



WEDNESDAY, MAY 1ST
108 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

SOME PEOPLE ARE natural storytellers. They know how to set the scene, find the right angle, when to pause for dramatic effect or breeze past inconvenient details.

I wouldn't have become a librarian if I didn't love stories, but I've never been great at telling my own.

If I had a penny for every time I interrupted my own anecdote to debate whether this actually *had* happened on a Tuesday, or if it had in fact been *Thursday*, then I'd have at least forty cents, and that's way too big a chunk of my life wasted for way too small of a payout.

Peter, on the other hand, would have zero cents and a rapt audience.

I especially loved the way he told *our* story, about the day we met.

It was late spring, three years ago. We lived in Richmond at the time, a mere five blocks separating his sleek apartment in a renovated Italianate from my shabby-not-quite-chic version of the same kind of place.

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On my way home from work, I detoured through the park, which I never did, but the weather was perfect. And I was wearing a floppy-brimmed hat, which I never had, but Mom mailed it to me the week before, and I felt like I owed it to her to at least *try* it out. I was reading as I walked—which I’d vowed to stop doing because I’d nearly caused a bike accident doing so weeks earlier—when suddenly, a warm breeze caught the hat’s brim. It lifted off my head and swooped over an azalea bush. Right to a tall, handsome blond man’s feet.

Peter said this felt like an invitation. Laughed, almost self-deprecatingly, as he added, “I’d never believed in fate before that.”

If it *was* fate, then it’s reasonable to assume fate *a little bit* hates me, because when he bent to retrieve the hat, another gust swept it into the air, and I chased after it right into a trash can.

The metal kind, bolted to the ground.

My hat landed atop a pile of discarded lo mein, the lip of the can smashed into my rib cage, and I did a wheezing pratfall into the grass. Peter described this as “adorably clumsy.”

He left out the part where I screamed a string of expletives.

“I fell in love with Daphne the moment I looked up from her hat,” he’d say, no mention of the trash-noodles in my hair.

When he asked if I was okay, I said, “Did I kill a bicyclist?”

He thought I’d hit my head. (Nope, just bad at first impressions.)

Over the last three years, Peter dusted off *Our Story* every chance he got. I was sure he’d work it into both our vows *and* his wedding reception speech.

But then his bachelor party happened, and everything changed.

The story tipped onto its side. Found a fresh point of view. And in this new telling of it, I was no longer *the leading lady*, but instead the teensy complication that would forever be used to jazz up *their* story.

Daphne Vincent, the librarian that Peter plucked out of the trash,

nearly married, then dumped the morning after his bachelor party for his “platonic” “best” “friend,” Petra Comer.

Then again, when would he even need to tell their story?

Everyone around Peter Collins and Petra Comer knew their history: How they’d met in third grade when forced into alphabetical seating, bonding over a shared love of Pokémon. How, soon after, their mothers became friends while chaperoning an aquarium field trip, with their fathers to follow suit.

For the last quarter of a century, the Collinses and the Comers vacationed together. They celebrated birthdays, ate Christmas brunches, decorated their homes with handmade picture frames from which Peter’s and Petra’s faces beamed out beneath some iteration of the phrase *BEST FRIENDS FOREVER*.

This, Peter told me, made him and the most gorgeous woman I’d ever met *more like cousins than friends*.

As a librarian, I really should’ve taken a moment to think about *Mansfield Park* or *Wuthering Heights*, all those love stories and twisted Gothics wherein two protagonists, raised side by side, reach adulthood and proclaim their undying love for each other.

But I didn’t.

So now here I am, sitting in a tiny apartment, scrolling through Petra’s public social media, seeing every detail of her new courtship with my ex-fiancé.

From the next room, Jamie O’Neal’s rendition of “All By Myself” plays loudly enough to make the coffee table shiver. My next-door neighbor, Mr. Dorner, pounds on the wall.

I barely hear it, because I’ve just reached a picture of Peter and Petra, sandwiched between both sets of their parents, on the shore of Lake Michigan—six abnormally attractive people smiling abnormally white smiles over the caption, *The best things in life are worth waiting for*.

As if on cue, the music ratchets up.

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I slam my computer shut and peel myself off the sofa. This apartment was built pre-global warming, when Northern Michiganders had no need for air-conditioning, but it's only May first and already the apartment turns into a brick oven around midday.

I cross to the bedroom hallway and knock on Miles's door. He doesn't hear me over Jamie. I escalate to pounding.

The music stops.

Footsteps shuffle closer. The door swings open, and a weed fog wafts out.

My roommate's dark brown eyes are ringed in pink, and he's in nothing but a pair of boxers and a funky knitted afghan wrapped around his shoulders like a very sad cape. Considering the overall climate of our hotbox apartment, I can only assume this is for modesty's sake. Seems like overkill for a man who, just last night, forgot I lived with him long enough to take a whole-ass shower with the door wide open.

His chocolate-brown hair sticks up in every direction. His matching beard is pure chaos. He clears his throat. "What's up."

