

'One of the most talented writers
in the romance genre today'

LYSSA KAY ADAMS

CARA
BASTONE

Call Me Maybe

Could it
be love at
first talk?



CARA BASTONE

Call Me Maybe



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About the Author

Cara Bastone is a full-time writer who lives and writes in Brooklyn with her husband, son and an almost-golden doodle. Her goal with her work is to find the swoon in ordinary love stories. She's been a fan of the romance genre since she found a grocery bag filled with her grandmother's old Harlequin Romance books when she was in high school. She's a fangirl for pretzel sticks, long walks through Prospect Park, and love stories featuring men who aren't hobbled by their own masculinity.

To find out more, visit carabastone.com or follow Cara on Twitter and Instagram [@carabastone](https://twitter.com/carabastone).

Praise for Cara Bastone

‘Cara Bastone is one of the most talented writers in the romance genre today. With her signature blend of heart, humor, and honesty, Cara’s books remind you that the best stories begin and end with hope’

Lyssa Kay Adams

About the Book



Paint your toes. Pick up the wrong coffee and bagel order. Drive from Brooklyn to Jersey in traffic so slow you want to tear your hair out. It's amazing all the useless things I can accomplish while on hold for three hours with customer service. Three hours when I should be getting the Date-in-a-Box website ready to launch at the big business expo in a few days. Except my shiny new website is glitching, and my inner rage-monster is ready to scorch some earth. . .when he finally picks up. Not the robot voice I expected but a real live human named Cal. He's surprisingly helpful and really knows his stuff, even if he's a little awkward. . .in an adorable way.

And suddenly I'm flirting with him? And I think he's flirting back.

And suddenly it's been hours, and we're still on the phone talking and ordering each other takeout while he troubleshoots my website.

And suddenly we're exchanging numbers and sending texts and DMs every day, leaving voice mails (who even does that anymore?!).

And suddenly I'm wondering if it's possible for two people to fall in love at first talk.

Because I'm falling. . .hard.

For anyone who prefers a dash of fantasy
life sprinkled into their real life.
I wrote this book for you. You are my people.

Chapter One

Monday Morning

“You’ve reached Curio Customer Service. My name is Cal. How can I help you today?”

“Hello? Hello? Is someone there? Is a human actually speaking to me?”

“Yes. Ma’am—”

“Oh, my God. Just a second. Don’t hang up! For the love of all that is holy, stay on the line!”

“I’m not going anywhere, ma’am.”

“I just have to pull over. Just let me get off the road. *Jeez! Where’d you learn to drive, you lunatic?!?*”

“Are you talking to me, ma’am?”

“No! Not unless you’re driving that red Taurus that almost sideswiped me.”

“I am definitely not doing that . . . How about we just don’t talk until you pull over somewhere safe?”

“But you’ll stay on the line, right? Don’t hang up!”

“I won’t hang up.”

“Good, because do you have *any* idea how long I’ve been listening to that horrible hold music? Three hours and forty-five minutes. I could have watched *Titanic* in the amount of time I’ve been on hold. No. That’s way too relaxing of an example. You know what I *actually* could have done in the amount of time I’ve been on hold? I could’ve brushed my teeth, gotten dressed, painted my toenails, waited for them to dry, gone down the block and ordered a bad bagel and the wrong coffee, gotten into my car and driven all the way from Brooklyn to the middle of Jersey in traffic so slow I nearly ripped my hair out. *That’s* how long I’ve been on hold!”

“Those were . . . extremely specific examples.”

“That’s because they weren’t examples. That’s literally everything I did while I was actually on hold.”

“I gathered that.”

“Okay. There. Here I am. I pulled off the road. Hopefully I don’t get axe murdered in this wasteland.”

“If you’re somewhere unsafe we can definitely—”

“No! No. Don’t you dare suggest we wait another minute. I’ve been on hold for a lifetime. I’m practically ninety years old now but I’m getting my laptop out and turning my hotspot on and we are fixing this website issue immediately.”

“All right . . . Do you want to start by telling me what the problem is?”

“Well, it’s just one huge problem! You know, I used Curio because someone recommended it to me. And because every other website-building service that I tried was awful. They all say that they’re user friendly and that no matter how little experience you have with that kind of thing, it’s easy to build your site. But they *lie*. They’re nothing but a hellscape. Literally my version of hell is forever building my website. Choosing between fonts and minutely different background colors for all eternity. H-E-Double Hockey Sticks.”

“I see.”

“Did you just laugh at me?”

“I laughed *with* you. You’re funny.”

“You know what’s not funny? My dumpster fire of a website. No, this is so much worse than a dumpster fire. It’s a garbage barge fire . . . Stop laughing, Cam.”

“Right. Sorry. Cal. My name is Cal. And I am here to help you. If you point me toward the issues your site is having, I promise we can fix them.”

“Well, for starters, it doesn’t *work*. The whole thing.”

“Okay. Can you give me your user ID? Once I get into your account, I should be able to help figure this out.”

“Oh. Sure. It’s, um, bigcojonesvera69.”

“Sorry? I didn’t quite catch that.”

“That would be because I mumbled it because it’s ridiculously embarrassing and when I came up with it I never thought anyone would ever know about it except for me.”

“I promise I won’t judge you.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll say it again, but no laughing at me.”

“Deal.”

“It’s bigcojonesvera69.”

“ . . . ”

“I can *feel* you laughing at me.”

“I’m not! I swear. You just, ah, caught me off guard. Would you mind spelling that out for me?”

“B-I-G-C-O-J-O-N-E-S—*stop laughing*—V-E-R-A-6-9.”

“Okay, just one second while I sync with your account.”

“I’m not usually this silly, I swear. It was just that starting a website for my business really made the whole thing feel real and I needed a confidence boost. So, what better way than to look at my username and remember that I’ve got big cojones?”

“Naturally. Makes sense to me. And I assume your name is Vera?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry, I should have asked for your name right away. I’m still getting used to the customer service thing.”

“Oh. *Great.*”

“No, no, I’m not new to website troubleshooting. I’ll totally get your site squared away. It’s just the customer service thing I’m still getting the hang of.”

“I’m your first? I’ll try to be gentle.”

“Much appreciated. But you’re not my first. I mean, you’re not the first customer I’ve serviced. Oh, God. That’s not what I—Now you’re the one laughing.”

“Of course I’m laughing. That was the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

“Okay, ma’am, I’m truly sorry for, ah, misspeaking. I’m synced to your site now and it won’t be a problem to assist you.”

“Oh, is your manager listening in or something? WHOEVER IS LISTENING, PLEASE DON’T FIRE CAL UNTIL HE HELPS ME FIX MY WEBSITE. I PROMISE I WASN’T OFFENDED BY HIS OFFER TO SERVICE ME.”

“I didn’t—never mind. Oh, man. I see what you mean about your website. This is . . . not functional. Maybe if I . . . No. But what if . . . No. I wonder . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Cal? You still there?”

“Oh, sorry. I was getting lost in problem-solving mode already. I haven’t seen an issue like this before.”

“Ugh.”

“Did you say you had your laptop out and had internet access?”

“Well, I’m using my hotspot so I’ve got extremely *pricey* internet access.”

“Right. Do me a favor and go to your homepage and hit refresh. I’m wondering if I just fixed the issue.”

“Okay . . . refresh and . . . yikes. Pretty sure you just made the issue way worse.”

“Oh, wow. I see what you mean. Okay, this is an interesting problem. Well, first things first, I need to figure out if this is an organizational issue with the way you set up the site or if this is a coding issue with Curio. So, if it’s all right with you, I think the best way to do that is for you to approve me as an administrator, then I can edit your site.”

“How?”

“Well, do you see where the little settings wheel is?”

“No.”

“How about the green menu bar at the top left?”

“Nope.”

“What *do* you see?”

“A bunch of letters and numbers in weird alien script all bunched up together.”

“Oy.”

“Yah.”

“Okay, hmmm. Are you comfortable with mirror sharing?”

“Does it involve you seeing me naked?”

“*What?* No!”

“I’m joking! I’m joking. Sorry, didn’t mean to give you a panic attack. Mirror sharing is where you see what I’m looking at on my computer screen, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then, yes, I’m fine with that.”

“Okay, I’m sending you an invitation right now and when you accept it, I’ll be able to see what you’re seeing and we can go from there.”

“Oh, hi! Got your invitation. You’re in.”

“Wow.”

“What is it?”

“Vera, I don’t mean to be rude, but your operating system is . . . prehistoric.”

“Come on.”

“No, seriously, this is pretty much the operating system they used in World War One to communicate with submarines. Don’t you ever update?”

“Of course not! Who likes to update? It’s the worst chore ever and they always prompt you to update during the best part of whatever show I’m watching.”

“So, you’ve literally never updated your computer?”

“I mean, I’ve *thought* about updating my computer. Every time my computer pings me requesting an update I feel really *guilty* about the fact that I never do it. Does that count?”

“For our purposes today? No, that doesn’t count.”

“Well, I guess you’re about to tell me to update my computer.”

“Honestly, it’s Curio’s fault that it’s so incompatible with an old OS, not yours. But if you’re in a rush to get your site fixed as soon as possible, it’ll be a lot easier to interface with Curio if you’re updated.”

“I guess if I have to. But I really don’t want to lose all my tabs.”

“All your—Good lord! You have . . . *forty-three* open browser tabs. I really am having a panic attack now. How can you function with forty-three open browser tabs?”

“It’s all articles I want to read and shopping carts I haven’t purchased. Websites I don’t want to forget about. That kind of thing.”

