



THEIR FIRST DATE IS ABOUT TO GO
APOCALYPTICALLY WRONG...

DOOMSDATE

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LAURA
PIPER LEE

Advance praise for

DOOMSDATE

“This was delightful fun! An ultra-competent heroine takes on the zombie apocalypse and a hot professor at the same time—naturally, shenanigans ensue. *Doomsdate* was frothy fun that managed to hit all the notes that zombie fans enjoy while still managing to pack in a ton of spice and emotions. I’m a big fan of lighthearted romance in unusual settings, and this managed to be a fast-paced joyride that kept me smiling the entire time. I really enjoyed both main characters, and shout-out to Chicken, the best cat sidekick in an apocalypse. I can’t wait to see what Laura Piper Lee writes next!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Ruby Dixon

“Bloody brilliant! I absolutely adored this hilarious, sexy, un-put-down-able, fabulous zombie-filled book. Maisie and Everett are spectacular—such wonderfully written characters. I loved every second of road-tripping with them, machete and Taser in hand!”

—Sarah Beth Durst, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Spellshop*

“Who would I trust more with the zombie apocalypse rom-com of my dreams than Laura Piper Lee? Laugh-out-loud funny and sexy as hell, *Doomsdate* is a blast from start to finish, from the strangest blind date you’ve ever heard of, to road-tripping through the end of the world. If a zombie apocalypse ever happened in real life I’d be done for, but in case I made it out . . . could I bring this book?”

—Alicia Thompson, *USA Today* bestselling author of
Love in the Time of Serial Killers

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“An absolutely delicious fever dream of a book that is hilarious, gory, sweet, and sexy in equal measure . . . One part zombie apocalypse story, one part rom-com, and one part road trip from hell—and Laura Piper Lee balances every element to perfection. I am low-key obsessed with any author who can come up a premise this unhinged (affectionate!) and execute it so well. All the stars.”

—Jenna Levine, *USA Today* bestselling author of
Road Trip with a Vampire

“Only the delightful Laura Piper Lee could pen a romantic comedy set in the midst of a zombie apocalypse that manages to be both laugh-out-loud funny and heart-meltingly tender. This book is a real good time. Brava!”

—Megan Bannen, *USA Today* bestselling author of
The Undertaking of Hart and Mercy

Previous praise for Laura Piper Lee

POT SHOT

“Hilarious, sexy, deeply compassionate, *Pot Shot* embodies everything I long for in an inclusive, heartfelt romantic comedy.”

—Chloe Liese, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Happy Ending* and the Bergman Brothers series

“The funniest book I’ve read all year . . . Equal parts tender, hot, and hilarious, readers will eat up Julian and Nomi’s story faster than a magic brownie.”

—Victoria Lavine, internationally bestselling author of *Any Trope but You*

“Laugh-out-loud funny, perfectly inventive, and irresistibly sexy, *Pot Shot* is unputdownable! Literally. I lost my phone for seven hours and didn’t even notice because I was simply too engrossed in Nomi and Julian’s pitch-perfect second-chance rivals-to-lovers romance.”

—Ellie Palmer, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Anywhere with You*

“*Pot Shot* is laugh-out-loud funny, has compassion in spades, and is one of those books you think about long after you’re done. Laura Piper Lee is absolutely brilliant, and I’m a forever fan!”

—Lana Ferguson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Nanny*

ZOE BRENNAN, *FIRST CRUSH*

"I fell head over heels for this juicy Sapphic rom-com. . . . Lee's novel is one of the sexiest, funniest reads I've come across in years."

—Ali Rosen for *The New York Times*

"*Zoe Brennan, First Crush* is the sexiest, sweetest, and most heartfelt romance of the year."

—Alexandra Vasti, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Halifax Hellions series and *Ladies in Hating*

"Lee creates a lovely, cozy world in Blue Ridge's wine community. Zoe's zany friends add a sparkle to the story, while her relationship with Laine is full of intense longing and creative sex scenes. A funny and very steamy romance about the importance of being open to love and all that life has to offer."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Lee delights with a sensual sapphic rom-com as heady and complex as the wines it describes in breathless detail. . . . Moments of reflection, comedic episodes, and plenty of steamy encounters balance this heartfelt story about honoring loved ones' legacies while still realizing one's own aspirations. This demands to be savored."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"This steamy romance has everything readers could ask for: excellent writing, well-developed characters, an atmospheric setting, and a forced-proximity workplace romance. Fans of Anita Kelly and Ashley Herring Blake will adore Zoe and Laine and clamor for more from Lee."

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—*Library Journal*

HANNAH TATE, BEYOND REPAIR

“Laura Piper Lee has such an electric, laugh-out-loud voice, deftly balancing humor and tenderness with some excellent steam.”

—Rachel Lynn Solomon, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Ex Talk

“Laura Piper Lee hits the page with a dynamite voice, sparkling wit, and profound characterization that will keep you reading way past bedtime! Readers, meet your new auto-buy author!”

—Courtney Kae, author of *In the Event of Love* and
In the Case of Heartbreak

“Add another name to the Rom-Com Writers’ Hall of Fame. *Hannah Tate, Beyond Repair* is laugh-out-loud funny, dead sexy, charming, as Southern as chess pie and twice as sweet. Get ready to fall in love!”