"Everything okay?" I ask, because while I'm used to a *disheveled* Miles, I'm less used to hearing him blast the saddest song in the world.

"Yep," he says. "All good."

"Could you turn the music down," I say.

"I'm not listening to music," he says, dead serious.

"Well, you paused it," I say, in case he really is simply too high to remember more than three seconds back. "But it's really loud."

He scratches one eyebrow with the back of his knuckle, frowning. "I'm watching a movie," he says. "But I can turn it down. Sorry."

Without even meaning to, I'm peering over his shoulder to get a better look.

Unlike the rest of our apartment, which was perfectly tidy when I arrived and is still perfectly tidy, his room is disastrous. Half of his

records are stacked atop the milk crates they ostensibly belong inside. His bed is unmade, a rumpled comforter and the sheet untucked all the way around. Two tattered flannel shirts hang out of his mostly closed dresser drawers, like little ghosts he's pinned there, midescape.

In direct opposition to the creams and taupes of my room, his is a messy, cozy mix of rusts, mustards, seventies greens. Where my books are neatly organized along my bookcase and the shelf I installed above my window, his (very few) are face down, spines cracked, on the floor. Electronics manuals, loose tools, and an open bag of Sour Patch Kids are scattered across his desk, and on his windowsill, a stick of incense burns between a few surprisingly vivacious houseplants.

His TV, though, is what catches my eye. Onscreen is the image of a thirty-year-old Renée Zellweger, sporting red pajamas and belting a song into a rolled-up magazine.

"Oh my god, Miles," I say.

"What?" he says.

"You're watching *Bridget Jones's Diary*?"

"It's a good movie!" he cries, a little defensive.

"It's a great movie," I say, "but this scene is, like, one minute long."

He sniffs. "So?"

"So why has it been playing for at least"—I check my phone—"the last eight minutes?"

His dark brows knit together. "Did you need something, Daphne?"

"Could you just turn it down?" I say. "All the plates are rattling in the cabinets and Mr. Dorner's trying to bust down the living room wall."

Another sniff. "You want to watch?" he offers.

In there?

Too big of a tetanus risk. An ungenerous thought, sure, but I

have recently tapped out my supply of generosity. That's what happens when your life partner leaves you for the nicest, sunniest, prettiest woman in the state of Michigan.

"I'm good," I tell Miles.

We both just stand there. This is as much as we ever interact. I'm about to break the record. My throat tickles. My eyes burn. I add, "And could you please not smoke inside?"

I would've asked sooner, except that, technically, the apartment is his. He did me a huge favor letting me move in.

Then again, it's not like he had many options. His girlfriend had just moved out.

Into *my* apartment.

With *my* fiancé.

He needed to replace Petra's half of their shared rent. I needed a place to sleep. Did I say sleep? I meant weep.

But I've been here three weeks now, and I'm tired of showing up to work smelling like I came straight from the least famous of the Grateful Dead's spin-off bands' concerts.

"I stick my head out the window," Miles says.

"What," I say.

Immediately I picture a chocolate Labrador riding in a car, its mouth open and eyes squinting into the wind. The few times Miles and I met before all this, on awkward double dates with our now-partnered partners, that's what he'd reminded me of. Friendly and wiry with an upturned nose that made him look a bit impish, and teeth that were somehow *too* perfect in contrast to his scruffy face.

The toll of the last three weeks has given him a slightly feral edge—a Labrador bitten by a werewolf and dumped back at the pound. Relatable, honestly.

"I stick my head out the window when I smoke," he clarifies.

"Okay," I say. That's all I've got. I turn to go.

"You sure you don't want to watch the movie?" he says.

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Oh, god.

The truth is, Miles seems like a nice guy. A really nice guy! And I imagine that what he's feeling right now must be comparable to my own total emotional decimation. I *could* take him up on his offer, go sit in his room on an unmade bed and watch a romantic comedy while absorbing fifteen hundred grams of weed smoke via my pores. Maybe it would be nice even, to pretend for a bit that we're friends rather than strangers trapped together in this nightmare of a breakup.

But there are better uses of my Wednesday night.

"Maybe some other time," I say, and go back to my computer to continue looking for new jobs, far away from Peter and Petra, and far away from Waning Bay, Michigan.

I wonder if Antarctica is in need of a children's librarian.

One hundred and eight days, and then I'm out of here.

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BACK IN APRIL BEFORE I KNEW I NEEDED TO LEAVE

HERE'S HOW THE rest of the story goes, when I'm the one telling it: Peter Collins and I fell in love one day in the park, when the wind swept my hat from my head.

I am arguably the world's worst small-talker, but he didn't want to small-talk.