“If we have time at the end of this phone call I’ll teach you about bookmarks. It’s going to rock your world. In the meantime, don’t worry, your computer will give you an option to reopen all your tabs and word processing docs when your computer restarts. See? Right there. Click that button.”

“Okay. Wow. There goes my computer. Shutting down for the first time in years. Oh, it’s sending a chill down my back! I hate seeing it go to sleep! Goodnight, sweet prince.”

“It’ll come back on in just a minute. Better than new. Let me know when it does because restarting will have severed the mirror-sharing connection.”

“It’s back on already! But there’s a spinny loading bar and it says estimated time of update *thirty-eight minutes?!?*”

“Oy.”

“Cal, you traitor. I really am gonna get axe murdered if I’m sitting around here for another thirty-eight minutes.”

“If you’re not in a safe place then you should really drive somewhere else, seriously, I won’t abandon you if you have to hang up.”

“No way. I’m not falling for that. It’s the oldest trick in the book. I’m sure you’re dying to get off the line with the cojones lady, but I’m not going to make that easy for you. MANAGER, IF YOU’RE LISTENING, I DON’T CONSENT TO GETTING HUNG UP ON.”

“I won’t hang up on you, cojones lady. We can just wait on the line until your computer comes back on.”

“Okay.”

“Vera? Will you be drumming your fingers the entire time?”

“Oh! Sorry! I’ll mute myself. Just give me a shout if you need me!”

“You got it.”

Vera

Dang. I tried really, really hard to stay angry. That’s what my brother always says my problem is. That I can’t stay angry. He says I lack the killer instinct. And if I really want to make my business thrive, I have to be able to make people fear disappointing me.

I can’t even stay mad with a customer service representative.

But you know what? Maybe that’s not my fault. Let’s blame it on this Cal guy. Because who could stay mad at someone who thinks learning about the bookmarks bar is going to rock my world?

He seems sweet. And a little . . . new. Whatever the opposite of an old soul is.

Which is probably why this trash-ass company hired him to do customer service in the first place. Because they knew that their customers were going to be calling en masse, complaining that their websites were completely glitching and subsequently ruining their lives. But if those customers encountered someone like Cal the baby bird on the other end of the line then they wouldn’t immediately demand a refund.

But never fear because Cal is here! He’s single-handedly fixing websites and saving Curio from being bombed with one-star reviews.

I try to picture Cal.

He's probably sitting in a call center somewhere, with no windows and stale coffee in a styrofoam cup. No, never mind, our Cal would never use styrofoam and risk ruining this earth we all call home. Cal is definitely sipping herbal tea that his wife packed for him in a thermos. He probably has a framed photo of her on his desk. He's probably wearing immaculately pressed trousers that she ironed for him last night. I'm sure his bowtie is at perfect angles with his collar. His glasses would never have a smudge.

Thirty-four minutes left on the update.

This is torturous.

With every ticking second I can feel Friday morning approaching. Only four more days until I either make or break my business and all the while my website is a pile of letters and numbers on a celery-green screen. Why did I choose celery green again? It had seemed chic when Curio was helping me design my site. But now it just seems childish.

Somewhere out there in the World Wide Web my website is a completely useless pile of celery.

Twenty-eight minutes left . . .

"Cal? What song is that you're singing?"

"Oh. Jeez. That's embarrassing. I thought I'd put the phone on mute, too. See? Told you I was still learning the ropes of this whole customer service thing."

"But what song was it?"

"It's a pop song. A Finnish pop song. It was pretty popular over there a few years ago."

"Oh. That's cool. And . . . maybe a little random?"

"It's not random for Finnish people."

"Are you a Finnish person?"

"Yeah. Well, half Finnish."

"Top half or bottom half? Yeesh, sorry, bad joke."

"Ha, yeah. Probably my top half?"

"Does that mean your bottom half is American?"

"Finnish in the streets, American in the . . . Oh, gosh. I can't believe I just said that. I'm so sorry. That was, jeez, awful. I'm—"

"Cal! Stop apologizing. Don't you know me well enough by now to know that I'd laugh at that? MANAGER, IF YOU'RE LISTENING, I THINK CAL IS FUNNY. HE'S THE ONLY THING BETWEEN THIS COMPANY AND A ONE-STAR REVIEW."

“That’s a relief.”

“Twenty-four minutes left on the update. Did you ever live in Finland?”

“Yeah. I spent half my time there when I was growing up. A year in New York with my mom, a year in Finland with my dad. Back and forth.”

“You don’t have an accent. Well, you kind of have an east coast accent, but you definitely don’t have a Finnish accent. Not that I specifically know what that sounds like.”

“I never got much of an accent either way.”

“Can you tell where I’m from based on my accent?”

“Ah, no.”

“Good. I’ve done everything I can to erase the dulcet tones of Jersey.”

“I like a Jersey accent.”

“No one likes a Jersey accent, Cal.”

“No, really. I do. I think it makes people sound . . . unpretentious.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Oh. Hold on, Vera. Let me concentrate on this error message real quick.”

“Okay.”

Cal

Unfortunately, she’s cute.

When I started this customer service gig I was already nervous about talking to strangers all day. I hadn’t even entertained the idea that one of those strangers might be a cute girl.

Cute girls are not my skill set.

I use the error message excuse as an opportunity to let my thoughts settle.

Customer service is harder than I thought it would be. It’s hard when the customers are angry. It’s hard when they seem to be calling me from the middle of a construction site, or a bowling alley, and I can’t hear a single word they’re saying. It’s hard when they treat me like I am an idiot because I’m a customer service rep and they assume that means I’m not qualified enough to get another job. And yeah, apparently it’s even hard when the customers are kind of flirting with me.

This Vera person is making my palms sweat.

I wouldn't say that in general I'm, ah, *good* at talking to women. Actually, I'm not that good at talking to anyone. Which is why my best friend, Eliot, recommended I start in on this job. He thought it would be like a crash course in how to talk to all kinds of people.

So far I've been cursed out, cried at, implored, almost swindled, and thanked. But this is my first time being . . . charmed.

I wish I'd gotten dressed for work this morning. I take these calls from my living room, so I didn't see the point in changing out of my track pants and T-shirt. But now, I'm suddenly very aware of my bare feet up on the coffee table. It's not like Vera can somehow magically see them, but they look big and stupid and out of place on this phone call. I wish I were wearing slacks and a button down and my nice shoes. The ones I wore to Mom's wedding. Then, maybe I wouldn't be making awful jokes to a cute customer.

American in the sheets. Oh, God. What does that even mean? I can only hope she meant it when she claimed to think I was funny.

Her website really is a mess. I have no idea why. I really like that. Problems that are weird and unexpected and seemingly unfixable? Now that is my skill set.

I really wanna figure out what's going on with her site and fix it. Not only because I want Curio to actually be a successful content management system but also because it would be kind of . . . cool to be able to fix this for Vera. And I rarely look cool in front of women.

I'm the guy who's still just shaking hands at the end of a third date.

I think motorcycles are kind of scary. I've tried on exactly one leather jacket in my life and it made me look like the Fonz's little brother. I don't enjoy loud, crowded rooms. I drink, like, an occasional beer. I really enjoy silent sustained reading time and a few years ago I got really good at crocheting.

Case in point? I've had three different friends try to set me up with their sisters.

If that doesn't clue me in to the fact that I'm completely non-threatening slash un-thrilling, nothing will.

But Vera doesn't know any of that, does she? Right now, I'm just a voice on the other end of the line for her. I'm the guy who might just save her website and save the day. I'm the guy who already made her laugh a few

times. You know how rare it is for me to talk to a woman long enough to make her laugh? Vanishingly rare.

If she were another customer, I'd go back to professional silence while we wait for her computer to finish updating. But my palms are still sweating. So, I pull my bare feet off the coffee table and lean forward, planting my elbows on my knees. And I jump back in . . .

"Vera, can I ask you something while we're just waiting here?"

"Shoot."

"Why was the bagel bad?"

"What?"

"At the beginning of this phone call when you were describing all the things you did while you were waiting on hold you said you ordered a bad bagel and the wrong coffee."

"Oh. That was because I was on hold with your company in the bagel line and when I got up to the register, I was flustered. So I somehow ended up with a pumpernickel bagel and black coffee."

"Not your usual order?"

"Absolutely not."

"Well, what's your usual order, then?"

"Blueberry bagel, coffee with milk and honey."

"Sweet tooth."

"That's what they call me."

"Wait, really? People actually call you sweet tooth?"

"Well, not *people*, per se. But an ex-boyfriend."

"Ah."

". . ."

". . ."

"You still there, Cal?"

"Oh. Yes. Yup. Sorry. How's the update coming along?"

"It's actually going faster than it said it would. There's only five minutes left."

"So, I only got a glimpse of your site, but it looks pretty involved. You wanna tell me about it?"

"Yeah, it's for my business. Date in a Box. And, yes, I'm very aware that it sounds a lot like that SNL skit, dick-in-a-box. But I don't care. In fact, I think that only works in my favor. It's free marketing. A jingle I didn't have to pay for."

“That’s genius.”

“You’re saying that like you mean it.”

“I do. So, what do you do at *Date in a Box*?”

“It’s a care package subscription service. It started out as me putting together date ideas and supplies for people. You know, roses, chocolates, movie tickets, bottle of wine, that sort of thing. But then it expanded to more personalized dates as well. Hot air balloon ride tickets, or books to read out loud to one another. I even send outfits to some clients. And after a while, I realized that it didn’t just have to be romantic, either. I have Friend Date in a Box. Family Night in a Box. I even have a Break-up in a Box.”