—Jeff Zentner, award-winning author of *Colton Gentry’s Third Act*

“Lee’s romance is witty and heartwarming, a refreshing take on family dynamics and loving yourself first.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Folksy and complex . . . Lee makes a splash with her humorous and quirky rom-com debut.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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BY LAURA PIPER LEE

Hannah Tate, Beyond Repair

Zoe Brennan, First Crush

Pot Shot

Doomsdate

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LAURA PIPER LEE



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*To Mark,
my own hot TV and film professor,
who once said he'd rather die
than survive a zombie apocalypse without HBO and air-conditioning.
I'm glad you changed your mind, punk.
This one's for you.*

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CHAPTER ONE

*T Minus Five Hours and Thirty-Seven Minutes
Until Shit Hits the Fan*

Maisie

FIRST DATES ARE INHERENTLY TERRIFYING, WHETHER A DEBILITATING GI virus is sweeping the nation or not, but dammit, I *refuse* to go through another pandemic lockdown a virgin. I slip on my favorite olive-green jumpsuit for tonight—practical, generously pocketed, with belt loops sturdy enough for my utility belt—and consider my facial attire next. I hold up a dainty black mask in one hand and a heavy-duty white N95 in the other. Which one says, *I'm cautious, but not that cautious?*

I fling the N95 over my shoulder and sigh. It's been one week since GI-27 hit the United States, and already the country's grinding to a halt. Schools have closed, hospitals are overrun, and airports shut their doors this morning. With a flight to New York City booked for next week, the first plane ticket I've *ever* bought, that particular joke's on me. Turns out they won't fly a plane when everyone on it has uncontrollable diarrhea. Rumors are a nationwide mandatory lockdown is coming tomorrow.

Which makes tonight's first date *critical*. It may be my last chance to have sex before I turn thirty. An arbitrary deadline, I know, but it seemed reasonable when I first left the isolated farmhouse I grew

up in and headed for the big town of Durham, North Carolina, almost ten years ago. When your doomsday-prepping mother is the only person you've exchanged more than five words with since she yanked you out of society at age five, you need to ease into the whole talking-to-people thing. Dating, sex, marriage—those were all distant theoretical constructs when the last guy I met was in kindergarten, pre—the yanking. So, after Mom died and I scrounged up the courage to reenter the world she poisoned me against, twenty years old and completely on my own, I decided to do what I do best: research, make a plan, in a word—*prepare*. To avoid chicken-ing out, I set firm deadlines for my goals, and I've met each one, more or less.

By twenty-five, I'd have a stable job and career.

Done. I'm an actuarial analyst, calculating risk of death every way under the sun for a major insurance company, well paid and working fully remote. Could you get a better job for the anxious, reclusive daughter of a paranoid schizophrenic who taught her that evil men were recording us through the toaster? I think not. Also, RIP Mom, you foresaw the dawn of Alexa and smart devices twenty years early.

By twenty-eight, I'd make a friend.

Done. He's a seventy-three-year-old Vietnam vet I met online in a virtual course on preservation and canning, but Gramps is like family to me now, sending me pickled green beans, strawberry jams, and mail-order guns I keep having to return. Is it technically cheating that my only friend is a prepper I've never met in real life? Maybe, but Gramps understands me in a way normal people cannot. He knows what it's like to be isolated with nothing but your anxiety and a compulsion to dismantle it through systematic preparation. Plus, his jams are *great*.

In the way of most procrastinators, I saved the scariest, most exciting goals for last, and now here I am, almost thirty, and I'm still

a virgin who's never left North Carolina. While I at least purchased that plane ticket to New York, I've made zero progress in voluntarily allowing another human's body to touch *my* human body in a consensual sexual way. I've certainly tried. But after dozens of failed attempts, I've learned dating is hard, finding someone you want to have sex with is even harder, and it's about to become impossible now that another cockblocking pandemic is upon us.

Still think the world's so great? The ghost of my mother's voice echoes in my head. *Pandemics and loser men and insurance companies betting low on the value of human life, pennies to the dollar?*

I push her words away. Over time, I've come to realize that's all they are—it's not her, not really, but the perspective she drilled into my very marrow.

Other people can't be trusted. Not to help you, not to save you, and definitely not to love you.

Believing anything else will just get you hurt, Mom adds.

But thanks to that thinking, I'm a lonely twenty-nine-year-old virgin with a small armory in the guest room who's terrified to travel, and I *still* don't own a toaster. Suffice it to say, I'm in the market for a new perspective, preferably one that involves getting a life. I didn't realize that loneliness was something you could still feel when surrounded by people. But ten years later, ten years spent in the real world, the hardest part remains making connections to others.

Which is why I've been studying for tonight all day.

I sit at the desk in my prep room, wake up my laptop, and press play on another episode of *Dreamsdate*.

In this episode, Contestant Shayla has four dates with four potential partners. If she picks the one that dating coach, relationship expert, and happenstance billionaire Gigi Masterson claims is her most compatible match, as determined by interviews, personality testing, and, somewhat distressingly, blood work, Gigi will make Shayla's

dreams come true, which as far as I can tell always means a check for fifty thousand dollars and a trip to the Caribbean.

You can't beat reality TV for dating practice. It's *real*.

"Tell me about your trauma," Shayla says across the small, intimate table from Date #1. "It's okay, we love it."

"Whoa, it's so deep of you to put that out there, before I've even told you my name." The man places a hand over his heart. "This is a safe space, I can feel it."

"My therapist says I'm very brave," Shayla says. "And sex-positive. Are you sex-positive?"—she squints at his name tag—"Paul?"

Paul nods, very sex-positively, and I blow out a breath, impressed. Shayla's nailing this date.

I hit pause to take some notes, jumping when an explosion of static bursts from the ham radio's speakers to my left. Gramps clears his throat directly into his microphone some five hundred miles away.

"CQ, CQ, CQ, this is Gramps, calling for Maisie-girl."

I scoot my rolling stool toward my radio. The push-to-talk button lights up beneath my finger. "This is Maisie-girl, come in, Gramps."

"I've been thinking, Maisie, and this date's too risky. It's gettin' real bad out there. Is this boy even a survivalist?"

"First of all, he's a man, and second, no, but I like that about him." I tap my toes against the floor in a quick *rat-a-tat-a-tat*, feeling my heart rate spike in tandem. Gramps has been questioning my decision to go out tonight damn near nonstop, and frankly, so have I. When I agreed to this date, school buses still chugged down the roads, people milled about on the sidewalks below my apartment, and you could leave this country if you wanted to. It's scary how fast all that's changed.

But my birthday's *next week*.

"What's so special about this boy that you've got to go out with him tonight, though?"