When I told him the hat was a gift from my mother, he wanted to know if we were close, where she lived now, what the gift was for, and by the way, *Happy birthday, are you a birthday person?* And when I told him, *Thank you, and yes, yes, I am*, he volunteered that he was too, that his family always treated birthdays like huge personal successes rather than markers of time. And when I told him that sounded beautiful, the birthdays and his family, he said, *They're the reason I've always wanted a big family of my own someday*, and at that point, I already would've been a goner, even if he hadn't asked me right then, as if there wasn't garbage sticking to my chestnut-brown hair, *What about you? Do you want a big family?*

Dating in my late twenties had been hell. This was the kind of

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question I'd usually ask right before the guy on the other end of the phone ghosted me. As if it had been a formal proposition: *Should we skip grabbing a drink and maybe freeze some embryos, just in case?*

Peter was different. Stable, steady, practical. The kind of person I could imagine trusting, which didn't come naturally to me.

Within five weeks, we'd moved in together, synced our lives, friend groups, and schedules. At the first over-the-top birthday party I ever threw him, Peter's and my respective best friends in Richmond, Cooper and Sadie, hit it off and started dating too.

Within a year, Peter proposed. I said yes.

A year later, while wedding planning, we started looking for a house to buy. His parents, two of the loveliest people I've ever met, sent him the listing for a gorgeous old house not far from them in the lakeside Michigan town he'd grown up in.

He'd always wanted to get back there, and now that his software development job had gone remote, nothing was stopping him.

My mom lived in Maryland by then. My dad, a title that really deserves to have scare quotes around it, was out in Southern California. Sadie and Cooper were toying with the possibility of moving to Denver.

And as much as I loved my job in Richmond, what I really wanted—what I'd *always* wanted—was to be a *children's* librarian, and lo and behold, the Waning Bay Public Library was looking to fill that exact position.

So we bought the house in Michigan.

Well, *he* bought it. I had terrible credit and slim savings. He covered the down payment *and* insisted on paying the mortgage.

He'd always been so generous, but it felt like too much. Sadie didn't understand my hang-ups—I let Cooper pay for literally *everything*, she'd say, *he makes a shit-ton more than me*—but Sadie hadn't been raised by Holly Vincent.

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There was no way my badass, hyperindependent mother would approve of me relying on Peter so heavily, and so I didn't approve either.

He came up with a compromise: I'd furnish the place, add piece-meal to the assortment of furniture we'd brought from Richmond, while he covered the bills.

Most of his far-flung friends had cushy white-collar jobs and could afford to take a separate trip for his bachelor party. Whereas Sadie and the rest of my friends were mostly other librarians—or booksellers, or aspiring writers—who couldn't afford two separate trips. Thus, she and Cooper would fly in a few days before the summer ceremony instead, and we'd do my bachelorette then.

So, three weeks ago, in early April, Peter trudged out for his Night on the Town and I stayed behind to read in our new butter-yellow Victorian. For the first few stops of the night, he texted me cute group shots. His brother, Ben, up from Grand Rapids, and his high school buddy Scott, with whom I'd *finally* managed to bond by reading the first four *Dune* novels, along with some other Richmond friends. They all had their arms slung around each other, Peter splitting center—in every picture—with his willowy, platinum-haired, cat-eyed goddess of a best friend, one Petra Comer.

Petra's boyfriend, Miles, had *not* been invited to the bachelor party. Peter didn't *hate* Miles. He just didn't think Miles was good enough for Petra, because Miles is a stoner without a college degree.

Petra is *also* a stoner without a college degree, but I guess it's different when you're a perfect ten with a picturesque family and well-padded bank account. Then you're not a stoner; you're a *free spirit*.

Another thing that must, despite my greatest wishes, be mentioned: Petra is preternaturally nice.

She's that woman who's instantly *familiar* with everyone, in a way that makes you feel chosen. Always grabbing your arm, laugh-

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ing at your jokes, suggesting you try her lip gloss in the bathroom, then insisting you keep it because “it’s better with your coloring.”

I really didn’t want to be jealous of her. It made sense that she went to his bachelor party. She was his best friend. It made sense that I *didn’t* go. That’s how this antiquated tradition works.

I’d hoped to stay awake long enough to shove a glass of water and some ibuprofen into Peter’s drunken hand when he got home, but I drifted off on the couch.

When I jolted awake at the click of the front door, it was full bright in the living room, so I could see Peter’s surprise at finding me there.

He looked, honestly, like he’d stumbled upon a woman who’d broken into his house and boiled his pet rabbit, rather than his loving fiancée curled on the sofa. But still the alarm bells didn’t go off.

It was hard to feel too panicky with Peter nearby, looking like the very least inventive depiction of the archangel Michael. Six foot four, golden-blond hair, green eyes, and a strong Roman nose.

Not that I have any clue what a Roman nose is. But whenever a historical romance writer mentions one, I think of Peter’s.

“You’re back,” I croaked and got up to greet him. He stiffened in my hug, and I pulled away, my hands still locked against the back of his neck. He took hold of my wrists and unwound them from him, holding them between our chests.

“Can we talk for a minute?” he asked.

“Of course?” I said it like a question. It was.

He walked me to the couch and sat me down. Then, as far as I could figure, a couple of tectonic plates must have smashed together, because the whole world lurched, and my ears started ringing so loudly I could only catch bits of what he was saying. None of it could be right. It didn’t make sense.

Too much to drink . . .