“A break-up? Wow. What do you send in that box?”

“Lots of tissues.”

“Ha. That only works if the person is sad about the break-up though.”

“True. I guess in some of my break-up boxes I should send along celebratory things.”

“Like . . .”

“Mmm, maybe an appointment to get their hair dyed a new and surprising color. New lingerie so that they can throw out all the . . . pre-used . . . shall we say? What else? Driving directions to a really great view of some kind so they can look hot with their new hair and undies as they gaze out across the landscape and contemplate their unencumbered future.”

“Wow, you are *really* good at this. Do you pack and send the packages yourself?”

“Right now, yes, but the website was step one toward being able to outsource some of the grunt work.”

“How so?”

“Well, so far all the information I have about clients and all the ideas for their specific packages has just lived in my head. But with the website, there are all these different components that help clients figure out what kind of package they might want and when and where to send it et cetera. So, it would be a lot easier to bring on other people to help me because they can use the information we gather from the site instead of having to mine it from my brain.”

“Man, we’ve really gotta get this site up and running for you, huh?”

“Yes. Preferably by Friday at eight a.m. Oh! The update just switched over to ‘finalizing.’”

“Great.”

“Oh, look! My computer’s back on and all my beautiful tabs are loading again.”

“I’m getting hives from thinking about your tabs.”

“Oh, hello, again. I’m accepting your invitation to mirror share.”

“Hi, Tasha? I’m a thirty-year-old female calling from a small midwestern town. I have a question about how to get my boyfriend to do a threesome—”

“Ooooookay. Paused it. Wow. Sorry about that, Cal. One of my tabs started playing when it reloaded.”

“What was that?”

“It’s that relationship advice podcast? The one with Tasha Brooke. Have you ever listened to it?”

“I’ve heard of it, I think. But I haven’t listened . . . She gives relationship advice about threesomes?”

“You might be surprised. She gives relationship advice about *everything*. In-laws. Wedding jitters. How to ask someone out. How to break up. She’ll talk about anything her callers ask her about. Religion, politics, sex toys—”

“Okay. Wow. Yeah. I get it, I think.”

“She’s kind of my hero.”

“Because she’s so candid? You seem pretty candid yourself.”

“No, it’s not that. I just think she’s the coolest because she’s so successful. Doing exactly what she wants to do. I admire anyone who can get out there and build something from the ground up. When she started her podcast, she was barely getting double digit downloads. And now she’s always on the top ten lists. That takes a lot of elbow grease. I think that’s cool.”

“I . . . think that’s cool too. Is that what you’re hoping for with your business?”

“Of course. If I can get the dang website to work in time.”

“In time? You said Friday at eight a.m. was some kind of deadline?”

“Yes, so get a move on!”

“Right! Right. Troubleshooting the site. Okay, well, can you see my mouse on your screen?”

“Yup.”

“Well, follow it here and authorize me as an administrator and then we can really get to the bottom of this.”

“I have to put in your email to authorize you.”

“It’s K-A-L-K-A-N @curio.com.”

“Is that your last name? Kalkan?”

“No, it’s Kal, like my name, and then Kan, for my last name.”

“Oh, do you spell Cal with a K? I’ve been thinking of it with a C.”

“When I’m in the States, I spell it with a C. Finnish people only use Ks to make that ‘kuh’ sound. But here, if you spell Cal with a K, people think of Superman.”

“Superman?”

“His real name isn’t Clark. It’s Kal-El. You know what? Never mind. Let’s forget I started talking about comic books.”

“We can talk about comic books if you want.”

“Let’s talk about your site instead.”

Chapter Two

Monday Afternoon

Vera

It's been three hours since we started troubleshooting the site and my eyes are crossing. In fact, I don't even think the time could be measured in hours. There are so many other markers of the passage of time at this point.

It's been four granola bars since we started this.

Six different Finnish pop songs hummed under Cal's breath.

Countless "hmms" coming from his direction.

At least fifty instructions to click this or highlight that or refresh this or restart that.

And, from what I can tell, there's been exactly zero progress.

Cal has insisted that we can hang up and he'll keep working on it. He even told me that he'll call me back when he's figured out the problem. But no. I categorically refuse to hang up this phone call. It would be like turning around halfway up the mountain.

You know, for years and years I had no problem turning around halfway. I have half a degree in nursing and three-quarters of a degree in psychology to prove it. This very minute there are countless partially fleshed-out business ideas in a folder on my hard drive.

Unfortunately my living room has two-thirds of a turquoise wall in case anyone thought I might be exaggerating about my lifelong inability to finish what I start.

But not Date in a Box. I *refuse* to give up on this. Even though that means sitting on the side of the road in the middle of Jersey, where like, only four cars have passed the whole time I've been sitting here, then that's what I'm gonna do.

I swore to my parents that I could get my business started without a business degree. Because they're the kindest, most generous people on the face of the planet, they paid for the nursing degree I didn't finish. And then, also because they're the kindest, most generous people on the planet—but not made of money—they paid for *some* of the psychology degree I didn't finish. I know they'd do the same for a business degree, but I just can't face it.

I have loans from my unfinished undergrad to take care of and there is no way in hell that I'm taking on more debt right now.

It's Date in a Box or bust. If I can pay off my student loan debt and pay back my parents for my unfinished schooling, *then* I'll think about going to business school.

I've spent a year working on my business plan and building up my clientele. My website is the next step. Without a website, my business is widely viewed as *cute*. Just something sweet I do for some people.

One time I overheard a conversation between my mother and our old next-door neighbor. It's one that's on-and-off haunted me for months now.

And what's Vera up to these days? Did she finally find a job?

Oh, yes. She's started her own business. She's, um, making presents for people.

That's her . . . business?

Yes.

And she makes money?

Well, people pay her for the presents.

Oh. That's sweet.

And it is sweet. That's one of the reasons why I like this job, why I'm throwing my whole weight behind it. Because it's a nice thing to do for people. Because I genuinely enjoy brightening the lives of my clients.

But it can't just live in my head and heart. I can't be someone who my clients recommend to their friends with the words "trust me" tacked on at the end. I need a freaking storefront. Well, a virtual one at the very least.

Vera, meet mountain.

I will stay on this phone call until my website is purring like a Lamborghini.

I will—

Oh, shit.

"Oh, shit."

“Vera? What’s wrong?”

“No, no, no, no, no.”

“Vera?”

“C’mon, baby, don’t do this to me. Be good for Mama. C’mon, c’mon, c’mon.”

“Vera? Seriously, are you all right?”

“NO! DAMMIT! I’M SUCH AN IDIOT!”

“I’m sure you’re not. Just tell me what’s wrong—”

“My car battery just died.”

“Oh. Wow. Yeah, that’s bad.”

“I’m such an IDIOT. I stopped idling a while ago because, you know, planet earth is withering away as we speak and I’m not going to burn fossil fuels for no reason. But I needed to charge my phone so I kept my car part of the way on. And I forgot and now the damn thing died and my phone is still only halfway charged. And look at that, now my computer is down to fifteen percent also. And great. This is just GREAT. I’m gonna die out here, Cal. Because I already burned through my granola bar stash. And the temperature is dropping. The night is coming and this is just the end of the line for me. Because I’m an idiot.”

“Vera.”

“This is so bad.”

“Vera, listen to me.”

“I can’t listen to you, Cal. Apparently I can’t listen to *anyone*. Because if I ever bothered to listen to anyone, I would probably be safely ensconced in a classroom somewhere taking notes on optimization and simulation modeling or something like that and I wouldn’t be about to freeze to death in my car.”

“Vera, first of all, it’s mid-May. You said you’re in the middle of Jersey? Well, I’m Googling it and, yeah, the temperature is 61 degrees outside right now. Unless you’re in your underwear, I think you’re gonna make it. Second of all, do you have Triple A?”

“I *almost* signed up for it. Does that count?”

“Oh, boy.”

“God, I really, really didn’t want to end this call until my website was fixed, but I guess I need to call someone and figure out how to drag my car’s useless carcass somewhere it can get fixed.”

“All you need is a jump.”

“All a normal car needs is a jump. But this has happened before and trust me, my car needs a little more loving than that. It’s kind of . . . geriatric.”

“Okay, so you need a tow to an auto shop. I can help you with that.”

“What?”

“Well, you said you didn’t want to hang up with me. And actually, I’d be more comfortable if you didn’t hang up until you were somewhere safe anyhow. So, I’ll make the call for you.”

“Really? Oh, Cal, that would be great. You can tell them that I’m on Skyline Road about—”

“VERA, ARE YOU NUTS?! DON’T TELL ME YOUR LOCATION!”

“Um. What?”

“I’m a complete stranger! You can’t tell me your exact coordinates!”

“Why? I mean, it’s not like you’re gonna—”

“How do you know!? Oh, my gosh. Please tell me you’re normally more careful than this. Please tell me you’re not out there handing out your whereabouts on a silver platter. You don’t add your location when you post on Instagram, right?”

“I don’t know? I guess I’ll have to go back and check?”

“In addition to teaching you about bookmarks, at the end of this phone call we’re gonna go over some basic identity safety precautions.”

“Well, fine. But Cal, if I can’t give you my location then how the heck are you going to tell the tow truck where to get me?”

“I’m going to conference the tow truck guy in to our call and then I’m gonna stop listening while you tell him where to come get you.”

“If you really think that’s necessary . . .”

“Just give me the zip code you’re in.”

“Um. Hold on while I look it up . . . It’s 07436.”

“Here, I found the number for an auto shop in your area. I’m going to patch him through to you. I’ll pick back up in a minute.”