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“Well, he’s smart, for one, a UNC professor, and he works out, eats well, and seems super normal.” I can’t tell Gramps my most compelling argument—that Dr. Everett Greer is smoking hot, with wavy chestnut hair, hazel eyes behind bookish tortoiseshell glasses, and a tall frame, complete with broad shoulders and a chest you could beach yourself on. The fact that he’s older and a professor to boot checks every one of my admittedly vague sexual-fantasy boxes. There’s a reason I’m still a virgin at twenty-nine, several if I’m being honest, but the biggest is that I have high standards for what kind of person I want to put inside *my* person.

And Dr. Everett Greer can get it.

Assuming I’m not being catfished. It’s a distinct possibility that’s plagued me ever since we matched on the dating app and started messaging a week ago. The messaging phase is usually when I lose most interested guys, so I’ve learned to keep the *other* major reason I’ve never gotten laid to myself. As it turns out, men don’t like women who are into survival. It blows my mind, honestly. How is having enough rations to last two years unattractive? But Everett didn’t balk at all when I mentioned practicing competition-level mixed martial arts, and he’s similarly passionate about eating minimally processed whole foods. Perhaps the biggest bonus of all: He’s as desperate to go on this date as I am, virus outbreak be damned.

I really hope I’m not being catfished.

“‘Seems normal’ ain’t enough. Not for you, Maisie-girl.” Gramps clears his throat. “Which is why I called in my guy.”

“*Gramps*.” I close my eyes and sigh. “Again?”

“He’s meeting you outside at the drop-off. Go on, now.”

Groaning, I grab a mask and exit my apartment, taking the stairs to the ground floor. I walk half a block down the deserted street to the postal collection box. On cue, my cellphone begins to ring. The caller is listed as Unknown.

I exhale and answer. “Hi, Frank.”

A nondescript gray sedan is parked across the street. Next to it is the bus enclosure, where an old Black man in a tan trench coat, brown fedora, and large sunglasses sits on the bench inside. His gloved hand holds a flip phone to his whiskered face.

“Never use my name, doll,” Frank wheezes into the phone. “This line could be monitored.”

Leave it to Gramps to use a PI older than he is.

“You got something for me?” I’m eager to get back inside. March is still cold in Durham, and the empty sidewalks are weirding me out. Frank doesn’t look so good, either. The narrow strip of face between his collar and his sunglasses is ashen.

“You know it. Check and see.”

I bend over as discreetly as I can—if I’m too obvious, Frank will yell at me—and slide my hand beneath the collection box. My fingers travel over a hardened knot of gum first, *blech*, but then the file folder slips into my hand.

I straighten, then begin thumbing through the background check Gramps commissioned on my date tonight.

It doesn’t take long.

“This is pretty skimpy,” I say into the phone cradled between my ear and shoulder. Frank’s usually much more thorough, but this file doesn’t contain anything more than what I already found online. The sound of loud heaving makes me look up.

Frank’s doubled over, a paper bag pressed to his mouth. It’s . . . *full*.

“Jesus, Frank. Are you okay?”

“I’m feeling under the weather, so I couldn’t do my full workup on your guy. I’m sorry, doll. But at least there’s no gun offenses, no arrests. He doesn’t even have any speeding tickets. As far as I can tell, Dr. Everett Greer’s clean as a whistle.”

“Good to hear. This virus is really something, huh.”

“Sure is. Your trip to New York’s off?”

“For now, at least. Guess I’ll have to wait until this blows over to uncover all the secrets of my mother’s past.” I give him a rueful smile, though he’s pretending to look down the street instead.

“Well, you know I’ll help you with that any way I can, doll.”

I hold the folder up in salute. “Thanks, Frank. Get some rest, okay?”

He nods, and the heaving begins again. I hurry back to my building. When I received the thick, padded envelope sent certified mail from the New York-based law firm Danielson & Rabinowitz two weeks ago, Frank was the first person I contacted. After a few days of digging, he confirmed it—the letter claiming that my mother’s parents, the now-deceased Astrid and Elias Nilsson, had left me their entire estate was legit. The keys in the envelope really did unlock their historic brownstone just off Central Park. And if I chose to liquidate their holdings, I’d never need to work again. To go from knowing literally nothing about my mother’s past to discovering she was the estranged daughter of wealthy Swedish immigrants has been disorienting, to say the least. But I contacted the law firm, set an appointment to review my grandparents’ estate, and bought my first-ever plane ticket. I was finally going to learn something about the family I never knew. I was going to learn who I am.

But then GI-27 hit. The firm canceled my appointment yesterday, and the airline my flight a few hours later. I’m disappointed, but relieved, too. So relieved. For someone who didn’t leave her homestead until she was twenty years old, and did so only after losing the one person, the one life, the one world that she knew, the idea of *leaving*, of *going*, of *arriving*, is incredibly loaded.

Maybe next year.

As I walk down my hallway, the door to 2F opens suddenly, startling me back. I clutch the folder to my chest as my neighbor Tyler

sways in the doorway, eyes bleary and bloodshot. His perpetually backward baseball hat lies slightly askew. I brace myself, but he stands there, frowning.

“Hey,” he mumbles. “Thought you were the delivery guy.”

I shake my head quickly.

He squints at me, eyeing my outfit up and down. “A jumpsuit? Pretty impractical for a shitting virus.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, you won’t be for long, weirdo. Everyone’s getting it.” Grunting, the old frat bro disappears back into 2F, the door swinging not quite shut behind him, and I scurry down the hall.

I knew Tyler and Samson have the virus—I’ve heard nothing but moaning and flushing on repeat through the thin wall that separates our apartment bathrooms for the last twenty-four hours—but Tyler didn’t hit on me, then insult me, his usual one-two combo. He must be really sick.

Cold unease flares in my chest. Is everyone sick except me? Maybe I really *should* cancel.

I settle back at the radio, feeling unnerved, and press the talk button. “Frank didn’t find anything. Everett’s clean, Gramps.”

Gramps harrumphs into the microphone. “The best criminals always are, Maisie-girl.”

I sigh, hating how there’s no winning against a prepper’s anxiety. We produce mistrust as readily as carbon dioxide, and I can’t even be mad at Gramps about it because I’m just as bad. The fact is, this date *is* risky, a word I’ve avoided my whole life.

