESENT DAY

It's those deathbed promises that bite you in the ass.

Granted, I did *not* start the day aware that I'd be driving through four states to stand by a hospital bed, trying not to sob. I'd started it by thinking about what I'd make for breakfast, then lunch, then dinner. I'm a chef, and a fat girl. Food is everything.

But right now, my face was frozen into what I hoped was a comforting smile. The left side of my mouth was twitching, and my eyes felt weird and hot. It was hard to remember how to breathe, and when I figured it out, the hospital air tasted stale and flat.

Outside the room, there was bustle and clatter, voices and squeaking shoes. In here, though . . . silence except for the wheeze of Emerson's breathing and the beeping of the monitors. Yes, yes, the monitors. Look at that. HR 133, O2 87%, BP 183/99.

I'm not a doctor, but I knew those numbers weren't good. Even if they were, the evidence was in the patient.

I wasn't even sure it was Emerson. That was her face—sort of. Hard to recognize amid the tubes and wires and the second chin so big it rested on her chest . . . and God, the mountains, the *acres*

of flesh. When . . . how had she become so huge? I didn't understand how it could have happened in such a short time. But it wasn't short, was it? We'd gone away for the weekend maybe seven years ago, and we saw each other again at Georgia's wedding almost six years ago, and yes, she'd always been the biggest one of us, but this . . . I never expected this.

Thank God that's not me, I thought, and guilt made my fake smile stretch even more. *Do something, idiot!* my brain commanded, so I ran a hand through my hair, snaring my pinkie. I glanced at Georgia, who was blinking rapidly. No fake smile for her, just her brows knit together as she tried to take in what we were seeing.

Why hadn't we known Emerson was this far gone? Why hadn't I reached out more? My heart was galloping in my chest, and tears burned in my eyes.

Emerson appeared to be sleeping, her eyes closed. Apparently, she was exhausted from greeting us, and from . . . existing.

"Promise," wheezed Emerson.

I jumped. Okay, she was awake, then. Her eyes were swollen into slits, but I could see her look at me first, then Georgia. In her hand she clutched an envelope, but clearly she was too weak to lift her arm to hand it to us. Or her arm was too heavy. Or both.

"Promise you'll . . . do it," she whispered.

"Uh . . . yeah," I answered, still too stunned to know what I was really agreeing to. "You bet. Of course we will. We'll do it with you. When you get better. Emerson, you know you'll get better. You will. You're in the hospital, they're taking great care of you, you're not going to . . . you know! Right? Right, Georgia?"

Cutting a glance at Georgia, I saw she was still frozen. A quick elbow to her side solved that.

I heard her force a swallow. Then she said in a near whisper, "Yes. Exactly. I was just thinking the same thing. You . . . you'll

be fine.” She paused, and I heard her take a deep breath. “I’m quite, quite sure.”

For a former lawyer, Georgia’s lying ability sucked.

I took a step closer to the bed and patted where I thought Emerson’s foot would be under the covers, hoping it didn’t hurt. The blanket and sheet had pulled to the side, as if they weren’t big enough to cover her, revealing her knee, the elephantine thigh, the hugely muscled calf—muscled from carrying her body. Her skin was red and stretched so tight it looked like it might burst with the slightest touch, like an overfilled balloon.

Jesus.

My heart twisted. Every time we’d seen each other—every single time since we met—the three of us had talked about how this was a new chance to do what we’d all sworn we’d do before.

Lose weight.

Because all three of us had been fat/heavy/overweight/metabolically challenged/curvy/big all our lives.

And here we were. Still not skinny. But my God, the stakes were life and death now.

I was fat—let’s just call it what it is—forever relegated to Lane Bryant and the plus-sized corners of department stores. Georgia, while currently on the smaller side of things, had yo-yoed so often that the two of us fantasized about the village we could’ve populated based on our cumulatively lost body mass alone.

But Georgia and I had never been like *this*.

The three of us had met at fat camp—pardon me, at Camp Copperbrook, an Intensive Residential Nutrition and Exercise Program for Girls. All of us had been eighteen, all heading for college, hoping *this* summer would be the one when we could Lose That Weight for Good and Really Start Living. Emerson and Georgia had been camp regulars; I only got to go that one time after begging, whining and guilt-tripping my parents.

In six weeks, I lost fourteen pounds and gained two friends. Georgia and I stayed close—we were both from New York, had gone to colleges an hour apart and visited each other at least a couple times a semester. When she went to Yale Law, I'd go to Connecticut to see her, and she'd come down to spend the odd weekend with me at my parents' house.

But Emerson was from Delaware. She was super close to her mom and didn't like to travel. I think Georgia and I had seen her five times in the sixteen years since camp.

But I *had* tried with Emerson. Just last year, I'd tried to organize a girls' weekend for the three of us. Emerson was the one who canceled at the last minute.

Maybe it was because of this. Her size.

Aside from Facebook occasionally alerting me to the fact that Emerson had posted a picture of flowers or kittens to her page, it was fair to say that the adult version—*this* version—of Emerson Duval was a stranger to me. It was shocking to see what had happened in five years. She'd always had the most weight to lose, but still . . .

Please, God, I prayed. Please, Frankie. Don't let this be the end.

Then again, Frankie had left me, too.

Emerson seemed to have fallen asleep.

From the hallway, we could hear someone giving a tour. "This is one of our bariatric rooms, specially designed to fit the super-morbidly-obese patient. Our walls are reinforced with steel plates to support the grab bars for patients up to a thousand pounds"—a *thousand* pounds—"and our toilets allow extra room for aides to assist the patients. The doorway is bigger, as you can see, and—"

Georgia flew over to the door. "Do you mind?" she hissed. "There's a human being in here." She closed the door, and dashed a hand across her eyes.