Cal

I turn my phone off speakerphone and set it down, listening to the distant, tinny sounds of Vera’s now-familiar voice parlaying with the tow truck guy.

I’m tense.

Dragging a hand down my face, I can’t help but laugh into my palm. *The temperature is dropping and the night is coming.* She’s so dramatic. It’s

really freaking cute.

I wish I didn't have to wait on the line while some strange dude comes to pick her up. I wish she'd been making this customer service call from her house. With big, fuzzy slippers and flannel pajamas. Instead, she waited almost four hours on hold and had to run errands in order to fit this website issue into her day. Her website that is completely glitching.

Come on, Curio. You can do better than this.

It's hard not to feel like this is my fault.

Frowning, I stand to do a few stretches. We've been at this for hours, and honestly, I think this is a coding issue with the site. One that could take a while yet.

My stomach grumbles. There's leftover curry in my fridge that is gently calling my name. But no. Vera's eaten through her stash of granola bars. She's stuck on the side of the road because she ran her car battery down on the phone with me. Gorging on curry seems insensitive.

I plunk back down on the couch and find myself staring at my sockless feet again.

I'm not bragging when I say that I'm an intelligent person. Academically, at least. Math and science, literature, history, philosophy, there wasn't a subject I didn't enjoy in school. I'm smart. But a while back I came to the conclusion that some people just have dumb feet. I'm one of them. My feet are big and ridiculous-looking, like they're made up of pieces of other feet all smashed together at odd angles. I'm not bad at cycling and skiing. But if you ask me to kick a ball or dodge an opponent, I will almost certainly wind up tits up. Big, dumb feet.

I stand and pick up the phone carefully, so as not to hang up the call or make a lot of scuffling noise that'll interrupt their conversation. I catch the tone of Vera's voice as she says something and immediately recognize the tenor of one of her jokes.

I didn't hear the joke, but even so I'm smiling as I step into my room. I almost toss the phone on the bed but catch myself mid-throw. Instead I carefully set the phone on the dresser, quickly shucking off my comfy clothes and throwing them in the hamper. I'm pulling on jeans and a sweater as fast as I can, not wanting her conversation with the tow truck man to end while I'm in my underwear. Not that she'd know, but still. Seems a little pervy.

I pull on socks, straighten my sweater and smooth down my hair in the mirror.

I hear a low laugh on the phone and look over. It's minute eight of Vera's conversation with the tow truck man and he's laughing.

Hmmm. It's hour four of my customer service conversation with her. I've lost track of how many times she's made me laugh. Is eight minutes a long time to talk turkey with a tow truck man? Maybe this kind of thing happens to Vera all the time?

I picture a line, fifty cars long, queuing behind her car as she chats up the person who makes change on a toll road. She probably knows her grocery store cashiers by name. I'll bet she can walk into her usual coffee shop and request "the usual." But no, she said this morning she ended up with the wrong bagel and coffee.

Whoever her barista is, they're seriously missing an opportunity.

As I'm moving back through my apartment I catch sight of myself in the mirror by the front hall. I just look for a minute. I'm wearing my best jeans and my blue sweater. The one that makes me look slim and wide-shouldered instead of gangly.

I hadn't wanted to be wearing loungewear anymore, so I'd tugged some nicer clothes on.

But now that I look . . . This is my date-night outfit.

The tow truck man laughs again. I feel ridiculous.

Ugh. This is ridiculous. I'm sure Vera has someone else she can call to ensure her safety while her car gets towed. Someone she can actually feel safe telling her location to. She doesn't need some random customer service rep in her ear. And I could probably fix this website issue a lot faster if I didn't have her making me laugh, distracting me with her friendly, husky voice and that smile that I can just *hear*.

Once she's arranged things with the tow truck driver, I'll make sure she has someone else she can call and then I'll hang up with her and get down to business on her site.

"Cal? Cal?" I hear her call through the phone. She must be done with tow truck man.

I stare down at the lit-up screen in my hand. The time of call reads four hours and nineteen minutes.

"Cal?" Her voice, so familiar already.

My name.

Oh, who am I trying to kid? Screw self-preservation. I'm not hanging up until she does.

"Cal?"

"I'm here."

"Oh, good! I was worried I lost you. I had a chill down my back thinking I'd have to call the customer service number again."

"Oh, actually, you're right. I should give you my direct line so that you don't have to call back through the switchboard if we get disconnected . . . There. I just texted it to you."

"Great! So, Lionel will be here to whisk me away any minute now."

"Lionel?"

"The tow truck driver."

"First-name basis, huh?"

"Of course. And his wife's name is Natalie. He has a son and two grandkids but I didn't catch their names yet. Why are you laughing?"

"No wonder you were so willing to give me your location. You've never met a stranger, have you?"

"I like making friends!"

"I wasn't making fun of you. I was just . . . marveling, I guess. I don't make friends nearly as easily as you do."

"Well, I had to make friends with him. He's giving me a ride all the way back into the city."

"Wait, really? Aren't you, like, ninety miles outside of the city?"

"Yes, but apparently his auto shop has one location in Jersey and one in Queens and he agreed to drive me and my car to the Queens location instead since I'm ultimately headed back to Brooklyn anyhow."

"Wow. Does this kind of thing happen to you often?"

"What kind of thing? What do you mean?"

"Do people spontaneously offer to do nice things for you? Drive all the way to Queens when they could just drive down the road?"

"Doesn't everyone do that for everyone?"

"Not really, no. I think there's a distinct possibility that you bring that out in people, Vera."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but here comes Lionel in his big old truck."

"I was thinking . . ."

"Yes?"

“Okay, this is kind of a ridiculous ask, but I’m just gonna be working on fixing your website anyhow.”

“What’s the ask?”

“How about we just keep the call connected while you’re driving with Lionel?”

“It’ll be just me and Lionel in the truck. It’d be kind of rude if I were on the phone the whole time.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. We don’t have to talk. You can even put the phone in your pocket. I just . . . we don’t know Lionel.”

“Cal, we don’t know *each other*.”

“I know. But it’s a long drive with a stranger. Just keep the phone on and think of me as your buddy sitting in the back seat. If you need anything, I’ll be right there.”

“ . . . ”

“Unless, uh, unless that’s weird. Which it probably is. Do you have someone else you could be on the line with? A friend or your mom or somebody?”

“Oh. Sigh. I could probably call my brother. But then I’d have to explain this whole thing and I really don’t feel like adding another tally mark. So, sure, Cal, I’ll take you up on your offer. It’s sweet. As long as you don’t mind, I’ll just let you know when Lionel and I part ways.”

“Did you just say the word ‘sigh’ out loud?”

“I did indeed. Lionel’s here. I’m going to put you in my pocket now.”

“Just say my name if you need anything. And good luck.”

Vera

It’s fitting that he wished me good luck. Because for some reason, I kind of feel like *Cal* is a good luck charm. Not that my car dying on the side of the road was good luck. And not that he’s actually been able to resolve any of the issues with my website yet. But still, having him in my pocket right now is making an unexpected calm fall down over me. Like that moment when you toss a sheet over the bed and it billows down in that perfectly picturesque way. I have this strange feeling that Cal is about to tuck everything in, snug as a bug. At the end of this customer service call I’ll have diamond-white teeth, like in a toothpaste commercial. My hair will

have grown by inches and I'll be able to do the splits. Cal's my secret magical pill, here to fix everything amiss in my life.

Lionel and I fell into a companionable silence somewhere around the RFK Bridge. Now we're tooling through Queens in a patchwork-ish route that leads me to believe he knows a lot of shortcuts. It must've rained here because the pavement is glittering as the streetlights start to flick on. I love the city at this time of pre-night. It's that moment when the day-shift workers retire and the night-shift workers emerge. The hipsters about-face from coffee shops to bars. Parents are straightening their kids' backpacks while they scuttle them home for dinner. People are checking their makeup in storefront windows before they slide into the restaurant where they're meeting their dates. It's not day and it's not night. It's that time when something is always about to become something else.

Twice on this ride I've pulled out my phone and listened for a moment. I've heard the sounds of Cal's keyboard, some errant humming and a few muttered phrases. He talks to himself when he works.

We pull into the tiny, cramped parking lot of the auto shop and one of Lionel's employees has to Tetris three other cars around to make mine fit. I follow Lionel into the shop and sign some paperwork. Instead of shaking hands, I give him a big hug, which makes him blush. The other guys in the shop laugh and elbow each other.

On my way out, I run a hand along the hood of my car, tucking her in for the night. It's a silent apology for everything I've put her through that day.

And then I'm catching a cab on the corner and heading back to Brooklyn. It's been the most ridiculous day.

Four hours on hold, a drive all the way out to Jersey to pick up some new biodegradable packaging material that I didn't even successfully obtain, a dead car battery, a huge tow truck bill, a screwy website, and for some reason, I still feel kinda . . . light.

I suppose I could get my phone from my pocket and inform Cal that I'm no longer in the tow truck with Lionel and he could hang up now, but we've come this far so why not go the whole distance?

I watch Queens fade into Brooklyn as the cab fights its way downstream. Three blocks from my apartment we pass my brother's place. His windows glow like candles. I'll bet he's curled up with a movie and a cup of cocoa. He's one of those freelancers with his shit together so well he files quarterly

taxes. If he's missing a match to one of his socks, he throws the lonely one out immediately. His sock drawer is an ode to coupledness.

If my day hadn't been quite so . . . whatever it was, I might have stopped at his house. He's always happy to see me and he always has the best leftovers. But no. My living-room couch is calling to me and Cal is still working away in my pocket.