“Will this professor be able to take care of you when the shit hits the fan?” Gramps’s insistent voice warbles through the speakers. “That’s what you’ve gotta ask yourself, Maisie-girl. When doomsday arrives, who do you want by your side?”

“Gramps, I don’t need some man to take care of me.” At least,

not in the way Gramps is referring to. I desperately need a man to take care of me in the more primal sense. “And besides, I’m lonely. Did you know that people who are lonely have a thirty percent increased risk for early death? Studies show that loneliness is as lethal as smoking fifteen cigarettes every day for your entire life.”

“Don’t I know it. Which is why you should get in your rig right now and head to my bunker instead of going on a first date on the eve of the damn apocalypse!”

“For the hundredth time, it’s not the apocalypse, Gramps. It’s just a nasty GI virus, and finding someone to spend the lockdown with is worth a little diarrhea.” *Little* might be an understatement, though, based on next door’s marathon of flushing.

“What? Diarrhea? Your transmission broke up, girl—did you say you’re sick?”

I can practically hear Gramps’s blood pressure rising through the speakers.

“No, no, no. I’m perfectly healthy, and I know you’re worried, but we’re going to Gatherers. There hasn’t been a single outbreak of the virus connected to that chain.”

Gramps snorts into the mic, which is worse than clearing his throat. “Because it’s run by the evil vegans, that’s why.”

I roll my eyes. “Have you been on Reddit again?”

“Consider the facts, Maisie! An ultra-contagious GI virus hits the U.S. like a ton of bricks, with outbreaks connected to every major restaurant, poultry farm, processing plant, and ranch, and yet the vegans are fine? They’ve done something to the meat supply!”

“Then why are vegetarians getting sick, too?” My tone is gentle, though firm. Anxiety is the common denominator in the prepper community, the undercurrent fueling our collective determination to be ready, and for some, like Gramps, it’s easier to cope with the fear by assigning it to a boogeyman.

And in the case of the great gastrointestinal distress of 2027?
Evil *vegan* boogeymen.

“Animal products! Casein is in everything these days—that’s why the parakeets are sick! It’s in their bird food!” Gramps clucks his tongue. “What did those li’l birdies ever do to the vegans? It’s criminal!”

“Listen, Gramps, I’ve got to go.” I glance at the five episodes of *Dreamsdate* cued up on my laptop. “Got a lot to do. Did you take your meds today?”

The staticky air on the other side is telling.

“... yes?”

“Can’t have a heart attack in an underground bunker in the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania, and survive the evil vegan apocalypse, can you? Go take them now.”

“Fine. But you keep an eye on the news and be ready to skedaddle up here at the first sign of societal collapse, you hear?”

“Ten-four, Gramps.” I smile, even though he can’t see me.

“Oh, and Maisie? There ain’t nothing wrong with being a virgin.”

I hang my head, face flaming. I’m simultaneously annoyed that Gramps knows me so well and weirdly glad, too. At least one person in this giant, terrifying world does. “Well, now you’re just lying.”

Gramps chuckles. “Seventy-three, Maisie-girl. This is Gramps, signing off.”

I repeat the goodbye signal, feeling my usual mix of grateful and humbled that my only friend is an elderly reclusive prepper I met online. Thanks to Mom, I never knew my real grandparents, and Gramps never had a real granddaughter. But somewhere along the way, between chatting about our favorite water-purification systems and rigging electric vehicles to be off-grid, we fell into this routine of . . . caring about each other. Checking in. Sharing our lives over

the same ham radio frequency bit by bit, encouraged each time the other signed on and asked for more. Then, one day, Gramps sent me a coded message taped to the bottom of my favorite strawberry jam.

Coordinates.

It's a big deal, telling someone the location of your secret bunker. The biggest deal, to a prepper. It's throwing your lot in with someone else, the highest level of trust. We've been family officially unofficially ever since. Gramps has been trying for ages to get me to move up there before a shit-hits-the-fan scenario, but of course, I haven't. I haven't even visited. I can't say why exactly, other than this feeling I have when someone gets too close. That apprehension that lives in the space between spotting a bird on your windowsill and it flying away. The question isn't *if* you'll scare it off, but when.

Just like every guy I've messaged on the dating apps, every co-worker, every friendly face at the gym. When people learn who I am, they always fly away.

But I can't lose Gramps, so I've never wanted to risk it. That meddlesome, throat-clearing old man is all I have, and I love him.

After an afternoon spent watching reality television, grooming, and freaking out, it's finally time to leave, and I'm proud of myself. Despite several close calls, I haven't canceled, and I'm not going to. This is my last chance to find *my* Dream Date, to meet my goal and start living this life I've wasted for so long by spending it in fear.

My shaking fingers finally manage to slide a small golden hoop's metal post through one ear, then I brush my short blond hair back and repeat on the other side. There. Earrings say *I'm a normal woman who has definitely made it past a first date*, right? My reflection stares back at me in my small handheld signaling mirror, the perpetual worry lines visible even in the three-inch stainless steel. I tuck the mirror into one of my jumpsuit's cargo pockets.

This is going to be fine. I am going to be fine.

I check each of my hidden stashes to ensure they're ready if I decide to bring Everett home. Switchblade under couch cushion. Taser in bathroom. Pepper spray under my pillow. I may have grown up in isolation, but I've spent the last ten years being a woman in America, and some boogeymen are real. After clicking a utility blade into my belt holster, I slide on my fleece while the local news plays on my laptop. I'm only half listening as the attractive news anchors banter about the rise of the "tummy bug" across the United States.

"And if you have to go out, don't forget your mask and nitrile gloves, Dave!"

"That's right, Jessica—scientists are divided on how the virus spreads, but you can't be too safe. And maybe do your business at home, if you know what I mean!"

Jessica's polite laughter echoes around my prep room when a bright red news ribbon starts scrolling across her jiggling breasts, catching my eye. Her laughter stops abruptly. She clutches her hidden earpiece closer, her eyes transforming to the flat, dead color of iron.

"This just in—the first death has been reported due to GI-27."