"Thank you," wheezed Emerson, her eyes still closed.

My mouth started to quiver. She didn't sound good. Not at all. That squeak in her lungs, her labored breathing . . .

Emerson lifted her hand again, her arm flopping back to the bed. Right, right. The envelope.

"You're going to be fine," Georgia said, her voice steadying me. "You're where you need to be right now. But sure, if it makes you feel better, we'll take it." She stepped closer to the bed, took the envelope out of Emerson's hand, glanced at it, swallowed, and held it up for me to see.

To be opened after my funeral had been written across the front.

A sob popped out of me. "You're not . . . dying, Emerson," I managed to say. "You're just . . . you just need help."

"You're going to get better," Georgia said, her voice firmer now that she seemed to have gotten over her initial shock. "You have to, Emerson. You're wonderful and funny and kind, and we love you."

Tears were streaming down my face. I reached for Emerson's hand, which was cold and clammy, and gave it a squeeze. "We do," I managed. "You hang in there, Emerson. You can get better."

Emerson smiled a little, eyes still closed.

Just then, the door burst open again. "Bath time!" announced a nurse, one who was carrying a good sixty-five extra pounds herself. (Estimating weight is one of the superpowers of the fat.) "Ladies, if you don't mind." She gave Emerson the once-over and sighed. "Why do they expect me to do this alone?" She stuck her head out in the hall. "I'm gonna need an assist in here!"

"Lovely," Georgia muttered. She went over to Emerson's head and patted her shoulder. "Don't give up, okay? We love you."

Emerson opened her eyes. "I love you both," she whispered.

Georgia's face scrunched.

I wiped my eyes and kissed Emerson on the forehead. Her cheeks were bright red—high blood pressure. “Bye,” I whispered, my throat clenched tight. “See you soon.” *Please, God. Please, Frankie.* “Love you,” I added, in case my deities weren’t going to come through.

The nurse bared her teeth at us in what was clearly not a sincere smile.

As we were walking to the elevators, a doctor called out. “Excuse me? Are you Ms. Duval’s friends?”

We stopped. “Yes,” Georgia said.

“I’m glad I caught you. I’m Dr. Hughes.” He was a tall, lean man with a kind face, not much older than we were. “Emerson gave me permission to update you. I was hoping I could talk to you for a minute, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” I said.

“I’m sure you can tell your friend isn’t doing well.”

“We can see that,” Georgia said.

Tears welled in my eyes once more. I wiped them away, noticing that my hands were shaking.

“You may want to stay close,” he said. “She’s had a blood clot travel from her legs to her lung, which is why she’s having trouble breathing. She’s hypertensive, has fluid around her heart, lymphedema . . . that’s what causes the swelling. Her organs are shutting down.”

Oh, sweet Jesus.

“Is she dying?” Georgia asked.

He looked at her, his expression sad. “My best professional guess is yes.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” I asked, hearing the terror in my voice.

“I think at this point, Emerson has exhausted her options,” he said.

“Well, what options do *you* have?” I asked. “Obviously, she’s very sick. You’re the doctor. Help her.”

“We’re doing everything we can,” he said. “But . . . well, when a person has been this overweight for this long, the damage has been done, and we can’t always reverse it.”

Georgia and I looked at each other. My throat was so tight I couldn’t speak.

She turned back to the doctor. “How long do you think she has?”

“A day or two. I’m sorry. She wanted you to be prepared.” He gave us a sad, almost apologetic look, then turned to leave. We watched him until he got to the end of the hall and disappeared around a corner.

Georgia was silent in the elevator, silent as we walked to the car.

Me, I was bawling.

.....

We’ve all seen the shows—thank you, TLC—and let’s be honest. We watch them to make ourselves feel better. Sure, I was fat, but not six-hundred-pounds fat! I wasn’t having KFC fed to me through my bedroom window, was I? I didn’t need the firefighters to chainsaw around the front door so I could fit through, didn’t need a team of eight to drag me out of the house on a sheet. And I *always* ate healthy food while watching that show. No ice cream during that one, no sir. Ice cream was for *The Walking Dead* (another show that made me feel good about my appearance).

But seeing it—seeing *Emerson*—in person was different. There was no feeling good now.

“You okay to drive?” Georgia asked as we sat in my car.

I blew my nose for the tenth time and nodded. Took a few deep breaths. Started the car and left the parking lot.

“Okay,” Georgia said, tapping her phone as I merged onto the highway. “I just booked us a room at the Marriott and e-mailed work to let them know I’ll be here a few days. You want to call your mom?”

I did, and asked my mother to cover my clients for the next couple of days. After all, I’d learned to cook at her side. “Of course I’ll do it,” Mom said, always glad to be needed. “How’s your friend? Getting better?” There was the familiar edge of worry in her voice.

“I hope so,” I lied. Mom didn’t handle bad news well. “Anyway, the list of meals is on my computer. Dante can help. He owes me.” Until my little brother had gotten married six months ago, I’d fed him at least three times a week for free. “And be super careful with the Fosters, okay? The father has a shellfish allergy.”

I was a personal chef, the kind who delivered meals to people too busy to cook, or people who didn’t like cooking. Living in the wealthy little Westchester County burg of Cambry-on-Hudson was a godsend; so many people here worked in Manhattan and appreciated having a delicious meal waiting for them. A lot of stay-at-home moms used me, too, for those nights when they needed a little break.