It's fully dark when we pull up to my corner.

I'm standing in front of my big, brick apartment building looking up at my dark windows three floors up. I should pull out my phone and hang up with Cal. He's done more than his civic duty at this point.

Instead, I just schlep my heavy bag past the broken elevator and up the stairs. I'm through my door and kicking my shoes off and locking New York out before I reach for the phone. I look at the timer on the lit-up screen.

Six hours and thirty-eight minutes. This is officially the longest phone conversation I've ever had.

Cal deserves a medal.

Chapter Three

Monday Night

“You there?”

“Vera! Are you back home?”

“You sound oddly energized for hour six of this phone call.”

“I’m just glad to know you made it safe. Wait, you did, right?”

“I’m happy to inform you that I’m speaking to you while face-planted on my couch.”

“That’s why it’s so muffled?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Exhaustion got the better of me for a second.”

“Understandable. You’ve had a day that most people would classify as the day from hell.”

“Coulda been worse.”

“I guess that’s true. If your life were a movie you would have been splashed by puddle water as a truck drove past you.”

“Ha! You’re right. I would’ve broken the heel on my favorite pair of shoes.”

“Gotten dumped by the boyfriend you thought was going to propose.”

“... I *did* get dumped today.”

“What?! Oh, jeez. I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I never would have made a joke had I—”

“Oh, gosh, it’s too easy.”

“You were *joking*? Stop laughing! I know I’m gullible, all right?”

“Cal, I’m glad it was you who picked up my phone call and not someone who would’ve let me starve on the side of the road.”

“I’m glad it was me, too.”

“... ”

“... ”

“Um, speaking of starving, did Lionel have any snacks for you?”

“Why would Lionel have given me snacks?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was just hoping he would because you said that you’d eaten through your granola bar stash a while ago.”

“Oh. Right. No, I haven’t eaten anything. I’m about six seconds from gnawing off my own paw.”

“Well, get something to eat then!”

“I’m too tired. I’m just going to lie on this couch for the rest of my life. Besides, I’m already horrifyingly aware of what awaits me in my kitchen.”

“What’s that?”

“Absolutely nothing. I don’t even think I have a packet of ramen in there.”

“You have nothing to eat?”

“I’m one of those people that eats my groceries down to the very last mouthful before I’ll fit in a trip to the store. By day ten I’m dipping aged cherry tomatoes into a jar of peanut butter just to get rid of everything.”

“Oh, *God*. Vera, it doesn’t have to be that way! There are other ways to live!”

“Finally you’re matching me in dramatics!”

“You’ve pushed me over the edge with your disgusting food combinations.”

“Don’t judge me. It’s hard to grocery shop in NYC! It’s a major chore.”

“I seem to manage just fine.”

“... Oh. Do you live in the city then?”

“Um. Yeah.”

“Uh oh, Cal. You’ve broken the cardinal rule of identity safety and revealed your secret location to me!”

“Considering the age of your operating system this morning, I’m not exactly intimidated by your ability to track me down.”

“Low blow.”

“But seriously, what are you going to do for dinner?”

“Why are you so obsessed with my dinner?”

“... No reason.”

“Cal, you weirdo, tell me the truth.”

“Fine, but you’re right. It’s weird. I’m warning you.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, I feel guilty that Curio is the reason you broke down on the side of the road and have been hungry all day, so I kinda didn’t think it was good manners to eat either.”

“What?! You’ve been hunger-striking on my behalf?”

“No, I—”

“MANAGER, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD GIVE CAL A RAISE. YOU ARE NEVER GOING TO HAVE A MORE DEVOTED CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE THAN THIS MAN. HE IS A HALL OF FAMER. DO YOU HEAR ME? GET HIM A GOLD WATCH FOR CHRISTMAS. SIX WEEKS’ VACATION. HIRE HIM A HOOKER—”

“Vera! MANAGER, IF YOU’RE LISTENING, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DON’T HIRE ME A HOOKER.”

“Ha! Yes. Okay, fair enough. STRIKE THE HOOKER ORDER FROM THE RECORD. HIS WIFE WOULD NOT APPROVE.”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not married.”

“Right.”

“What are we gonna do about dinner for you, Vera? You can’t starve to death on the line with Curio customer service. It’s bad business.”

“Right.”

“You know what? Why don’t you let Curio buy you dinner. It’s the least we can do.”

“What? Are you even authorized to do something like that?”

“Ah, yes. I’m authorized to do something like that. I give refunds and discounts to customers all the time. I don’t see how this is any different. Actually, Curio should probably pay for your tow truck bill too, now that I think about it.”

“No! Good lord, Curio is not going to pay for the fact that I’m a dipshit who let my car battery die.”

“Well, you have to let us do something to make up for everything you’ve been through today.”

“When you put it that way . . . I guess I would accept some takeout on Curio’s dime. But, you now, I kind of feel like I owe you a meal, too.”

“Me? Why?”

“We both know that you’ve gone a little above and beyond the call of duty today, Cal.”

“It was nothing, I mean, not a big deal. Please don’t worry about it.”

“No. Yeah. This is a good idea. I’m buying you dinner. That way my conscience won’t be bugging me.”

“Vera.”

“Cal, if you don’t let me buy you dinner I’m going to give Curio a one-star review immediately.”

“There’s no way to refuse this politely, is there?”

“None.”

“All right, then. I accept.”

“Yay! Okay, I’ll buy mine and you buy yours and we’ll just pretend that we did it for each other. That way we don’t have to exchange addresses.”

“That’ll work.”

“But we have to spend the *exact* same amount or else it ruins the illusion of the gift, okay?”

“You’re . . . one of a kind, Vera.”

“I hear that a lot, actually. Okay, I’m pulling up a takeout menu.”

“I’ll just probably order my usual—”

“No! No. I’m picking for you and you’re picking for me, okay? It’s a gift, remember? Can I text that direct number you gave me? Oh, yup, it pops up as an iPhone. Okay, I just texted you the menu to my favorite Mexican place.”

“Vera . . .”

“What?”

“You just texted me the address of a restaurant that delivers to you. Which means I now know what neighborhood you live in. Identity safety, Vera, you’ve really gotta—”

“Be more careful, I know, I know. You’re not a creep, Cal, get over it. Now text me your menu. Ooh! I’ve been here before. They have a kimchi bowl I dream about sometimes. So, you’re in Bay Ridge, huh? Add one of those kimchi bowls to your order, that’s definitely what you should get. How do you feel about squid? Never mind. Add the rice cake with the traditional sauce to that order. Aaaaaand the steamed shrimp dumplings. That should do ya. What are you going to order for me?”

“Large order of rice and beans, cheese quesadilla and salsa.”

“That’s the most basic dinner ever! Didn’t you see all their fancy dishes?”

“I did. But after the day you had, I recommend something simple. Something that will fill you up and ground you. If I could send you a plate of my dad’s home-cooking, I would.”

“He’s a good cook?”

“The best. He makes this traditional Finnish dish called squeaky cheese that is so good I could eat it twice a day for the rest of my life and never get tired of it. What’s your total?”

“Mmm. \$29.75. And I’ll include a five-dollar tip for the delivery guy. What’s yours?”

“\$25.20. I’ll make up the difference with tip so our totals match.”

“That’s a nice tip!”

“I used to be a bike courier, I have no problem with tipping my delivery person well.”

“Order officially sent. It should be here in half an hour or so. A bike courier? Wow. In New York?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty badass.”

“If you say so.”

“I do! Bike couriers take their lives in their hands in this city. Were you weaving in and out of traffic and riding down flights of stairs and stuff?”

“Probably not as dramatically as you’re picturing, but . . . I was good at it.”

“Ha! See! I bet you were jumping rooftops and popping wheelies on the Manhattan Bridge. Getting important packages delivered in the nick of time. Did you wear a bandana tied around your forehead?”

“You really amuse yourself, don’t you?”

“It’s one of my many talents.”

“My food’s ordered too. It says forty minutes until delivery. Wanna work on your site until then?”

“Cal?”

“Yeah?”

“Earlier, when you said that I bring it out in people, them doing stuff for me, like Lionel driving me into the city . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Does this fall under that category?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s eight at night. We’ve been on the phone for a million hours. There’s no way you’re still on shift, right? You’re stuck at a call center in Bay Ridge trying to fix this issue because of me, right?”

“Yes and no.”

“Hmm?”

“Well, yes, if you hadn’t called the customer service line, I probably wouldn’t still be working right now. And no, I’m not at a call center right now. I, uh, take these customer service calls from home.”

“Oh! You’re at home right now? You’ve been home this whole time?”

“Yup.”

“Gosh, that’s such good news! I was picturing you in some sad, windowless office complex surviving on handfuls of instant coffee and chain-smoking.”

“No to the coffee and definitely a no to the chain-smoking. My mother would turn my insides into outsides if I ever smoked in this apartment.”

“Oh. You . . . live with your mom?”

“No! No. I took over her lease when she got married and moved to be with her new husband. They’re out in Montauk now. But I grew up in this apartment. I didn’t want to lose it.”

“That’s sweet. You’re sweet. But what did you mean ‘no to coffee’? You don’t drink it?”

“I can have maybe one cup of coffee in the morning. But have you ever seen *Men in Black*?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you know the alien guy who pretends to be a human and just twitches and freaks out the whole movie?”

“Yes . . .”

“Well, that’s exactly who I am after more than a cup or two.”

“I . . . would really like to see that at some point.”

“It’s not pretty. Anyway, your site?”

“Yes! Right! Did you make progress while I was riding with Lionel?”