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Everyone went home, but we stayed back to sober up . . .

One thing led to another and . . .

God, I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you, but . . .

"You cheated on me?" I finally squeaked out, while he was in the middle of yet another indecipherable sentence.

"No!" he said. "I mean, it wasn't like that. We're . . . She told me she's in love with me, Daphne. And I realized I am too. In love. With her. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

Some more sorries.

Some more ringing ears.

Some more platitudes.

No. No, he didn't cheat on me? No, he simply confessed his love to someone who was *not* me? I was trying to jam the pieces of the puzzle together, but nothing fit. Every sentence he said was incompatible with the last.

Finally my hearing caught on something that seemed important, if only I could figure out the context: *a week*.

"A week?" I said.

He nodded. "She's waiting for me now, so we can leave right away. Not be in your hair while you figure things out."

"A week," I repeated, still not understanding.

"I looked online." He shifted forward on the couch to pull a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket, and handed it to me.

Some truly deluded part of me thought it would be an apology note, a love letter that made all of this . . . not *okay*, but maybe *salvageable*.

Instead it was a printout of local apartment listings.

"You're moving out?" I choked.

A flush crept up his neck, his eyes darting toward the front door.

"Well, no," he said. "The house is in *my* name, so . . ."

He trailed off, expecting me to fill in the blank.

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Finally, I did.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Peter?" I jumped up. I didn't feel hurt then. That would come later. First it was all rage.

He stood too, brows shooting toward his perfect hairline. "We didn't mean for this to happen."

"Of course she fucking meant for this to happen, Peter! She had twenty-five years to tell you she was in love with you and chose *last night!*"

"She didn't realize," he said, defensive of her. Protecting *her* from the blast of this emotional fallout while I was here on my own. "Not until she was faced with *losing* me."

"You brought me here!" I half screamed. At the end, it turned into a sort of deranged laugh. "I left my friends. My apartment. My job. My *entire life*."

"I feel so terrible," he said. "You have no idea."

"I have no idea how bad *you* feel?" I demanded. "Where am I supposed to go?"

He gestured to the apartment listings, now on the ground. "Look," he said. "We're going out of town to give you space to figure things out. We won't be back until next Sunday."

We.

Back.

Oh.

Oh, god.

It wasn't just that I was expected to move out.

She was moving in. After they got back from a sexy new-couple vacation that was being pitched to me like an act of kindness for my benefit. I almost asked where they were going, but the last thing I needed was a mental picture of them kissing in front of the Eiffel Tower.

(Wrong. I'd later learn they'd been kissing along the Amalfi Coast.)

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"I'm really sorry, Daph," he said, and leaned in to kiss my forehead like some benevolent father figure, regretfully shipping off for war to do his duty.

I shoved him away, and his eyes widened in shock for just a second. Then he nodded, somberly, and headed for the door, totally empty-handed. Like he had everything he needed and not a lick of it was in this house.

As the door fell shut, something snapped in me.

I grabbed one of the bulk containers of Jordan almonds Mrs. Collins had picked up on her last Costco trip, and ran outside, still in the silk pajamas Peter bought me last Christmas.

He cast a wild-eyed look over his shoulder at me as he hoisted himself into the passenger seat of Petra's open-top Jeep. She kept her face decidedly pointed away.

"You are such a fucking asshole!" I hurled a handful of almonds at him.

He gave a yelp. I threw another handful at the tailgate. Petra started the car.

I chased them down the driveway, then threw the whole bucket at the Jeep. It hit a wheel and went skidding to the side of the road as they peeled off into the sunset.

Sunrise. Whatever.

"Where am I going to go?" I asked feebly as I sank onto the dew-damp grass of our—*their*—front yard.

I stayed there watching the road for probably ten minutes. Then I went back inside and cried so hard it might've made me vomit, if I hadn't completely forgotten to eat the night before. I wasn't much of a cook, and besides that, Peter was extremely careful with his diet. Low carbs, high protein. I dug around our understocked cabinets and started making Easy Mac.

Then someone started pounding on the door.

Fool that I am, my only guess was that Peter had come back.

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That he'd made it to the airport only for a burst of clarity to send him racing home to me.

But when I opened the door, I found Miles, red-eyed from either crying or smoking, and brandishing a three-sentence note that Petra had left him on their coffee table, as if it were a pitchfork or maybe a flag of surrender.

"Is she here?" he asked thickly.

"No." Numbness settled over me. "I threw some almonds at them and they drove away."

He nodded, the sorrow deepening across his face, as if he knew exactly what that meant, and it wasn't good.

"Shit," he rasped, slumping against the doorframe.

I swallowed a knot that felt like barbed wire. Or maybe it was a tangle of the Vincent family practicality I'd inherited from my mother, that old familiar ability to use those negative emotions as fuel to Get. Shit. Done.

"Miles," I said.

He looked up, his expression wrecked but with a bit of hope lurking somewhere between his eyebrows. Like he thought I might announce this whole thing was an extremely fun and not socio-pathic prank.