I wondered how Emerson had managed to get her food. From someone like me? God! The image of her mountainous body . . . I couldn’t get it out of my head.

Georgia kept tapping her phone. “How does she—never mind.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Looking up some of the stuff the doctor said. God. Listen to this. The cardiovascular and pulmonary systems aren’t equipped to support all that weight. Edema . . . that’s swelling, no wonder her skin is so tight. Her skin is literally an open wound, leaking out all that fluid.”

I bit my lip, trying not to cry since I was driving.

Georgia continued reading from her phone. “Acute shortness of breath . . . yep, she’s got that. Diabetes. Kidney failure. Cardio-pulmonary failure.” She shoved her phone back into her bag and looked out the window. “We need to lose weight.”

“Okay, for one, Georgia, I don’t think *you* need to lose anything. You look almost thin.”

“I think I might have an ulcer.”

Lucky, I almost said before her words really sank in. “Shit! Are you kidding? I thought you were just eating better! You’d better see a doctor.” My voice shook. “I mean, sure, you and I have our food issues, but we’re not like Emerson. Why didn’t she—” My voice broke. “I wish I’d known.”

“Don’t cry. You’re driving. You want me to?”

“I’m good.”

We were quiet for a minute, then Georgia said, “I’ve never wanted chocolate cake more in my entire life,” and then we were sputtering with horrified laughter.

It was our story, after all, the story of so many fat people. *Eat those emotions.*

“What’s in the envelope?” I asked.

“We’re not looking at it right now,” Georgia said. “I hope we never do. Ever.”

“Me too.”

“If she pulls through, we can just give it back to her. Not ‘if.’ When. *When* she gets better.”

“She has plenty of money, right? From her parents? She can afford the best treatment there is.” I swallowed. “And we’ll be there for her. We’ll do better.” I was awash in guilt, the curse of the Catholics. “We know what she’s going through.”

“No, we don’t, Marley. We’re just . . . normal fat.”

“Have you looked in a mirror lately? You look like you could shop at J.Crew.” I hoped I didn’t sound jealous.

“Please. Their extra-large is really a small.”

“Banana Republic, then.”

“Maybe.” Georgia turned to look out her window as we pulled up to the hotel she’d found for us. “Emerson will get better,” she said, almost to herself.

.....

Emerson did not get better.

She took a turn for the worse the next day, slipped out of consciousness. Georgia and I wept at her side, begging her to hang in there.

At 3:07 p.m., Emerson Duval died, leaving us with our envelope. One slim envelope, to be opened after her funeral.

CHAPTER 3

Georgia

Here's something you don't think about every day: It's hard to bury someone as big as Emerson.

We had to get a special casket. A truck was needed to get her from the hospital to the funeral home, and from the funeral home to the cemetery, because a regular hearse couldn't accommodate her. We had to arrange for a crane to lower her into the grave, next to her beloved mother. We also had to book eight firefighters who would get the casket from the truck to the graveside. I wondered if some of them were the same ones who'd had to drag Emerson out of the house on a blanket to get her into the specially outfitted ambulance when she went to the hospital last week.

How did she get like this? Why hadn't she asked us for help? In the two days that followed Emerson's death, every time we learned some new, tragically sad fact about Emerson's life, it was all I could do not to sob. Marley's eyes leaked constantly. My stomach ached like a hot poker was sticking into it. On the upside, I wasn't hungry.

The day of her funeral started with the wake Marley and I had

organized. When we arrived at the funeral home, Emerson's hatchet-faced caretaker, her cousin Ruth, was already there. The first thing she said to us, in lieu of any kind of greeting, was, "I see the boyfriend didn't show." She then shook her head disapprovingly. "That Mica, *he* was the one who kept bringing her food." Ruth glanced back at the enormous casket, the one the funeral director had diplomatically called the Goliath. Ruth seemed to be getting a lot of malicious satisfaction out of Emerson's death. "Not that she had to eat it, mind you. Look at me. I've never weighed more than a hundred and twenty pounds. Never had trouble with moderation. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't like sweets. My cousin, she was weak. It was disgusting, watching how much she'd put away. Mica just sat on her bed, watching her. It was perverted."

"But you kept cashing her checks, I'm guessing," I said. Ruth hadn't been Emerson's caretaker out of the goodness of her heart.

"Someone had to look after her," she said, oblivious to the tone of my comment. "You know how hard it is to bathe a giant like that? How you have to lift up her stomach to dry underneath? That's not easy, you know. All she did was eat and eat and eat. She had no self-control. None."

"Why don't you shut up?" I said.

Ruth looked confused.

"Stop being a bitch, in other words," Marley clarified.

"You could lose a little weight yourself," Ruth said to her.

"I'm going to punch you in the throat if you don't knock it off," Marley said just as the second guest arrived. Marley turned to her in relief. So few people were here, we were glad to see anyone. "Hi. Thanks for coming. I'm Marley DeFelice, one of Emerson's oldest friends, and this is Georgia Sloane, another old friend. You are . . . ?"

“Bethany. We worked together a while ago. She was really nice.” The speaker was a beautiful girl, slim as a gazelle, maybe twenty-six years old.

“She was,” I said.

Guilt razored through me, but I thanked God to see that Emerson had at least one person in her life who had appreciated her. Emerson had told Marley and me about her job a few years ago . . . a call center. Customer service. She hadn’t mentioned leaving it. She really hadn’t been in touch much this past year.

In the end, eleven people came to her wake. A few former coworkers, the nice doctor from the hospital, a nurse, one neighbor and her three daughters, and Emerson’s accountant. Marley and I greeted each of them in turn, watching their eyes widen at the size of the casket. The boyfriend, indeed, never did show up.