“I figured out what the problem is, but I don’t know how to fix it yet.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, basically, Curio got confused because your site is different from other sites. While most people’s pages are informational or offer a simple marketplace, yours is doing a lot more than that.”

“Right.”

“I’m curious, can you explain the purpose of the questionnaire feature you integrated?”

“Well, when people sign up for the service, they fill out this really extensive survey about their personalities, likes and dislikes, relationships, that kind of thing. From there, I can start to get an idea of their needs and their taste. It’s how I know what to pack in their care packages. How to personalize them. Because if I was just sending the most universal stuff in all of them, people would get pretty bored with the service. So, I try to get to know my clients really well so that they feel like their packages are really specific to them. But it’s all guesswork in the end. If they really liked one component or really hated it, they can tell me and I’ll plan accordingly next time.”

“What’s your favorite care package you’ve ever done?”

“Ooh, there’ve been so many, but there was this one for a dad. He was going to spend a day with his daughter who he hadn’t seen in years because after she’d gone off to college they didn’t have a ton of money for them to travel back and forth across the country to see one another. So, this was going to be his first time seeing her in a really long time. And even though they’d always been really close, he was nervous to see her. Like, his grown-up college graduate wasn’t going to have anything in common with him anymore.”

“That’s sweet.”

“I know.”

“What’d you put in the package?”

“For some of it, I went really corny. Like I put in this father/daughter T-shirt set that had penguins in sunglasses and one said ‘cool like my dad’ and the other said ‘cool like my daughter.’”

“Wow. That’s brilliant! Either they actually like them, which is a win, or they think the shirts are silly, which gives them something to bond over.”

“Exactly! He’d never been to her city before either, so I designed this big scavenger hunt for the two of them to do together that brought them all over the place, so she could show the whole city to him. It had complicated clues that they had to figure out together.”

“Just in case they couldn’t find something else to talk about.”

“You guessed it.”

“So smart.”

“Thanks!”

“So, I can see that you expanded the questionnaire section to have an interactive feature. Almost a mini social media component, specific to your site. I’ve never seen a customer do that with their site before. What was your thinking there?”

“Well, once the site is up and running again, you should fill out the survey. You’ll see that it’s really extensive. It takes about twenty minutes to complete. And in the end it shows all these different graphics on how your preferences compare to other people’s, and the ways that certain choices you made were unexpected or unusual. It makes predictions on what trends you might be interested in, or activities you might enjoy.”

“Really cool.”

“Right? So, I wanted to add some chatting and posting features as a way for customers to connect their results to the other users of the site. And in my wildest dreams, I was kind of hoping to turn part of it into a dating site.”

“A dating site? How would that work?”

“Well, a user could look through the profiles on there and if they saw someone they were interested in, they could try to design a care package for them using what they think they’d like. Then I’d pack it and send it and if the person they sent it to liked it, they’d connect with them. I don’t know. Maybe the whole thing is too involved, but I’m trying to think big.”

“You want to create space for your business to grow in lots of different directions.”

“Exactly.”

“I think it’s really cool, Vera. I’m always extremely interested in all the different things that the people who use Curio are making sites for, all the different things they’re interested in or trying to promote. But this is one of the better ideas, I have to say. It’s ambitious and good-hearted and yeah . . . I’m rambling. Anyway, earlier I wrote some new code for your site and if it works for you, then you can make it go live, okay?”

“Okay!”

“So, go to your site-building page on Curio and I’ll walk you through it.”

“Should we mirror share?”

“Sure. I’m sending the invite now.”

“Accepting it and bam! Hello!”

“Are you waving hello to me with your mouse cursor?”

“Wave back! Ha. Yes. This is seriously the best customer service call of all time.”

“Very glad to hear it. Okay. So, go to this menu here and I’ll walk you through how to authorize—Ah, to authorize the changes. And then—*Shh!* And then—”

“Cal? What the hell is that noise over there?”

“Oh, nothing. That’s just—*Ow! No claws!*—that’s just my cat. Jule.”

“She’s been so quiet all day!”

“He’s a he, actually. And yeah, he only emerges from the underworld at this time of night, screaming for food.”

“You named your male cat Jewel?”

“It’s Jule, like short for Juliet, actually.”

“Okay. You named your male cat Juliet?”

“Didn’t you hear what he sounds like when he’s meowing?”

“I didn’t—Oh! I get it! He sounds like he’s calling for Romeo. I have never heard a cat make a noise like that before.”

“Hold on, I’ll get up and feed him. Ouch, Jule! No claws!”

“Jule sounds like he’s got a lot of personality.”

“You have no idea. He hides somewhere in the house, I have no idea where. But I won’t see him for, like, twelve hours except for dinnertime and then in the middle of the night I’ll wake up to him smothering my face in fur.”

“What?!”

“I’m not joking. He hates me except for when he gets lonely in the middle of the night and then he loves me so much he nearly suffocates me.”

“That sounds exactly like my relationship with my ex. Except I was the Jule in this scenario.”

“Sweet tooth?”

“Hmm?”

“The ex who called you sweet tooth?”

“Oh. Yeah. I forgot I mentioned that. Jeez, we’ve really unearthed some buried treasure in this million-hour conversation.”

“Okay. Jule is officially fed. And I’m back and ready to get down to—Wow.”

“What?”

“Um, Vera. I would just like to remind you that we’re currently mirror sharing and I can see everything that you’re looking at on your screen.”

“*Ohmygawd.* Ah! Minimize! Minimize, damn you! Why won’t this screen minimize!?”

“Just click the button. The one—not that one. Oh, jeez. I . . . How about I just close my eyes until you’ve sorted this out.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Okay, Cal, it’s gone. And for the record. That was for a *client*. Not for me.”

“You . . . purchase sex toys for clients?”

“For some of them, yes!”

“And the lingerie . . . ?”

“Also for the same client! It’s called the Adults Only package. And it’s—*God*—it’s very . . . I leave no stone unturned, okay? You’re making me want to go hide under a rock for the rest of my life!”

“Don’t be embarrassed. Honestly, it wasn’t the worst thing I’ve ever seen while mirror sharing with a client.”

“Porn?”

“So much porn.”

“Who watches porn while on the line with a customer service rep?!”

“It’s actually happened more than once.”

“You must bring it out in people, Cal.”

“It must be my bassy, irresistible voice.”

“That’s definitely the only reasonable explanation.”

“So. Moving right along. Are you ready to see if I’ve fixed your website, Miss Cojones Lady?”

“It’s *big* cojones, Cal, get it right. And yes, I’m ready to work on my website.”

“I should’ve known I’d catch you perusing sex toys. The username should have been a red flag from the beginning.”

“Oh, my God. They were for my *client*. And if my website were working properly, then I could probably have already outsourced the sex-toy shopping to some lowly intern.”

“Right, right, right. Your glitchy website. I think I fixed it and I’m hoping I’m about to redeem my company here.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Okay. So, you see where my mouse is right now? You’re gonna enter into this menu. Great. Now, click here. Re-enter your password. Flip this toggle. And that one. Almost there. Now, just hit that button and your page should reload, good as new.”

“Okay, here we go!”

“...”

“Oh! Yay! Cal, it’s beautiful! Look at my gorgeous homepage. I’ve been doubting the celery, but no, it was the right call. Ah! Hello, options menu, look at you operating at full tilt. Cal, you’re a genius! A website doctor! I can’t believe you fixed it!”

“Well, hold on here. It definitely *looks* better but we don’t know if it’s completely fixed yet. Let’s click through the site together and use all the features.”

“Okay. Homepage, check. Testimonials, check. About section, check. Get Started Questionnaire . . . Oh, no. The survey is all screwy, Cal.”

“...”

“Cal? You there?”

“Is that you?”

“Is what me?”

“The photo, on the About page. Is that of you?”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s me with tons of makeup and my hair all done up. I don’t normally look like that. But my brother thought it would be a good idea to have a few professional photos taken for the site.”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh! Hold that thought, Cal. That’s my food at the door. I’m gonna put my phone down for a sec.”

Chapter Four

Still Monday Night

Cal

Thank the sweet lord that I have a moment to myself. My heart was already racing from unexpectedly seeing her shopping cart filled to the brim with vibrators and . . . round bendy things I have never seen before. Not to mention that red underwear bodysuit thingy. But that was impersonal. They were just *things*. Nothing I couldn't see on my own with a quick Google search. It didn't really mean anything.

But her photo.

Her *smile*.

Vera's nice to look at. Pretty brown hair and gray-blue eyes. But that's not even what . . . That's not even the point. She's got one of those smiles that makes you want to empty your bank account into a charity. Makes you wanna find an old lady to help cross the street. Makes me wanna go back to the shelter and rescue a hundred more Jules.

I sit up straight on the couch and set my computer aside for a minute. I'm scrubbing my hands over my face. With my eyes closed, all I can see is her smile. The shock of it reverberates through my body. I feel like somebody just smashed a set of cymbals next to my ear.

When my eyes open, it's to see my own date-night jeans.

All right. It's time to face the music.

I am straight up vibing with this woman.

And it's been a really, really long time since I've vibed with somebody.

Look, I'm not lonely per se. But this kind of thing doesn't really happen to me. A spark like this. A spark that I think she's feeling too? I mean, I know that she's just sort of a spark-ish person. Hell, she's probably making the delivery man feel like he's about fifteen feet tall right this very second.

But if she didn't like me at all, would she have stayed on the phone with me for—I check my screen—seven-plus hours?

But that's beside the point. Only playing my cards if I'm positive about *her* cards is a very middle-school thing to do. I'm a grown man. I can tell her that I think she's really, really cute and it would be nice to get to know her, ya know, in person.