*T Minus Two Hours and Thirty Minutes
Until Shit Hits the Fan*

Everett

There's a special kind of desolation that results from scrolling on Netflix for forty-five minutes and finding nothing you want to watch. I've been lying motionless on my couch for so long, Chicken has evolved into her truest form, a furry gray meatloaf purring on

my chest. I've had to rest the arm holding the remote control three times. I am motivationally bankrupt. Spiritually aloof. And when you're a film professor who stopped caring about the art form you've dedicated your career to studying . . . well.

Add professionally fucked to that list, too.

Two perfunctory knocks and a sudden twist of metal unlocking metal, and my front door is thrown open with a bang. Sandeep peers inside, sniffing once warily, before stepping fully into my house.

Chicken and I don't even look up.

Sandeep marches to the couch and stands over me, hands on his hips, mouth quirked into his crooked smile. "Hey, man."

"Oh, no." My eyes widen as I cower behind Chicken's butt. "Whatever you want, the answer is *no*."

"What are you talking about?" His tone is innocent, even though the intent is *certainly* malevolent.

"That's your up-to-shit smile, Sandeep, and I don't want any part of it. Chicken and I are enjoying a quiet night in, memorizing the Netflix menu, so if you could kindly go back to the home for meddling boys from whence you came, that'd be great."

"Have you showered recently?" Sandeep eyes my hair in frank judgment. "Why do I even bother asking? Go shower."

"Sandeep—"

"I won't leave until you shower." He sits in my armchair and crosses his legs at the knee, smiling patiently. He *sps-sps-spses*, and Chicken hops off of me and trots over to the better-smelling newcomer.

Little trollop.

When I exit the shower ten minutes later, feeling slightly better though I'd never admit it, I find an outfit laid out on my bed.

The pants have a *zipper*.

Alarm balloons in my chest.

I stomp over to my pajama drawer to dress in protest, but it's empty. "Sandeep!" I roar. "What did you do with *my jammies*?"

"Get dressed and I'll tell you," he calls from the living room, sounding unbearably cheerful, and *my god*, I want to murder my best friend.

When I reappear in the living room wearing the cursed *going-out* clothes, he greets me with that crooked smile from the armchair, his fingertips pressed together in a pyramid of villainous scheming. "It's time, my friend."

"Time for you to give back my sweatpants? Or time for you to leave?"

"Time for you to get back out there." He does little jazz hands as he says "out there," and I throw my head back and caw out a single, incredulous laugh.

"You think you can just show up to my house on a Friday night, make me shower, and then, what? Take me to a bar? Force me to get a woman's number?" I cross my arms and narrow my eyes. "I won't do it, and you can't make me."

"Everett, *Everett*! Of course I wouldn't do that." Sandeep pets Chicken in long, luxuriant strokes, and I'm forced to admit he would make an incredible villain. "I skipped all those parts. Your date begins in twenty minutes."

"What?!" The room tilts beneath me for a second, and I have to grab the doorframe for support.

"Her name is Maisie Bennett, she's a twenty-nine-year-old actuarial analyst who enjoys mixed martial arts and eats unprocessed whole foods exclusively, and she's nice." Sandeep waggles his eyebrows at me. "Very pretty, too."

"No! Tell her I can't make it!" Am I hyperventilating? I think I am.

"Tell her yourself." Sandeep holds his phone out to me. A dating

app is pulled up, and oh, god, that's my face on the profile picture. My *name*.

"You catfished her?!"

"Is it really catfishing if I'm not the one going on the date?" Sandeep muses, tilting his chin to the side. "More of a Cyrano situation. My nose *is* iconic." He shakes the phone at me. "Better hurry up and cancel. Maisie's probably already left her house for your big first date together."

I groan at the ceiling and yank the phone from his hand. "This really crossed a line, and now you're making me do the dirty work of canceling, too? *Ugh*."

He shrugs, still holding my cat. "I made a promise to Louise, and I intend to keep it if it's the last thing I do."

I close my eyes and take a deep, shaky breath in. Before, a casual drop of her name would collapse the insides of my chest, crushing the architecture of my heart and lungs into a wet, bleeding ruin. But it's been three years, and the pain has lost its gusto. All I feel now is an old, cold ache where it used to be. A chest packed with ice.

I'm doing *fine*.

"Louise wouldn't want this, Everett," he says softly. "She passed away, but you didn't. You *haven't*. Not yet. Meeting someone new will be good for you. Hell, doing anything new would be good for you. Remember when you used to live life for the story of it?"

I open my eyes and release the breath, then pull up the messages in the app. "I feel nothing, Sandeep. I want nothing. I can't even pick a movie anymore. How is it fair to put that on anyone?"

I scroll back through to the oldest messages, sent a week ago, with this Maisie person. He's chatted with her every day, pretending to be me like the pushy, boundary-abusing best friend he is. Only Sandeep was charming and funny, which I haven't managed to be in years, and she was kind, reserved, and quietly receptive to meeting. Maybe

even eager? When Sandeep finally asked if she'd like to get together, she opted for an immediate date instead of waiting until the virus scare had passed. The last message on the app reads:

Maisie-girl: Can't wait for tonight :)

"She sounds lonely," I murmur.

"I think she is," he agrees, then glances at my clock. "You really going to leave her hanging?"

My phone dings in my pocket. I check the notification screen instead of answering him.

Unknown Number: Your pre-scheduled Lyft ride has arrived!

Please meet your driver Jaxon at the designated location.

"I cannot believe you." I look up at him, but his smirk is gone, replaced by a sad smile. He places Chicken gently on the floor, then stands.

"I'd take you myself, but I'm feeling a little dodgy." He runs a hand over his stomach and grimaces. "Plus, I figured you'd have a harder time demanding a stranger turn around than me."

He's not wrong. My thumb hovers over the cancel-ride button.

"Come on, Everett. I want my best friend back." Sandeep holds my coat out to me. "*His* story isn't done."

Unknown Number: Your driver Jaxon is waiting.

Do you need to cancel ride? Y/N.

I sigh and take my coat, and Sandeep grabs me up into a long, tight hug.