At the cemetery, it was just Marley, Ruth and me, the firefighters and the funeral director. The crane was parked in full view. Even in death, it seemed that Emerson would be deprived of dignity.

“Would anyone like to say a few words?” the funeral director asked.

Marley was crying too hard to do it. “Emerson was a good, kind person,” I said, my voice strained with the emotion I didn’t want to release. Not here. “We had a lot of fun together. We’ll miss her so much.” Not the best speech, but I couldn’t think of what else to say.

Ruth sighed, checked her phone and asked if we could go now.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the funeral guy said.

Without a word, she walked to her car.

Marley put her hand on the casket, wiped her eyes and pressed her lips together.

My own eyes were hot and dry. I took a white rose from the arrangement on the top of the casket—Marley and I had bought

a huge, beautiful display. *I'm so sorry*, I thought. *I'm just so sorry*.

When we got back to Emerson's house, Ruth was waiting for us, as was a woman holding a casserole dish in her hands. She'd been at the wake with her daughters.

"Hi," Marley said.

"Hello, I'm Natasha. A neighbor," she said. "I'm so sorry for your loss." She handed me the dish, which was still warm.

"Did you know her well?" I asked.

"No, not really. Hardly at all. She, um . . . well, she stopped in front of my house once, and we talked a bit. But she didn't get out much. Anyway. My daughters and I were very sorry to hear she'd died. She seemed like a sweet person."

"Thank you," Marley said, her voice rough. "You're very kind."

She walked down the street, and Marley and I stood there, looking at the house for a minute. We'd visited her here once, about a year after her mother died. She'd lost a lot of weight and was full of energy . . . and I couldn't remember when that changed.

At least the house and neighborhood were nice. She'd taken a lot of pride in this sweet little place.

I tried not to wince at the sight of the destroyed front door as we followed Ruth inside.

"Can we see her room?" I asked.

"Fine. She had to move to the den when she couldn't haul herself up the stairs anymore." She led us down the hall and opened a door. A bigger-than-usual door. Marley and I went in, and Ruth followed.

"Maybe you could give us a minute," I said.

"Don't take anything."

My jaw locked. "Ruth. Give us a minute."

She pursed her lips and stepped out, but stood just outside the

door, in case Marley and I decided we were in desperate need of one of the cat statues that Emerson appeared to have collected.

Marley looked at me, her brown eyes wet, a hand over her mouth. My head ached.

The king-sized bed was a mess of tangled blankets, and a mountain of pillows. The detritus of the first responders was scattered about—gauze, paper, plastic, a latex glove. In the corner was the CPAP machine. Clothes that seemed to be the size of sheets littered the floor.

And then there was the damning evidence . . . a pizza box on the desk, a couple of empty cereal boxes, a package of Double Stuf Oreos, a red and white bucket from Kentucky Fried Chicken.

I could hear my brother's ugly voice in my head letting loose a tirade of disgust. He hated fat people. Especially his only sibling.

On the bureau, which was reassuringly free from food, was a picture. Emerson, Marley and me, taken on our last day at Camp Copperbrook.

We looked so happy. Fat, and happy. Marley looked much the same, though she no longer wore purple eye shadow. I was laughing; funny, I never pictured my face in a smile. I'd lost thirty-three pounds in twelve weeks at camp that summer and could have passed for chubby, but I'd gone on to gain twenty pounds my freshman year at Princeton.

Emerson was the biggest, even back then.

I showed the picture to Marley. "Damn it," she whispered, wiping her eyes.

I looked out the bedroom window. Emerson had been stuck in here, in this room, in that body, for the past year. Our friend had been a prisoner. All she saw of the outside world was through these windows. The leaves on the trees of that one maple, the bricks of the neighbor's house, a glimpse of the sky.

I felt the familiar pinch of pain in my stomach.

Why hadn't she told us?

I knew the answer: shame.

"Let's get out of here," Marley said.

"We'd like to have this," I told Ruth, holding up the picture.

"Fine." She put her hands on her skinny hips. "You know, you two might think you're high and mighty and I'm a bitch, but where've you been these last two years?"

Her words struck a nerve. There was nothing left for us to do, so without another word, we left.

The envelope was in my bag, waiting for us.

It was a long drive home.

.....

Four years ago, I left my job at a Manhattan law firm and became a nursery school teacher. The change in career also prompted me to move back to my hometown of Cambry-on-Hudson, New York, a pretty little city about an hour north of Manhattan, overlooking the mighty river. I wanted to be closer to my nephew. Oh, and I'd also gotten divorced.

I'd rented an apartment at first, but as far back as Camp Copperbrook, Marley and I (and Emerson) had talked about living together. Two years ago, when a place came on the market—a town house with a caterer's kitchen in the rental garden apartment—it felt like the universe was telling me something. I called Marley, who lived with her parents, and described the state-of-the-art kitchen. "Want to be my tenant?" I asked.

"Hell's yes, I do," she said. By the end of the day, it was official.

Most of the homes on Magnolia Avenue were like mine—brick or brownstone town houses built at the turn of the twentieth century, many having been divided into apartments. The Romeros had an in-law apartment in their ground-floor unit; the

Clancys used theirs as a furnished Airbnb rental; Leo the piano teacher taught out of a garden apartment and lived upstairs with his girlfriend, Jenny. And, in number 23, Marley and me, just like the book.

Now, as we crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge on our drive back from Delaware, I asked, “Didn’t Emerson talk about moving to New York a couple years ago?” What if Emerson *had* moved up here? Would that have saved her? Had she hated hearing that Marley and I were living together?