"How many bedrooms does your apartment have?" I asked.

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SATURDAY, MAY 18TH
91 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

HONESTLY, MILES NOWAK is a good roommate.

Aside from occasional invitations to watch a movie, or texts to ask whether I need anything from the market, he leaves me to my own devices. After my request that he only smoke outside, he really must have stopped merely *sticking his head out the window*, because weeks pass without me smelling weed in the hallway. There's no more mournful blasting of Jamie O'Neal either. In fact, he seems totally fine. I never would've guessed he was a man fresh off a horrible heartbreak if I hadn't seen his face six weeks ago, on the day it happened.

Without discussing it, we pretty easily figured out a bathroom schedule that works. He's a night owl, and I usually get up around six thirty or seven in the morning, regardless of whether I'm working the library's opening shift or not. And since he's rarely home, he never leaves stacks of dirty dishes "soaking" in the sink.

But the apartment itself is tiny. My bedroom is a glorified closet. In fact, Petra used it as one, when she lived here.

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A year ago, the meager dimensions wouldn't have been a problem.

As long as I could remember, I'd been a staunch minimalist. From the time my parents separated, Mom and I had moved around a lot, chasing promotions at the bank where she worked, and then, eventually, helping open new branches. We never had professional movers, just the help of whichever guy was trying and failing to score a date with Mom at the time, so I learned to travel light.

I made a sport of figuring out the absolute least amount of things I needed. It helped that I was such a library kid and didn't have metric tons of annotated paperbacks. Books were the only thing I was gluttonous about, but I didn't care about owning them so much as absorbing their contents.

Once, before a move in high school, I convinced Mom to do a ceremonial burning of all the A+ tests and papers she'd been stockpiling on our fridge. We turned on the little gas fireplace in the living room—the *only* thing we both agreed we'd miss about that mildew-riddled apartment—and I started tossing things in.

It was the only time I'd seen her cry. She was my best friend and favorite person in the world, but she wasn't a *soft* woman. I'd always thought of her as completely invulnerable.

But that night, watching my old physics test blacken and curl, her eyes welled and she said in a thick voice, "Oh, Daph. Who am I going to be when you go off to college?"

I snuggled closer to her, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "You're still going to be you," I told her. "The best mom on the planet."

She kissed me on the head, said, "Sometimes I wish I held on to a little bit more."

"It's just stuff," I reminded her, her own constant refrain.

Life, I'd learned, is a revolving door. Most things that come into it only stay awhile.

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The men hell-bent on proving their feelings for Mom eventually gave up and moved on. The friends from the last school who promised to write faded from the rearview in a month or two. The boy who called you every day after one magical summer night outside the Whippy Dipper would return to school in the fall holding someone else's hand.

There was no point clinging to something that wasn't really yours. Mom was the only permanent thing in my life, the only thing that mattered.

When she put me on a plane to send me off to undergrad, neither of us cried. Instead we stood hugging each other so long and tight that later, I found a bruise on my shoulder. My entire wardrobe of solid-colored basics fit into one suitcase, and we'd shipped the jute rug we'd found on clearance, along with a mug, bowl, set of silverware, and hot pot, which Mom joked would allow me to make all of my major food groups: tea, Easy Mac, and Top Ramen.

That was two states and five apartments ago. In all that time, I'd managed to accumulate very little clutter.

Then Peter and I moved into the Waning Bay house, with its wraparound porch. That day, he scooped me into his arms, carried me over the threshold, and said three magic words that changed my little minimalist heart forever.

Welcome home, Daphne.

Just like that, something in me relaxed, my gooiest parts oozing out beyond my heretofore carefully maintained boundaries.

Until that moment, I'd carried my life like a handkerchief knapsack at the end of a broom handle, something small and containable I could pick up and move at the drop of a hat. And I never knew what it was I was running from, or to, until he said it.

Home. The word stoked an ember in my chest. Here was the permanence I'd been waiting for. A place that would belong to us. And yes, our uneven financial situations complicated that own-

ership, but while he paid the bills, I could focus on cozying the place up.

My minimalism went out the window.

Now all that *stuff*—furniture intended for a three-bedroom house—was stuffed into Miles’s guest room. Furniture wall to wall, all of it butting right up against each other, throw pillows utterly covering my bed, like I was some unhinged Stephen King villain who might handcuff you to the headboard and mother you to death.

I should’ve left all of this shit behind, but I felt too guilty about the money I’d spent, outfitting a home that wasn’t even mine.

Then there was the wedding paraphernalia, shoved into every closet the apartment had, the overpriced dress hanging on the other side of a thin laminate slider door—a telltale heart, a Dorian Gray portrait, a deep dark secret.

In theory, I’m going to sell the dress and the rest of it online, but doing so would require *thinking* about the wedding, and I’m not there yet.

In fact, I’ve spent the first seven hours of my Saturday morning shift pushing any thought of the Wedding That Never Was out of my mind.

Then my phone buzzes on my desk with a text from Miles: ur working

This is how he texts. With abbreviations, very little context, and no punctuation.