CHAPTER TWO

*T Minus Two Hours and Five Minutes
Until Shit Hits the Fan*

Everett

“JAXON?” I PEER THROUGH THE TINTED WINDOWS OF THE BATTERED electric Chevy Spark with oversize tires parked outside my house. The window rolls down an inch, just enough so I can see the top of the man’s industrial-strength respirator-mask-and-goggles combo. He thumbs a garden-gloved hand toward the back seat, so I climb in, quickly adjusting my own N95 as I do. Being that the mask requirements came down just yesterday, Jaxon’s getup seems a little much.

Jaxon passes back an empty white paper bag, which I stare at blankly.

“For vomiting, man.”

“Ah, thanks.” I glance around the back seat, unnerved by the damp feel to the cloth seats. “Has that been . . . happening a lot?”

His eyes find mine in the rearview mirror, his furry eyebrows lifted beneath the goggles.

“Right,” I say to myself more than him, my eyes catching on something shiny in the front seat. An aluminum baseball bat juts up from the floorboard, in grabbing distance.

Well. That’s ominous.

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Durham's streets are strangely empty for a midsemester Friday night, but I guess that's to be expected when the NCAA postponed March Madness "indefinitely." Rumors among the faculty are that GI-27 is currently decimating the Tar Heels star lineup, which, if my last class's abysmal turnout is any indicator, is probably true. I haven't paid much attention to the virus outbreak. To be fair, I haven't paid much attention to anything, but now I'm wondering if I should have. Tonight, the quaint downtown looks unnaturally gray, as though a vampire drained all the life from its red, rusty bricks and evergreen awnings. One storefront, though, glows with a supernatural yellow-green neon sign spelling GATHERERS in loopy cursive. I sigh a fog into my mask, tickling the short stubble that perpetually lines my jaw. At least Sandeep got the choice of restaurant right. I've been living off Gatherers takeout for years.

"Thanks." I slap the top of the car as I close the door, but Jaxon's window rolls down another inch.

"Be careful out there, man." Behind the faceted Plexiglas shield, Jaxon's small smile is refracted back at me, more insectile than human. A shiver runs down my spine—a *feeling*. I marvel at it. It's the same thrill of unease a great horror movie seeds in the first few minutes.

Unfortunately, I don't *like* horror movies anymore.

Jaxon waggles his hand in the hang-ten surfer sign, the words "no pukies!" trailing out his window as his tiny car hums down the road.

"No pukies," I mumble in return, then try the door to Gatherers. It doesn't budge. I try again until a light tap on the window from inside calls my attention upward. A masked hostess on the other side of the glass gestures at the buzzer, which I press.

"Welcome to Gatherers! When was the last time you had diarrhea?" her bright voice, tinny through the speakers, burbles at me.

"Oh, um." I run a hand through my hair, blushing furiously beneath my mask. "Last year, maybe?"

“Do you currently have runny stools?”

I shake my head quickly.

“Vomiting? Gratuitous belching? Odorous gas?”

“Jesus, no!” I blurt. “I’m sorry—just, no.” I try to smile, but of course she can’t see it beneath my mask. The door clicks open, and a server appears on my left like a bolt of lightning, startling me back.

“Gloves and mask, sir.” The server thrusts a biohazard bin at me, which opens and refuses to close until I peel off my gloves and mask and toss them in. The hostess walks me to my table, which luckily is empty. After the surreal trip here, I need a few minutes to gather my wits and cuss Sandeep out some more.

Everett: I can’t believe you talked me into this. It’s
SO weird out here right now.

I stare at my phone for a minute or two longer, but no typing bubble appears, so I put it away and take several deep breaths. At least inside the restaurant it feels pretty normal. People are happily eating their wholesome vegan fare and chatting as if half the country isn’t trapped in the bathroom right now. My phone buzzes, and I pick it up, then nearly drop it in revulsion.

It’s a call from *my parents*.

I send it to voicemail on the second ring. I blink down at the cursed phone as if it could tell me what the illustrious Colonels Greer want with *me*, the disappointing offspring, on a Friday night. About five years ago, thanks to Louise and my sister Gemma’s not-so-gentle prodding, my parents and I reestablished communication, tentatively and with great reluctance on my part. It’s been exclusively over text and email up to now, but that’s their fifth call this week. All unanswered. Their texts are bad enough. I’m just not ready to hear their uncomfortable words, too.

Maybe they're calling about the virus—to check in and see if I'm okay. After a second, I pull up our text chain. The last message was sent more than a month ago.

Everett: Hey, I'm still fine, if that's what you're calling about. Can't talk now. I'm—

I pause. Am I going to be honest about this date? And if so, can I handle the resulting flood of overly encouraging texts and congratulations that, coming from my parents, would veer from tone-deaf to downright insulting? *Good to hear you've stopped wasting your life. Good to hear you're not a total coward. Good to hear, good to hear, good to hear . . .*

Nope.

—out for the evening. Hope you're both well, too, I finish with a magnanimous spirit, and press send.

There. But before I put my phone away, a missed-call notification pops up, too, from Gemma, our parents' offspring of choice. Even after the FDA fired her and she started working full-time at a rebel lab my father once described as “borderline seditious,” what did our decorated colonels-for-parents do?

Sign up for her underground newsletter on FDA corruption and blacklist the entire agency, of course. Dr. Gemma Greer can do no wrong.

Dr. *Everett* Greer, on the other hand . . . well. One child is a toxicologist, studying the effects of chemicals and pathogens on the human body in a clinical setting. The other is a film professor, who watches horror movies and is clinically depressed. It's an easy choice for them.

I actually consider calling Gemma back, because even though her obnoxious perfection makes my own substandard quality more apparent, my little sister is my favorite person.

God. I hope *she's* not sick.

Before I can make a decision either way, the front door buzzer sounds. I watch as a masked woman outside endures the same barrage of ultra-personal digestive questions with a straight back and slightly panicked eyes. She's immediately recognizable from her profile picture.