“I think that was just talk.” Marley paused. “That was around Christmas a year and a half ago, so she still would’ve been kind of . . .”

Huge.

“Yeah.”

My stomach puckered and burned as if I’d swallowed a hot rock rubbed with jalapeños.

We got off Route 9 and headed into Cambry-on-Hudson, past the pretty downtown—the Blessed Bean, the coffee place where I stopped every morning for a double-tall extra-strong skinny vanilla latte; Bliss, the bridal shop owned by Jenny from down the street; Cottage Confection, that den of sin and sugar; and Hudson’s, the newest farm-to-table restaurant, where Marley and I went sometimes, her brother and his husband often joining us.

When we pulled onto our street, I said, “Why don’t you come up and we can read whatever it was she left us, okay?”

“Sure,” said Marley. “I’ll bring dinner.”

“You don’t have to.” After the past few days, the last thing I wanted to do was eat.

“Oh, please. It’s what I do. I haven’t cooked for five days, and it’s driving me crazy.” She paused. “You could use some food, besides.”

I pulled up to the curb. “Okay. I’ll make the martinis.”

We went into our separate doors—mine up the stairs, hers through the garden gate.

I was greeted by Admiral, my rescued greyhound, age three.

“Hello, handsome,” I said, kneeling down for a snuzzle. He pushed his wet nose against my neck and wagged, and I ran my hands over his lean ribs and spine.

Admiral was an elegant gray, a former racing dog. My fourteen-year-old nephew, Mason, had been taking care of him while I was gone, and had sent me pictures of Admiral in various stages of repose. (Ad was basically a couch potato . . . a cat in dog’s clothing.) Mason adored him, and welcomed the chance to dog-sit. More than welcomed.

Speaking of my nephew, I had six e-mails from him. These were in addition to the eight texts and two phone calls since I’d been in Delaware. All of them sounded painfully upbeat, all variations on, “Hey, I know you’re away, just wanted you to know I was thinking of you, can’t wait till you get back, hope you’re not too sad, love you.”

Mason had a heart as big as the planet.

Somehow, my dickhead of a brother had gotten the world’s greatest kid. Father and son could not be more different, and Hunter’s brittle, obvious disappointment in his son kept me up at night, especially since his mother, my wonderful sister-in-law Leah, had died when Mason was only eight. But my general constant worry for my nephew had exploded into all-out terror after what Mason had done last April.

An overdose. Accidental, he said. I wasn’t so sure.

One of the worst things about my divorce had been that Mason lost my husband, too. Rafe had been one of the only supportive male role models Mason had in his life, and I always thought there had been a special bond between them. But now Mason had

Marley, who was like an inappropriate aunt and all the more fun because of it. He had Admiral. My dog, whom I'd only owned a year, had done more for Mason's self-esteem than my brother ever had. And he had me.

I called Mason now, and he answered on the first ring. "Hey, honey, how's it going?"

"Hey, G! Are you back?"

"Yeah. It was really sad."

"I'm so sorry."

Just those three words made my heart ache. My brother wouldn't have been able to say them with a gun to the back of his head. I couldn't bear to imagine what Hunter would have said if he'd seen Emerson.

"Thanks, honey," I said, clearing my throat. "And thanks for taking care of Admiral. He said you were an excellent companion, and he wants you to come over this weekend."

Mason laughed. "He did, huh? He was also a great companion." There was a pause; it was possible my brother was in the room, and Hunter resented the fact that his son loved me. I was an embarrassment to my brother. Fat was unforgivable in his eyes, even though the honest truth was, I was probably in the normal zone these days. Not that he had noticed. Nor that it mattered in his eyes.

I'd *been* fat.

"I'll come by on Sunday," Mason said.

"Can't wait. Love you, honey."

If only I could adopt Mason. But that was a thought I'd had a million times, and I still couldn't see a way to do it. My stomach pain flared again.

Definitely time for martinis, ulcer or no ulcer. I didn't cook, but I made a killer cocktail. One did not attend the fine learning

institutions I had—Princeton undergraduate, Yale Law, University of North Carolina graduate school, thank you very much—without learning to be a skilled mixologist.

Marley knocked a few minutes later, bringing a wilted spinach salad, braised chicken with a red pepper sauce and quinoa with almonds and peas. My brain did the mental calorie count . . . probably 350, 400 calories a serving. Even though I knew Marley's kitchen was stocked with good food, I was amazed at how quickly she had once again put together such a beautiful meal. "Delicious, nutritious, fast and low cal," she announced, knowing I still obsessed over every mouthful.

When we moved in under the same roof, Marley and I had made a pact. No food judgment. We'd be living on top of each other, literally, and the last thing we needed to feel was watched at home. If one of us had gained weight or lost it, was overeating or purging, the worst thing we could do was question the other. The rest of the world took care of that just fine.

I poured her a martini. "To Emerson," I said, and Marley's big brown eyes welled up with tears. I clinked my glass with hers and took a healthy swig. The vodka burned in my stomach, but tonight, it was important to have a buzz on.

"To Emerson," she echoed, the tears sliding down her cheeks.

Under the best of circumstances, enjoying food was hard for me. Eating with Marley, with her good example of healthy eating and appetite, was easier. Had been, anyway, until Mason ended up in the hospital.

Eating with Rafael Esteban Jesús Santiago had been pretty great, too . . . at least at first. My ex-husband and my best friend were both chefs. Probably not a coincidence.