Is he asking me or telling me that I’m working? Neither makes sense. I have a detailed whiteboard calendar in the kitchen where he can clearly see exactly where I’m going to be and when. I check it against my phone calendar nightly, and I invited him to add his own schedule, but he’s never taken me up on it.

Yep, I say.

Another text: U want Thai

I’m guessing that’s another implied question mark, though it’s

unclear whether he's asking about ordering dinner or if it's more of an existential question.

I'm good, thanks, I write. Every day on my lunch break, I go to one of the three food trucks at the public beach across the street. Saturdays are a burrito day, so I'll be stuffed for hours.

K, Miles writes.

Then he types some more and stops. I wonder if he's fishing for an offer to pick up the aforementioned Thai on my way home.

Anything else? I write back.

He replies, I'll just c u when u get home.

Strange. On Saturdays, he's usually in his room or out for the night by the time I get back. My phone vibrates again, but it's just my ten-minute warning for Story Hour. I gather my supplies and head to the sunken-living-room-style Story Nook at the back of the library. Kids and their keepers are already gathering in the little pit, claiming carpet squares or heavily Lysoled gymnastic mats. Some of the older caretakers, grandparents and great-grandparents, ease themselves into the scoop chairs arranged around the outer ring of the nook, the regulars greeting each other.

The library's back wall of windows bathes the nook in sunlight, and I can already tell who will be nodding off by book two.

Still, a chorus of ridiculous little voices rises as I approach, cries of "Miss Daffy!" and other adorable mispronunciations of my name. In my heart, it feels like little kernels are bursting into fluffy blossoms of popcorn.

One little girl announces, as I walk past, "I'm three!" and I tell her that's awesome, and ask how old she thinks I am.

After brief consideration, she tells me I'm a teenager.

Last week she said I was one hundred, so I'm taking this as a win. Before I can respond, a four-year-old named Arham I've literally never seen *not* in a Spider-Man costume flings himself at me, hugging my knees.

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No matter how foul my mood, Story Hour always helps.

"Sweetie," Arham's mother, Huma, says, reaching to peel him away before we topple.

"Who here likes dragons?" I ask, to near-unanimous cheering.

There are a lot of sweet families who've become regulars since I started here a year ago, but Huma and Arham are two of my favorites. He's endlessly energetic and imaginative, and she rides that magical line of keeping firm rules without squashing his little weirdo spirit. Seeing them together always makes my heart ache a little bit.

Makes me miss my own mom.

Makes me miss the life I thought I'd have with Peter, and the rest of the Collinses.

I shake myself out of the cloud of melancholy and settle into my chair with the first of today's picture books in my lap. "What about tacos?" I ask the kids. "Does anyone like those?"

Somehow, the kids manage even more enthusiasm for tacos than they did for dragons. When I ask if they already knew that dragons love tacos, their shrieks of delight are earsplitting. Arham jumps up, the heels of his sneakers flashing red as he shouts, "Dragons eat people!"

I tell him that some maybe do, but others just eat tacos, and that's as good of a segue as I'm going to get into *Dragons Love Tacos* by Adam Rubin, illustrated by Daniel Salmieri.

No part of my week goes as fast as Story Hour does. I get so sucked into it that I usually only remember I'm at work when I close the last book of the day.

Just as I predicted, the energy that greeted me has fizzled, the kids mostly settling into pleasant sleepiness in time to pack it in and head home, except for one of the Fontana triplets, who's tired enough to devolve into a minor meltdown as her mom is trying to get her and her siblings out the door.

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I wave goodbye to the last stragglers, then start tidying the nook, spraying the mats down, gathering trash, returning abandoned books to the front desk to be reshelfed.

Ashleigh, the librarian responsible for our adult patrons and programming, slips out from the back office, her gigantic quilted purse slung over one shoulder and her raven topknot jutting slightly to the right.

Despite being a five-foot-tall hourglass of a woman with Disney Princess eyes, Ashleigh is the embodiment of the scary-librarian stereotype. Her voice has the force of a blunt object, and she once told me she “doesn’t mind confrontation” in a tone that made me wonder if maybe we were already *in* one. She’s the person that our septuagenarian branch manager, Harvey, deploys whenever a difficult patron needs a firm hand.

My first shift working alongside her, a middle-aged guy with a wad of dip in his cheek walked up, stared at her boobs, and said, “I’ve always had a thing for *exotic* girls.”

Without even looking up from her computer, Ashleigh replied, “That’s inappropriate, and if you speak to me like that again, we’ll have to ban you. Would it be helpful if I printed you some literature about sexual harassment?”

All that to say, I admire and fear her in equal measure.

“You good to lock up?” she asks now, while texting. Another thing about Ashleigh: she’s always late, and usually leaves a bit early. “I have to pick up Mulder from tae kwon do,” she says.

Yes, her son is named after David Duchovny’s character from *The X-Files*.

Yes, every time I remember this, I inch closer to death.

I’m now old enough to have kids without anyone being scandalized by it.