This isn't about trying to find a way to get what I want. It's about trying to connect with her. And if she isn't into it, then I'll wake up in the morning like always.

My doorbell rings and I accept my delivery food with a nod, but my mind is still on Vera.

Birds are trying to peck their way out of my stomach as I flop back onto the couch and pull my computer onto my lap again. I'm gonna tell a girl I think she's cute. Oy. I need a distraction. What did she say right before she went to get her food? I was still a deer-in-the-headlights of her smile and didn't hear her. She said something about the questionnaire section. I click over to that part of her website and frown.

Damn it.

It's an absolute mess. Completely unusable. What went wrong?

I'm going to have to start from scratch on this section. Which, normally, I'd love, because in the end it's just a logic puzzle I have yet to solve. But right now, it's incredibly disappointing, because can I really tell her that I think we're vibing when I haven't even solved her website problem? What if I make her feel weird but she feels obligated to keep talking to me because she needs her website fixed? I can't hold that over her.

No. I can't lay it all out until her website is fixed. Otherwise it might seem like I'm asking for some sort of . . . exchange. I cringe and push my computer aside again.

Yeah, that's definitely the worst-case scenario. Boy asks girl on date. Girl assumes he's extorting her.

Not great.

I'm a good person, I know this. But . . .

I also: 1) know very little about her; 2) am a representative for the company I've given years of blood, sweat, and tears for; 3) don't want to creep her out; 4) am a complete stranger to her; and 5) am not smooth at asking out women when the situation *isn't* this complicated.

I think of her smile, the cymbals crash again and I stand up and pace around my living room for a quick second. She's cute. I'm into it.

And there's no way around it.

I've gotta wait to tell her.

"Okay, I'm back!"

"You got your dinner?"

"Yup."

"Mine came a second ago, too."

"Oh, yay! We get to eat dinner together, Cal."

"All right, so I think we might have a real issue on our hands with this questionnaire section. It'll take me—"

"Wait, wait, wait. No shop talk during dinner, okay?"

"But don't you want to get this solved?"

"Definitely. But are you going to fix it in the next half hour?"

". . . No."

"Then let's eat and we can fix it later."

"All right. In that case . . . Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Earlier, when you mentioned that you could probably call your brother to be on the line with you while you were riding with Lionel, you mentioned that he'd be willing, but that you didn't really want to add another tally mark."

"Oh. Right."

"What are the tally marks counting?"

"Sigh."

"You know, you can just actually sigh and the same information will be conveyed."

"It's not as dramatic that way."

"It's okay if you don't want to tell me."

"No, it's not that. It's just, I don't know if I've ever explained it out loud before. It's really just a dynamic between me and my family that's sort of always existed. As long as I can remember. Basically, it's this whole idea that I can never stick with something. When things get hard, I quit."

"Huh."

"You know, there was this misprinted shirt that went viral last year. It was supposed to be inspirational. It said, 'NEVER QUIT' in big block

letters. And then a smaller subline was added that said ‘Do your best.’ But they accidentally arranged the words so the shirt actually read ‘Never do your best, quit.’ ”

“Ha, yeah, I remember seeing that trending.”

“Well, my family got that shirt for me for Christmas this year.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s not as mean as it sounds. It was just a gag gift. We’re the kind of family that’s always teasing each other. And they also got me some thoughtful things, too. But the shirt stung.”

“Yeah, I can see why. Have you done anything to deserve the reputation?”

“Definitely. As a kid I bailed on three different basketball teams, a softball team, track, a couple different dance classes. It got to the point that my folks wouldn’t let me sign up for a sport that didn’t have a refund policy on the registration fee. Let’s see, what else . . . I have half a nursing degree. I didn’t finish my undergrad, even though I only needed a few more credits to get a Bachelor’s in psych. I trained for half a marathon.”

“You ran a half marathon? That’s a huge accomplishment.”

“No. I did half the training for a whole marathon. But gave up because it was way too hard.”

“Ah.”

“You can laugh, if you want. I’m used to it at this point.”

“I would never laugh at that.”

“I know, it’s too depressing to laugh at.”

“That’s not what I meant. Do you really think your brother would have counted your car battery dying as you giving up on something? That seems like a stretch to me.”

“No, he wouldn’t have counted the car battery. But he would have wanted to know what I was doing on the side of the road and then I would have had to explain about the website failure and then he would have gotten that *tone* that he gets when he expects I’m about to give up on something and it would have totally gotten in my head, which is not what I need right now. And it all would have been so much worse because this time I wouldn’t have been giving up halfway, this time I would have been tripping at the finish line and, yeah, I just really, really need my website to work.”

“First of all, it’s Curio’s fault your website doesn’t work. Not yours. And if your brother can’t see that then he sounds like a real . . . piece of work.”

“Maybe it’s Curio’s fault that the website doesn’t work. But it’s my fault that I left designing the site until the last minute, so now all the troubleshooting has to get resolved immediately or else I totally fail.”

“You mentioned before some kind of deadline? Is that what you mean by last minute?”

“Oh, God. I didn’t want to blab about it and end up jinxing myself. But yes. I used the remainder of my seed money to register for this huge food and wine expo that’s happening on Friday. And not just as an attendee, as a vendor. I have a booth and everything. I’m trying to get clients, but also to connect with other vendors there. There are representatives from all the best restaurants and vineyards all over the east coast. There are countless luxury items being sold. Stuff that would be perfect for my packages. Not to mention all the people who know people who know people. People with money who would totally want someone like me to design care packages for, I don’t know, their entire staff as their year-end bonus or something like that. This could be a huge break for Date in a Box. BUT, if I don’t have a website, or even worse, all I have is a messy jumble of alien alphabet instead of a website, I’m going to look so unprofessional and no one is going to want to work with me.”

“Oy.”

“Yah.”

“And you’ll feel like you tripped at the finish line.”

“I’ll feel like I face-planted in whipped cream at the finish line. And got a wedgie on the way down. And—”

“I get it. This is a can’t-fail situation.”

“Yes.”

“Well, Vera, I’m happy to inform you that you are currently working with a ‘can’t-fail’ kind of a guy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Wait, did I just hear you crack your knuckles?”

“Sure did.”

“Why do I feel like the *Mission: Impossible* music is playing in your head?”

“Because it is. Except, instead of rappelling down the side of a cliff I’m just going to start . . . typing really fast on my keyboard.”

“Ha. Is it just me or are you getting funnier as the time goes on?”

“Well, considering we’ve been talking for nine hours, if I’m not funny by now, there’s probably not any hope.”

“Has it really been nine hours?”

“Almost.”

“Have you ever had a customer service conversation that’s lasted this long? Be honest, I’m a high-maintenance customer, aren’t I?”

“Vera, I’ve never had *any* conversation last this long. And you’re not high maintenance. You deserve to have your site work well. You paid for it after all.”

“You aren’t working right now, are you? We’re taking a break, remember?”

“I can work and eat and chat at the same time.”

“No! I demand that you relax at least for a minute. You’re working overtime for me, which technically means I’m your boss, and as your boss I’m mandating a dinner break. YOU HEAR THAT, MANAGER? WHO’S IN CHARGE NOW?”

“Are you threatening my manager?”

“Sometimes you gotta lay the law down, Cal. Stick with me and you’ll get all the dinner breaks you could ever want.”

“How’s your food?”

“Oh, perfect. You were exactly right about eating simple food. It’s hitting the spot. How’s yours?”

“Perfect. Colorful. Unexpected. Interesting.”

“Wow, the food is that good?”

“And the company.”

“Aw. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I’ve grown on you throughout the day.”

“Grown on me? That implies I didn’t like you at first.”

“Oh, come on, Cal. There’s no way you liked me at first. I was screaming at other cars and raving about the hold music. I took *Titanic*’s name in vain.”

“I liked that! Really. I felt bad you’d been on hold for so long, but I thought you were funny right away.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about my flawless first impression.”

“You were charming.”

“And you were . . . very polite.”

“Oh, great. Just what every man wants to be.”

“Ha! Sorry, did that bruise your ego? Never mind, you weren’t polite. You were a pulsing vein of testosterone. I could tell, simply by your voice, that you could definitely crush a beer can on your forehead.”

“Much better.”

“Mmm. I’m done with my food and now suddenly *I* feel like I could crush a beer can on my head.”

“Well, you hadn’t eaten all day, Vera.”

“Neither had you.”

“It’s a miracle we didn’t simultaneously pass out cold.”

“Jule would have had to call 911 with his tiny little paws.”

“He’d never have gotten past the thumbprint ID on my phone. I would never give that loose cannon access to my personal data.”

“I think Jule is massively misunderstood. A classic anti-hero. You should have named him Heathcliff.”

“Trust me, he’s not a romantic hero. If you ever meet him, you’ll see what I mean. You won’t see hide nor hair of him for hours and then you’ll turn around and he’ll be like two inches from your face . . . just staring.”

“Well, I hope I do meet him someday. I have the sneaking suspicion that he would love me.”

“You . . . want to meet my cat?”

“Oh, hey, can you hold on for a second? I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“I’m back!”

“Everything all right?”

“Yup. Just changed into my pajamas.”

“Okay, I’m just gonna say it one more time.”

“What?”

“I’m about to sit down and try like hell to get your website fixed as fast as I can. It’s . . . really important to me that your site works. And you really, really don’t need to feel obligated to stay on the line. It’s late. You’re tired —”

“Am I distracting you while you work?”

“A little. In a good way. Never mind. You’re not. You’re perfect. Not distracting at all.”