But tonight I could only manage a few mouthfuls (though the vodka went down easily). A predictable thought flashed: *Hooray,*

I'm too sad to eat! Maybe I'll lose some weight! I rolled my eyes at myself and stood up to clear our plates. "Sorry I couldn't eat more," I said. "It was really good."

"You bet. And you know me. I can always eat. That doesn't mean I'm not still heartbroken."

"I know, hon."

We cleared the dishes and tidied my kitchen. "Is this new?" Marley asked as we went into the living room. She pointed to a print of a rabbit that I'd bought just before we got the call from Emerson.

"It is. I got it for Admiral. He looks at it all day long, don't you, boy?" My dog wagged his tail politely.

"HomeGoods?"

"Marshalls. Same thing. Hey, I was thinking of going to Crate and Barrel this weekend, if you want to come."

"I *always* want to come."

We just sat for a minute, avoiding reading whatever Emerson had given us. As some women could talk about clothes, Marley and I could talk about home decorating, and we shared a love of the same stores.

To be honest, the town house probably deserved better taste than I had, with my propensity for bright colors and made-in-China décor. But the home I grew up in was chilly in both atmosphere and temperature. Every room was eggshell or fog or sand colored, all the furniture muted neutrals. The thermostat was set at sixty-three "for the sake of the artwork," Mother liked to say. Every rug, every sofa, every candlestick and painting had significance—a vase wasn't just a vase, it was a signed Carder Steuben. The rug was an antique Heriz, the painting an Erik Magnussen, the sofa a genuine Fritz Hansen (which meant it was ugly *and* uncomfortable).

As a result, I was a whore for Crate & Barrel, Pier 1 Imports,

HomeGoods and yes, Ikea—all those cheerful throw pillows and funky, happy chairs. My mother claimed my house gave her a headache, but my furniture was comfortable, at least, and the colors made me happy.

But not tonight.

I poured Marley and myself half a martini more and took Emerson's envelope out of my purse.

To be opened after my funeral.

"What do you think is in there?" Marley asked. "Her will?"

"No, a will is a huge document." I'd kept my law license and still did some pro bono work. Legal documents were nothing if not long.

"Well, we promised Emerson we'd do whatever it says."

I had a feeling it wouldn't be easy, whatever it was. Admiral leaped up next to me and curled into his little doggy ball. His sixth sense for when I needed moral support was perfectly attuned. I stroked his silky ears, then took a deep breath.

"Okay," I said. "Here goes nothing."

I opened the envelope carefully. Inside was one piece of paper, the handwriting girlish and round, just as we had been.

It was our list.

Our list from Camp Copperbrook.

I scanned it, my throat tight, that hot poker digging into the wall of my stomach.

Oh, Emerson.

I handed the piece of paper to Marley, the memories of that summer surging.

I'd been friendly with Emerson from our other summers at Copperbrook, but it was Marley who made us the Terrible Trio. That summer was the first time I'd felt normal, away from my

family, with real friends, breaking the occasional rule, staying up late, laughing till the bunk beds shook. And on that last day, we'd made a list, each of us contributing something, or, in the case of the last item, mutually agreeing.

"She kept this," Marley said. "Oh, God, she kept it all these years." She put it on the coffee table and drained the rest of her drink.

Things We'll Do When We're Skinny

- Hold hands with a cute guy in public.
- Go running in tight clothes and a sports bra.
- Get a piggyback ride from a guy.
- Be in a photo shoot.
- Eat dessert in public.
- Tuck in a shirt.
- Shop at a store for regular people.
- Have a cute stranger buy you a drink at a bar.
- Go home to meet his parents.
- Tell off the people who judged us when we were fat.

Promise me, Emerson had said there in the hospital.

"She wants us to do all this? Now?" Marley asked.

"I guess so."

"Why? That was so long ago. I mean . . . these aren't exactly meaningful life achievements for a card-carrying adult." She was nervous, fidgeting with the fringe on the pillow. "Get a piggyback ride?"

"Have you ever had a piggyback ride?"

She gave me the stink-eye. "Any guy who gave me a piggyback ride would collapse or pop a hernia."

"His eyes would explode out of his head," I said. "Gray matter would leak from his ears, and his vertebrae would collapse into powder. Blood everywhere."

"Bite me," she said, tossing the throw pillow at me.

I'd never had a piggyback ride, either. It was such a little thing, and yet so . . . romantic. So normal, the idea that you'd be smaller than your honey, and he'd be playful and manly, and you'd be adorable and spontaneous.

Marley cleared her throat. "Let's go through this list, and see if any of these things matter anymore. We were just kids when we wrote it." She glanced at the notepaper. "Go running in a sports bra? Who wrote that one? It sure wasn't me."

"I did. All those cross-country meets when Hunter was in high school. My mother dragged me to every one." I still remembered those girls, so impossibly perfect, so oblivious to the blessings of good health and beauty. I couldn't take my eyes off them, even though they ignored me.

Even at age seven, I'd known I'd never look like that.

"The point of putting it on the list," I said slowly, "was the idea that someday, I wouldn't want to . . . you know. Hide."

"Fat acceptance?" Marley said.

"More like the idea that we could be skinny."

"Well, shit," said Marley. "Shit on rye."

"Don't make me want carbs," I said, and we snorted in unexpected laughter, which in Marley's case quickly became tears again.

I picked up the list. "The privileges of thin people," I murmured.

Because that's what it had been. These were the things thin girls got to do, things that were out of reach for us fatties. The list was stark and innocent, slashing like an unseen razor with its yearning . . . and honesty.