Hell, I’m old enough to have a daughter named Renesmee on

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one of those U-5 soccer teams where the kids take turns kicking the ball the wrong way, then sitting down midfield to take off their shoes.

Instead, I'm single and unattached in a place where I only know my coworkers and my ex-fiancé's inner circle.

"Daphne?" Ashleigh says. "You good?"

"Yep," I tell her. "You go ahead."

She nods in lieu of a goodbye. I circle the library one last time, flicking off the fluorescents as I go.

On the drive home, I call my mom on speakerphone. With how busy she is with CrossFit, her book club, and the stained-glass class she's started taking, we've started opting for more, quicker calls these days, rather than twice-a-month hours-long catch-ups.

I tell her about how things are shaping up with planning the library's end-of-summer fundraiser (ninety-one days to go). She tells me she can now deadlift one hundred and sixty pounds. I tell her about the seventy-year-old patron who asked me to go salsa dancing, and she tells me about the twenty-eight-year-old trainer who keeps trying to find reasons to exchange phone numbers.

"We lead such similar lives," I muse, parking on the curb.

"I *wish*. I don't think Kelvin had salsa dancing in mind or I might've said yes," she says.

"Well, I'm happy to pass along this guy's number to you, but you should know my coworker Ashleigh calls him *Handsy Stanley*."

"You know what, I'm good," she says. "And I'm also sending you pepper spray."

"I still have the can you got me in college," I say. "Unless it expires."

"Probably just gets better with age," she says. "I'm almost to book club. What about you?"

I open my car door. "Just got home. Same time Monday?"

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"Sounds good," she says.

"Love you," I tell her.

"Love you more," she says quickly, then hangs up before I can argue, a bit she's done as long as I can remember.

Miles lives on the third floor of a renovated brick warehouse at the edge of Waning Bay, in a neighborhood called Butcher Town. I assume it used to be the city's meatpacking district, but I've never Googled it, so I don't know, maybe it's named after an old-timey serial killer.

By the time I climb the stairs and reach the front door, I'm clammy with sweat, and inside I drop my tote and wrestle out of my cardigan before toeing off my loafers. Then I check my phone calendar against the whiteboard. The only thing that's changed since last night is, I agreed to host the Thrills and Kills book club on Thursday while Landon, the patron services assistant who usually runs it, recovers from his root canal.

I scribble the book club onto the board, then grab a glass and fill it with cold water. As I chug, I amble toward the living room. In the corner of my eye, a sudden movement surprises me so badly I yelp and slosh half my glass onto the rug.

But it's just Miles. Lying face down on the couch. He groans without so much as lifting his face out of the squashy cushion. His furniture is all comfort, no sex appeal.

"You looked dead," I tell him, moving closer.

He grumbles something.

"What?" I ask.

"I said *I wish*," he mumbles.

I eye the bottle of coconut rum on the table and the empty mug beside it. "Rough day?"

I'd been caught off guard by the *Bridget Jones* incident three weeks ago, but now it's almost a relief to see him *looking* how I've spent the last month and a half feeling.

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FUNNY STORY

Without lifting his face, he feels around on the coffee table to grab a piece of paper, then holds it aloft.

I walk over and take the delicate square of off-white parchment from his hand. Instantly, he lets his arm flop down to his side. I start reading the elegant script slanting across it.

*Jerome & Melly Collins along with
Nicholas & Antonia Comer joyfully invite
you to celebrate the marriage of their children,
Peter & P—*

“NO.” I fling the invitation away from me like it’s a live snake.

A live snake that must *also* be on fire, because suddenly I am so, so, so hot. I take a few steps, fanning myself with my hands. “No,” I say. “This can’t be real.”

Miles sits up. “Oh, it’s real. You got one too.”

“Why the *hell* would they invite us?” I demand. Of him, of them, of the universe.

He leans forward and tips more coconut rum into his mug, filling it to the brim. He holds it out in offering. When I shake my head, he throws it back and pours some more.

I grab the invitation again, half expecting to realize my brain had merely malfunctioned while I was reading a take-out menu.

It did not.

“This is Labor Day weekend!” I shriek, throwing it away from me again.

“I know,” Miles says. “They couldn’t stop at simply ruining our lives. They had to ruin a perfectly good holiday too. Probably won’t even decorate this year.”

“I mean, *this* Labor Day,” I say. “Like, only a month after *our* wedding.”

Miles looks up at me, genuine concern contorting his face.

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"Daphne," he says. "I think that ship sailed when he fucked my girlfriend, then took her to Italy for a week so he didn't have to help you pack."

I'm hyperventilating now. "Why would they get married this fast? We had, like, a two-year engagement."

Miles shudders as he swallows more rum. "Maybe she's pregnant."

The apartment building sways. I sink onto the couch, right atop Miles's calves. He fills the mug again, and this time, when he holds it out for me, I down it in one gulp. "Oh my god," I say. "That's gross."

"I know," he says. "But it's the only hard liquor I had. Should we switch to wine?"

I look over at him. "I didn't have you pegged for a wine guy."

He stares at me.

"What?"