Looking at Maisie as she surrenders her mask and gloves to the hostess, it's hard to believe she'd want to meet a gangly dork of a professor at all. She looks like she could kick my ass. Strong, lean, lithe little body. Her platinum-blond hair is cut short on one side, revealing the tight line of her jaw, but a length of silky straight hair settles over the other side in a shaggy asymmetrical cut. The healthy golden hue to her skin sets off the pale blue of her eyes, and it's like an ethereal *Midsommar* May Queen just floated into this vegan restaurant.

My mouth goes dry, and I hurry to suck down some water so I don't greet her with a coughing fit.

She slides out of a black fleece jacket but refuses when the hostess offers to hang it up for her. Her eyes scan the restaurant, landing on mine with a little jolt I feel in my chest. Clutching her jacket, she walks steadily toward our small table in the back. Halfway over, she seems to remember to smile, and it's like invisible puppet strings suddenly yank her mouth upward.

Jesus, she looks *terrified*.

Something in me registers this and squeezes. Even though I desperately do not want to be here, it isn't her fault she got catfished. I resolve not to be a sad, sorry prick who makes her regret coming out on this surreal night to meet a stranger in the hopes of finding something more. I can be kind and polite for an hour over dinner. I rush to stand, nearly knocking over the small bistro table.

"Maisie? Hi, I'm Everett." I hold out a hand to shake hers, momentarily horrified at my own giant paw hanging there between us.

She stares at it, too, as though assessing whether the coiled snake before her is venomous.

After a second, she reaches out to shake it. “Hi. You’re—real.” Her lips twitch along that nervous smile. “I was worried that you, ah . . . weren’t.”

“Yep. It’s really me.” I internally cringe. I can’t tell her she was right to doubt my veracity. That the “Everett” she likes is just a picture and some sales words, a construct made by my best friend out of his misplaced hope that there’s still something inside me worth salvaging. I start to sit, but she hovers uncertainly.

“Could we switch seats? I have to face the door.”

“Ah—”

“I *have to*.”

“Oh . . . sure.” I slide around to the opposite seat, nearly knocking the table over *again* when I notice her real-deal combat boots. Her olive-green jumpsuit is formfitting but utilitarian, and the numerous pockets along her legs make a distinct clinking sound when she sits. I swallow. “Former military?”

Her head tilts to the side. “No. Why?”

Why? She’s dressed like Lara Croft, winter edition, that’s why. Add a pair of aviators, and she’d be the next *Top Gun*. Still, relief pulses through me. I come from a long, unforgiving line of career military officers, but somehow, the gene that allows you to click your heels together as you salute your commanding officer skipped me altogether. Thanks to my parents, military people turn me off as a rule.

“Just a guess.” I try to smile, but she looks away before I can manage it.

“It’s my jumpsuit, isn’t it,” she says, dismay lining her words.

“It does give a *G.I. Jane* vibe.” I offer the outdated reference lamely, like a soggy, room-temperature hors d’oeuvre on a platter.

Jesus. This is solid proof I'm not ready to date. I can't even speak to a beautiful woman.

"G.I. Jane." She frowns. "Who's that?"

"Demi Moore with a buzz cut?" I wave a hand at her confused expression, like *oh, don't mind me, I'm unable to emotionally connect with people, so I just make TV and film references nonstop*. "Old movie, never mind."

"I wore earrings," Maisie mumbles, her hand fluttering to one ear, where a minuscule gold hoop twinkles. The tops of her cheekbones are the color of sun-ripened peaches, and I realize belatedly that she's embarrassed. This gorgeous *Star Wars* rebel commander sitting across from weird, out-of-touch me is *embarrassed*.

And it's my fault.

"They look . . . lovely." The compliment comes out awkward and halting. I place my stupidly big hand over hers for a quick second, seriously when did my hands get so *large*, then retract it just as fast. "You look lovely, I mean. Also very prepared."

I mean the last part as a bit of a joke, but for the first time since she arrived, Maisie looks pleased and strangely hopeful. "Thanks. It's kind of a . . . hobby of mine."

"Being lovely?"

She laughs, the melodic, twinkling sound seeming to surprise us both. Immediately, I want to make her do it again.

Could Sandeep be right? After the amount of shit I gave him for catfishing this poor woman, that would be awkward. But maybe meeting new people *is* what I need at this point. It's been so long since I've had anything to give anyone, it's felt wrong to impose the weight of my existence on others. But there's something about the way Maisie's winter-blue eyes lock on to mine that feels like a hand on my shoulder, shaking me gently awake. Startling, and a little

scary, but undeniably arousing. Not in a sexual way, of course. Or romantic. She's just interesting.

"No." She smiles shyly. "Being prepared is, though."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask, a bit distracted by the *zing* of all my systems coming online for the first time in years. "For what?"

Excited, she starts to say something, but then flinches back like her hand was slapped. The easy smile disappears, and her blush has traveled all the way to the small, pale V of her exposed chest. Damn, what did I do wrong now?

"Can we start over?" Her voice is tentative. This lovely, strange, anxious bird of a woman, like if I made one quick move right now, tiny invisible wings would lift her away in a blur. My heart does that strange thing again, that *squeezing* thing, as our server takes our orders. Of course Maisie's nervous—the new virus has everyone spooked—and yet, here she is, in her cargo pants filled with god knows what, attempting small talk with a stranger. I feel sorry for her. That's what this is. Sympathy from one lonely person to another. An unexpected urge comes over me to wrap her in my arms and give her a long, comforting hug.

God. I could use one, too.

"Sure, starting over now." I sit up straighter, and this time when I try to smile, it works. "Hi, Maisie. I'm Everett." I reach for my glass of water.

"Hi, Everett," she recites, as if from a card. "Tell me about your trauma."

The sip of water I just took tries to exit my mouth like a fountain, and I choke it back.

"*Trauma?*" I croak. My brain fizzles over the exchange of messages between Sandeep and Maisie, but he never mentioned Louise, that I'd been married, or anything like that. Can she just . . . *tell?*

“It’s very brave that I’m asking this,” Maisie informs me, frowning while my coughing fit continues. “You should feel very safe.”

Sitting here, hacking up the spoonful of water intent on killing me while diners start to stare, facing strange questions from a—okay, I’m calling it—*strange woman* as two of the black-shirted staff narrow their eyes at me?