When Rafe took me home to meet his parents, I remember thinking, *I should've lost more weight for this.*

"Can I see it again?" Marley asked. She studied the paper. I remembered the notebook—a pink cover with purple peace signs. Emerson had always been writing in it; she was one of the few people I knew who kept a diary.

"Actually," Marley said, "I *have* had a cute guy buy me a drink. Gays count, right?"

"I think we were picturing straight guys. Benjamin Bratt, remember?" We'd all had that *Law & Order* addiction.

"Oh, God, I *loved* him. So Benjamin Bratt has to buy me a drink? All right. The sacrifices I make." But I could hear the pain under her words. She'd had a crush on a guy for the past five years—one of her brother Dante's FDNY coworkers—but it had yet to progress to anything. He was an idiot, in my opinion. Marley was the best person on earth. So instinctively kind, so funny, so generous . . . and yes, sure, overweight, but she carried it well—she'd always had a waist and great boobs. She could get away with zaftig or Rubenesque.

Not me. I'd always been fat-fat, like a troll, like an egg. There was no romantic word for how I was shaped.

"'Tuck in a shirt,'" Marley read. Back at Copperbrook, we had talked about the ultimate skinny girl's outfit: a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt, tucked in. She looked at me now. "You could totally work that, just sayin'."

"With Spanx and a waist trainer and liposuction and black magic, sure."

"I'm serious. You look great."

I shrugged. Whenever I looked in the mirror, which I did only when necessary, I still didn't see what I wanted to.

"'Eat dessert in public. I already do that, so rest easy, Emerson,'" Marley said, moving on.

I didn't. I hadn't had dessert in . . . well, since my wedding cake, probably. I was more of the junk-food type. My first love was salt.

But since Mason's overdose, accidental or not, food and I had become even more hateful enemies.

"Hold hands with a cute guy in public," Marley continued. "That won't be a problem. I can run up to a hot guy, grab his hand and drag him a few yards. Check."

My ex-husband and I had held hands all the time. And he'd been extremely hot. I couldn't count the number of times people had looked surprised to see us as a couple.

"Tell off the people who judged us when we were fat," Marley read. "Great. We'd have to line them up in a stadium. Can we start with your asshole brother? 'Tell off,' that means stab in the eye, right?"

"We don't have to do this," I said, setting my drink down on the coffee table. "This is what three teenagers thought would be the ultimate . . . whatever. It's not really for adults. We're thirty-four. Almost thirty-five."

Marley lay back and gazed up at the ceiling. "But we promised Emerson we would. She'll never get to do these things, G." Her voice thickened. "And she kept this list all these years."

I swallowed, and Admiral put his head on my leg. "I don't know. It seems . . . empty, really. And my plate is pretty full these days. Work and Mason. The FFE." I did some pro bono legal work for the Foundation for Female Entrepreneurship, which gave out business and legal advice and sometimes money for disadvantaged women looking to start their own businesses. Couldn't let the Yale law degree go completely to waste.

I didn't see what purpose the list would serve, frankly.

Marley rubbed her eyes. "Yeah. I understand." We sat in silence for a few minutes until she spoke again. "I'm zonked. Time for bed."

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She left, and my apartment felt oddly empty. Like something was missing from the moment. Unfinished business. I had to shake myself to close the door after her.

A half hour later, I was soaking in my big, beautiful tub, Admiral curled on the floor next to me. I loved baths. I’d invested in a gorgeous tub for myself, big enough so I could feel small and delicate, and tonight, I needed to do something to make myself feel good. The sadness of Emerson’s funeral had caught up to me.

The list brought up a lot, too. All the misery of being a fat teenager in America, trying so hard to be invisible, quiet, not to draw attention to myself.

Still, I’d done stuff. I traveled a little bit, five days here, a week there. I’d been to Paris and Rome, albeit when I was in college. I had a great job, all my students hugging me, smiling, offering me their instant, innocent love. Granted, I made a lot less than when I was a lawyer, but I could pay my bills, thanks to the inheritance from my grandmother, and I had a nice investment portfolio curated by my dad, who managed a big mutual fund. I had a house, a dog, a nephew. A longtime best friend. I’d even been in love once. I didn’t need to do the things on that list.

Except I’d said I would.

CHAPTER 4

Marley

Be in a photo shoot. (*Sort of.*)

“Please wait while I get my checkbook.”

I closed my eyes and tried not to sigh.

This particular client was a special type of ass pain. Granted, I was grateful for ass-pain clients, because I charged them more.

But I loved most of my clients. Some saw cooking as too much of a chore, which was hard for me to understand, since I grouped sex and cooking in the same category of sensual delight. Others had food allergies and issues that made food prep difficult. Some were genuinely too busy. Some just hated it; Georgia admitted to dry-heaving if she had to touch raw chicken.

Here in the wealthy, charming little town of Cambry-on-Hudson, a lot liked the status of having a personal chef. Cambry was just twenty minutes from Yonkers, where I’d grown up, but a world apart. Here, there were things like equestrian clubs and preschools with tuitions equaling those of many colleges. So being able to say you had a personal chef . . . well, people liked that.

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And so . . . Salt & Pepper, my little company, founded by me, staffed by me and occasionally assisted by my mom and Dante.

Dinners (and lunches, but mostly dinners) prepared just for you, according to everything you love and any health considerations you might have.

My skills went beyond cooking. I was an organizational wizard. Got celiac disease? Don't worry; I would never show you a menu with a speck of gluten on it. Peanut allergy? There's a counter I used just for your food. Your kids hate bananas? No worries! I'll make sure they get their potassium another way. Dairy nauseates you? Good old Marley will take care of you.