His tipsy-squinting eyes narrow further. "Can't tell if you're kidding."

"No?" I say.

"I work at a winery, Daphne," he says.

"Since *when*?" I say, disbelieving.

"For the last seven years," he says. "What did you *think* I did?"

"I don't know," I say. "I thought you were a delivery guy."

"Why?" He shakes his head. "Based on *what*?"

"I don't know!" I say. "Can I just have some wine?"

He pulls his legs out from under me and stands, crossing to the kitchen. Through the gap between the island and the upper cabinets, I watch him dig through a cupboard I'm realizing I've absolutely never opened. The slice of it that I can see from here is filled with elegant glass bottles: white wine, pink, orange, red. He grabs two, then comes back to flop down beside me, pulling a corkscrew key chain off his belt loop.

The windows are open, and it's starting to sprinkle, the day's

humidity breaking as he pops the cork from one bottle and hands the whole thing to me.

"No glass?" I say.

"You think you'll need one?" he asks, working the other bottle's cork free.

My eyes wander toward the expensive card-stock invitation still lying on Miles's threadbare kilim rug. "Guess not."

He clinks his bottle to mine and takes a long drink. I do the same, then wipe a drip of wine from my chin with the back of my hand.

"You really didn't know I worked at a winery?" he says.

"Zero idea," I say. "Peter made it sound like you do a ton of odd jobs."

"I do a few different things," he says noncommittally. "In addition to working at a winery. Cherry Hill. You've never been?" He looks up at me.

I shake my head and take another sip.

The corners of his mouth twitch downward. "He never liked me, did he?"

"No," I admit. "What about Petra? Did she hate my guts?"

He frowns at his wine bottle. "No. Petra pretty much likes everyone, and everyone likes Petra."

"I don't," I say. "I don't like Petra even one tiny bit."

He looks up at me through a half-formed smile. "Fair."

"She never . . ." I twist my feet down in between the bottom seat cushions and the back ones. "I don't know, acted jealous of me? Did you have *any* idea she was . . . into him?"

Another wry, not-quite-happy smile as he turns in toward me. "I mean, yeah, sometimes I wondered. Of course. But they'd been best friends since they were *kids*. I couldn't compete with that, so I left it alone and hoped it wouldn't be a problem."

Somehow, out of everything, *that's* what does it: I start to cry.

"Hey." Miles moves closer. "It's okay. It's . . . fuck." He pulls me roughly into his chest, his wine bottle still hanging from his hand. He kisses the top of my head like it's the most natural thing in the world.

In actuality, it's the first time he's touched me, period. I've never been super physically affectionate with even my close friends, but I have to admit that after weeks of exactly no physical contact, it feels nice to be held by a near-perfect stranger.

"It's ridiculous," he says. "It's unbelievably fucked." He smooths my hair back with his free hand as I cry into his T-shirt, which smells only very faintly of weed, and much more of something spicy and woody.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I should've thrown the invitation away. I don't know why I didn't."

"No." I draw back, wiping my eyes. "I get it. You didn't want to be alone with it."

His gaze drops guiltily. "I should've kept it to myself."

"I would've done the same thing," I say. "I promise."

"Still," he murmurs. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I insist. "You're not the one marrying Petra instead of me."

He winces a little.

"Shit! Now *I'm* sorry," I say.

He shakes his head as he sits back from me. "I just need a minute," he says, avoiding my gaze. He turns his head to stare out the window.

Oh, god. He's crying now too. Or trying very hard not to. Shit, shit, shit.

"Miles!" I'm in a panic. It's been a while since I comforted someone.

"I just need a second," he repeats. "I'm fine."

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"Hey!" I crawl across the couch toward him and take his face in my hands, proof that the wine has hit my bloodstream.

Miles looks up at me.

"They," I say, "*suck*."

"She's the love of my life," he says.

"The love of your life sucks," I tell him.

He fights a smile. There's something adorable about it, so puppyish that I find myself tempted to ruffle his already messy hair. When I do, his smile just barely slants up. The movement makes his dark eyes glimmer.

It's been six weeks since I last had sex—by no means a personal record—but at his expression, I feel a surprising *zing* of awareness between my thighs.

Miles is handsome, if not the kind of man to make your jaw drop and hands sweat on sight. That was Peter—*TV* handsome, Mom called it. The kind that knocks you off balance from the start.

Miles is the other kind. The kind that's disarming enough that you don't feel nervous talking to him, or like you need to show your best angle, until—wham! Suddenly, he's smiling at you with his messy hair and impish smirk, and you realize his hotness has been boiling around you so slowly you missed it.

Also, he smells better than expected.

Counterpoint: he's my roommate and was just crying over the love of his life.

There are surely more pragmatic ways to take our minds off this mess. "Do you want to watch *Bridget Jones's Diary*?" I offer.

"No." He shakes his head and I release my hold on his face, surprised how my heart flags at the rejection, or maybe just the thought of shuffling to my bedroom to be alone with these feelings.

"We shouldn't mope," he goes on, with another shake of his head.

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