No. I don’t feel very safe. I feel like I want to escape this conversation, this attempted date, really the last three years.

“I’ll go first,” Maisie says, lifting her chin. “Someone I cared about died, and I felt bad about it.”

She looks at me expectantly until I finally manage to wheeze out, “Um. Me, too?”

At this, she leans over the table to touch my arm. It’s an awkward plop of the hand, right on my wrist.

We both look at it.

“I feel, so, *connected*. To, ah, you.” Her eyes flicker up to mine but don’t quite settle there, grazing somewhere around my forehead instead. “Do you feel the . . . connection between us? Because of our”—she swallows—“dead people?”

The server takes this moment to deliver our food, and Maisie lurches back in her seat.

I’ve never been so glad to see a rutabaga in my life. *Ugh*. This date *was* a bad idea, but I tried. I came here, I got dressed, I even showered. Nobody can fault me for giving up now.

Before he leaves, I tap him on the arm and mouth, *Box. Check. Now*.

When I turn back to the table, Maisie’s holding a rose. The red bud is slightly crushed, and the stem has been broken to fold into thirds, presumably to fit into one of her large cargo pockets. It hangs limply from her fist.

"This is for you," she pronounces, then lays the flower's mangled corpse in front of me. "Like me, the rose is beautiful and sweet, but it's guarded, too. Covered in thorns from all its trauma, unable to let others in, unable to trust. I am but a rose." She pauses this speech long enough to wince down at the poor flower. "So, you should watch out for my thorns."

My eyes widen. "Oh my god. Are you—"

"I'm not here to make friends, Everett!" she rushes out, panicked. "Are you sex-positive?"

"You *are*!" An incredulous laugh bubbles out of me. "You're reciting Shayla's speech from episode, what? Two? Of *Dreamsdate*?"

Maisie hangs her head, defeated. "Bits from episodes one through four, actually. I'm not good at dating. Shayla is, though, so I thought . . . I'm sorry, this was stupid."

The server reappears then with two boxes for our untouched food, the check, and a sympathetic smile. Maisie glances at him in surprise, then at me with horrible, heartbreaking understanding. He stands there, waiting, until I clear my throat.

"We're, ah, not ready just yet. Thanks."

"God, I really messed this up," Maisie says into her hands. She leans her whole face into them, refusing to look at me. "Just go, I'll pay."

My eyebrows pinch together as I regard her slumped shoulders. Maisie was so nervous about tonight she memorized lines from a reality dating show? All the discomfort I've felt in the last ten minutes evaporates into a tender, gentle regard. I may not be interested in dating this woman, or any woman ever again for that matter, but in this moment, I *do* feel strangely connected to Maisie. Not knowing how to talk to others or what to say. That was never a problem for me before Louise died, but ever since, it's like a curtain fell between me and everyone else, muffling their voices, obscuring their faces,

preventing me from finding and connecting with them at all. Is that how it's been for Maisie since she lost her someone, too? Was reciting lines from *Doomsdate* her painfully awkward way of trying to reach out and grasp my hand through her own curtain of isolating grief?

I can't leave her here like this. Louise would never forgive me.

I clear my throat again. "Not until we discuss how Shayla picked Jeremy over my boy Fawkes."

Maisie peeks out between two fingers. "I—hated Jeremy."

"Jeremy is the Antichrist and has the personality of a heel blister."

She hiccups out a laugh. "Fawkes isn't much better, though."

I lean over my rutabagas. "At least Fawkes doesn't go to Guy Fieri's tips specialist."

She frowns. "Who's Guy Fieri? And what's wrong with his tip?"

"Oh, god, don't say it like that," I groan. "I'm sex-positive, but not *that* sex-positive."

"His tip is sexual?" Her forehead wrinkles. "What?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Just the tip?"

She stares at me, waiting, and now I'm the one blushing.

"Mm, never mind." I smile, feeling soft and sorry for this strangely clueless person. "Maybe we should start over a third time?"

Maisie exhales a big sigh of relief. "Yes. This time, with no reality-TV speeches." She shakes her head. "Why do they call it reality TV when it all seems so fake?"

"You don't watch a lot of TV, do you?"

"No," Maisie admits. "I don't understand most of it, to be honest. I wasn't raised around TV, but I do enjoy baking shows. Do you like TV?" she asks tentatively, as though she's not sure this is a good date question but is going to try it anyway.

Luckily for me, it is.

"I love TV. It's my job. Movies, too, but I've had a harder time getting into them lately. *Doomsdate* has me in a choke hold, though."

Maisie's eyes trail down my jaw to my throat, then bob back up again, flustered. She frowns. "I thought you were a professor."

"I am." I rub my chin, not baiting her *per se*, but curious to see if her eyes track that movement, too. She looks at me so intently, like she's studying me. "I'm a TV and film studies professor. Pop culture is my profession, but I specialize in horror movies."

"You . . . teach TV? To *children*?"

"I teach story," I say, a smidgen of my new goodwill toward her disappearing. "To adults." I tilt my head to the side. "Well. Technically adults."

We share a smile at that. I ask her about actuarial science then, which is actually interesting, though I don't make that joke because she's probably heard it a million times. The science of determining the probability of bad things—no wonder she's anxious and copes by practicing lethal martial arts in her free time.

A loud *crack!* sounds against the glass storefront, and Maisie snaps to attention, her hand darting to her belt. Jesus, is she armed? I whip around in my seat along with everyone else and see a man with wild eyes smack his hand against the glass door again. "Let me in!" he yells, just audible through the growing murmurs of the diners. "Let me in!"

Two Gatherers employees dressed in all black walk quickly through the dining room, wearing full masks and gloves, and exit the restaurant just as fast. They each take an arm of the man, and then all three promptly disappear down the sidewalk.

I turn back to face Maisie. "That was weird."

She shrugs a shoulder. "Must've answered the diarrhea question wrong."

The laugh exits me with such force, it's startling. A few other patrons glare at me in reproach, but Maisie shares a private smile with me, and I find I don't mind the others' stares quite as much.