I loved it. I loved my clients, even the snooty yoga moms who pretended they cooked my dinners themselves or treated me like a serving wench when I did the occasional dinner party. I loved them because they needed me.

And then there was Will Harding.

I had already put his food on the counter, as I did five nights a week. Today, he'd chosen grilled salmon, crispy roasted baby potatoes and a tomato-and-avocado salad. For some reason, he felt the need to check under the lids, as if I'd topped the salmon with ground glass instead of kale-almond pesto.

I reminded myself that Will had been one of Salt & Pepper's first clients. He used me five times a week; most of my clients were the one- or three-times-a-week types. Some used me only for special occasions.

But Will never told me he liked the food, never gave me any feedback at all. In fact, he barely spoke to me.

I wished Frankie were here. I wished she were my business partner, my roomie, my best friend. I wished she were standing next to me, rolling her eyes as Will wrote out his check.

My twin sister had been dead for thirty years, and still, I had these feelings every day—the yearning for her company, even though I barely remembered her. The ache of feeling half of a pair instead of a whole person.

I sighed, and tried to pull out some of my Keep on the Sunny Side attitude from the vault in my heart. Sometimes that good cheer came naturally, and sometimes it was like walking through tar. It had been harder going than usual since Emerson's funeral.

How long did it take to write a check for the same amount every single day?

Wastes my time. I'd started a mental list of Will Harding's flaws months ago. And number one on that list was *prejudiced against fat people*.

Oh, yes, I noticed the way he scanned me, his face carefully blank. What? I wore my chef whites with the cute little logo over my heart—a set of salt and pepper shakers, dancing, little smiley faces alight with joy. Mason, Georgia's nephew, had made it for me on his computer, the clever lad.

But Will gave me that look that we overweight women know so well . . . the look that said, *No, thanks*, and also, *You're fat* . . . fat being as egregious a sin as being a serial killer of puppies. The look that said fat was worse than hateful or dishonest or cruel.

Will returned from the back room—I was only allowed in the kitchen—and gave me the look now. I forced my face into a smile, waiting for him to hand over the check.

"That cold sore you had is gone," he said.

I blinked. An entire sentence! And such a sweet thing to say, no less. "Yes."

"Good." He handed me the check, and I took it, careful not to let our fingers touch. Once that had happened, and he jumped back.

Not for the first time, I thought about dropping him. It was a little creepy, our routine. His whole house was always dark, shades drawn, only the counter island lights on in the kitchen. Every day, I was let in almost the second I knocked, because he waited for me. Then came the setting down of the bags. The

verification of their contents. The writing of the check. The dismissal.

“Thank you,” he said now, as he did every night. “Good-bye.”

“Enjoy the salmon!” I said with fat-girl jollity. “See you tomorrow!”

“Thank you,” he repeated. “Good-bye.”

It was always a relief to get out of there. Oh, the house was fine. Whether or not Will Harding had bodies stashed in his freezer was another question.

When I got into my car, I took a second to text Camden—Mr. November in the FDNY calendar. (My darling baby brother was Mr. April.) Camden worked with Dante and, occasionally, slept with me.

I loved him, of course.

Just left the serial killer’s house, I wrote. Am still alive.

Dante—“the gay firefighter,” Mom always said, as if she had more than one firefighter son—had done me one huge favor in his life, and that was joining FDNY. Sure, sure, saving lives and protecting property, that was great. More importantly (for me, anyway) was nearly unlimited access to New York’s Bravest. Dropping by his firehouse with a pan of eggplant Parmesan or four dozen cannolis to endear myself to my brother’s coworkers was one of my favorite activities. Yes, it was exactly as you might imagine. I’d go into Battalion 11 on the Upper West Side, hear a chorus of manly voices saying, “Yo, Dante, your sistah’s here! Heya, Marley, whatcha bring us, hon?”

I really was only there for Camden Fortuno. He was everything—gorgeous, brave, strong, funny, friendly, gorgeous, a firefighter, did I mention that? Okay, sure, his name was a little dopey—there are those Italians who have a penchant for picking out the WASPiest name possible to pair with their Old Country last name. My mom didn’t fall prey to that trap—we were Eva,

my older sister; Dante; Marlena (yours truly); and my twin, Francesca, aka Frankie, may she rest in peace.

Camden, on the other hand, had a sister named Huntley and a brother named Wickham.

At any rate, Camden was . . . well. See above. Plus, he was *nice*.

The three pulsing dots on my phone's screen told me he was typing a reply to my text. A second later, it popped up.

Thank God. What are you doing tonight?

My heart leaped. "Be cool, be cool," I said to myself.

Camden and I had never been on a date. Once in a while, I'd go out with my brother, his husband, Louis, and some of the gang from Battalion 11. That was about as close as a public date as I'd had with Cam. But in the past five years, we'd nevertheless ended up back at his place six times, where sexy time had indeed ensued.

Maybe he was asking me out now.

Not much, I typed back. Almost done with my deliveries. What are you up to?

Working, he wrote back. Have a great night!

Well, shit.

You too! I typed. Considered adding a smiley face, wisely decided against it, clicked off my phone and sighed.

Each time Camden and I had slept together had been after a party. Each time, Camden had been a little drunk; each time, he'd asked me not to tell my brother.

Each time made me love him all the more. Don't judge me.

But being a twin without a twin is like having a hole in your heart. Even though Frankie and I had been only four when she died, I was meant to be half of a pair. Small wonder that I latched onto friends the way I did, leaped at the chance to be Georgia's tenant, visited my brother twice a week, called my older sister to check in (not that she ever called me first). And yes, ever since passing puberty, I'd been on the prowl for a husband.