“I’ll read. I won’t say a word on my end of the phone. If you need anything from me, let me know, but otherwise I’ll be quiet as a titmouse.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s ‘quiet as a *church* mouse.’”

“Oh, it’s not tit?”

“It’s definitely not tit.”

“Either way, my tits’ll be quiet.”

“Wow.”

“I’m zipping my lip as we speak.”

“Is that even anatomically possible?”

“Shhhhh. I’m reading now and can no longer hear you. Unless you need something, of course. Oh! And Cal, the second you think you’ve solved the problem, you let me know, okay?”

“I promise.”

Vera

I’ve been quiet for an hour now but I haven’t read a word of my book. I can’t stop looking at the screen of my phone. The seconds are tick tick ticking past and I can’t help but feel like they’re counting more than time. Each second feels like a penny dropped into a well. I wonder what I’m wishing for.

I should hang up the call.

It’s definitely weird I’m not hanging up the call.

I can tell it’s weird because I imagine telling my brother about this phone call and all the different ways he’d tell me this was ridiculous.

You flirted with a customer service rep for ten hours? Vera, get a leash on yourself.

But the thing is, Cal doesn’t think this is weird. I can tell he doesn’t. Or, at the very least, he thinks this is the good kind of weird. I pick up my phone and carefully keep the call connected while I go into my text messages. I click on the number for his direct line, the one I already sent a menu to. And I save it in my phone with his name attached.

He’s a contact now.

He’s a friend now.

Of course he’s a friend. We’ve been through a professional crisis, a personal crisis, a temper tantrum, hours of flirting. We’ve had dinner

together. I told him about the quitter T-shirt. I haven't told anybody about the quitter T-shirt.

Maybe Cal is one of those people who other people tell their secrets to. Like Shelly Simpson. She was this girl I went to elementary school with and for some reason everybody told Shelly their secrets. She knew everything about everyone and everyone knew it. Shelly kept those secrets locked tighter than the Queen's jewels. It was a one-way street. The secrets went in, but they never came out.

Maybe Cal is a Shelly.

I can see it now. All his customers wind up revealing personal stuff. They bitch about their divorces and weep for their lost loved ones. Cal consoles them with his deep, friendly voice. His personal specialties are website troubleshooting and talk therapy. With a side of jokes and reassurance.

The seconds keep ticking, the pennies are piling up.

Ugh. Cal's kind of perfect.

I pick the phone up.

But maybe I'm just thinking he's perfect because he's only a floating voice. I put the phone back down. Right now, there's no B.O., or socks in the middle of the floor. He hasn't bailed on meeting my parents at the last minute or gotten jealous when he caught me texting with a guy friend.

It's counterproductive to assume that every man would eventually end up being like my ex, but Gio hasn't exactly been the easiest person to get over. He's not my great lost love or anything. He wasn't the one who got away. He's just been on my mind. He's *pesky*. I learned the wrong things from him, I know I did.

I learned that I want too much. I learned that men only give when they expect to get. I learned that a boyfriend is like gravy on the meat and potatoes, but he can never really fill me up.

And duh, that's stupid. I've grown up with my parents' relationship. My dad still warms up my mom's car for her on cold winter mornings. He sits with her in the living room when she comes home from work in frustrated tears. When she calls him, he answers. Even when he's on the toilet. That's not hyperbole.

I know these men exist. My brother is one of them. He's a golden retriever in man form. The most loyal creature on the planet.

I've long since refused to let Gio represent all men. But like I said. He's *pesky*. He shows up when I least expect him to.

Like right now. Instead of picking up the phone and trying to wheedle Cal into flirting with me again, I stay quiet and just watch the seconds tick past.

Here's the thing—I've been dating a lot recently. Which, in modern terms, means I've been ghosted a lot recently. A few dudes have followed through past the first date. One even let me down gently instead of going radio silent, which means that he is a delightful person who deserves a silk pillow in heaven one day.

But most of them are ghosts in hip, Brooklyn clothing. I'd love to tell you that I could spot them from a mile away at this point. Yeah. I can't. I'm still as much of a sucker now as I was when I started casually dating a year ago. It's hard to tell who's going to ghost you.

Cal doesn't *seem* like a ghost.

And I know he's not married. God, I made him repeat it twice. Because I'm an occasional loser who did a literal happy dance when her customer service rep turned out to be unwed. How embarrassing.

Or maybe not embarrassing? Cal has a deep, attractive voice. He's obviously willing to connect with me. He's been incredible company today. He called the tow truck guy for me. Made sure I got home safe. He's funny and attentive and reassuring.

Maybe there could be something beyond this phone call? If something were to happen with him, it wouldn't even be long distance. Isn't that a sign? He could've been talking to me from Nova Scotia. From Prague. From Beijing. Instead he's been chatting to me all day from six miles away.

I pick up the phone again.

"Cal?"

"Mmhmm?"

"Am I interrupting?"

"Yes. But honestly, I'm surprised you made it this long."

"Well, I was just wondering something."

"Okay . . ."

"Does your face match your voice?"

"Sorry?"

"Does your face match your voice?"

"No, I heard you the first time, I just have no idea how to answer that."

"Some people's faces don't match their voices. Like Michael Bublé."

"The Christmas singer guy?"

“He sounds like he’d be a fifty-year-old crooner, right? But he’s young and cute. It doesn’t match.”

“I still don’t know how to answer this question.”

“Well, from your voice I’d guess that you are . . . forty? Tall? Bearded?”

“You can hear a beard in someone’s voice?”

“Did I guess right?”

“You got one out of three.”

“Ooh! Which one?”

“I’m not describing myself to you in detail. That’s . . .”

“A breach of identity safety protocol?”

“I was going to say embarrassing.”

“Why? Is your appearance embarrassing? Do you constantly have whopper sauce on your face and nose hairs down to your top lip?”

“I should have predicted that your imagination would take this to a gross place.”

“Then just tell me and put me out of my misery!”

“Okay, I’m average. Completely average. If you saw me on the train, you wouldn’t recognize me.”

“You’re terrible at describing stuff.”

“Okay, fine. Imagine the most handsome man you’ve ever seen. Like, truly, you know, a hunk.”

“A *hunk*? Ha! Who are you, my grandma? Cal, you delight me.”

“Are you imagining the hunk?”

“Yes.”

“Great, now make him fifty percent less good looking. And now cut that in half again. Now reduce his muscle mass down to that of a normal person. And make his clothes less fashionable. Also, he needs a haircut. There. That’s me.”

“You sound lovely.”

“Sure.”

“Aaaaaahhhhhh. Yes. That’s the stuff.”

“What’s going on over there?”

“Oh, nothing. That’s just my crawling-into-bed-at-the-end-of-a-long-day noise.”

“You’re . . . in bed?”

“You okay? You sound weird.”

“Yeah. Just swallowed some water wrong.”

“I’ve decided it’s weird that you’ve seen a picture of me but I haven’t seen any of you.”

“Hm.”

“I wanna see a picture of you.”

“What for?”

“What do you mean, what for? For the same reason anyone wants to see a picture of anyone. Curiosity.”

“I don’t have any photos to show you.”

“Cal, it’s the twenty-first century. That rectangular thing that you’re using to converse with me has something called a ca-me-ra in it. Just smile at it and press the button and bam! You have a photo of yourself. It’s like magic.”

“You . . . want me to send you a selfie?”

“I want an even playing field. You’ve seen me. Wait! Is there a customer service get-to-know-you page for Curio? Some sort of employees list with photos?”

“No. There’s not. *Thank God.*”

“What are you mumbling about?”

“Nothing.”

“You really won’t let me see a pic?”

“Vera, you’re nuts if you think anyone would want to follow up your pic with one of their own.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean the hair and makeup? It doesn’t have to be a glamour shot, Cal. Just find some good lighting. Go into your bathroom.”

“You want a picture of me in my bathroom? MANAGER, ARE YOU HEARING THIS?”

“Ha. No. Bathrooms have notoriously good lighting. Why do you think there are so many bathroom-mirror muscle shots?”

“Are there?”

“Clearly you don’t online date.”

“Dating is just about the only thing I don’t do online.”

“Okay, you’re obviously just baiting me to distract me from asking for a picture, but I’ll bite. What else do you do online?”

“Where to begin? I chat, research, read, post, game, work, shop, kill time, watch stuff. I love the internet. It never ceases to amaze me.”

“Really? I kind of hate the internet. It tricks me into wasting hours of my life reading listicles on BuzzFeed.”

“I can understand that. I mean, I don’t think it’s a utopia or anything. It definitely brings me anxiety, too. But in its purest form it’s a place for people to connect with one another.”

“I guess I don’t see much connection happening online. It seems more like people yelling at each other.”

“Well, yeah, I think that’s what tends to trend. When people are mad and yelling at each other. But the best parts of the internet don’t usually trend. They’re the little moments. When you can find someone who feels the exact same way about something as you do. Or someone makes a joke that perfectly hits your funny bone. It can really make the world less lonely.”

“You probably see a lot of crazy websites working for Curio, huh?”

“You have no idea. It’s so interesting to me. I love to see what people care about enough to devote time and money to creating a page. Sure, lots of businesses. But then there’s blogs about every topic under the sun. Fan pages for obscure celebrities. Petitions to save some random animal I’ve never even heard of. You see a lot of passion sitting where I sit.”

“Is that why you started working for Curio?”

“Ah, yeah, actually. This kind of thing is important to me.”

“That’s really cool. *You’re* really cool.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Cal?”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering—”

“Hi, honey. Oh, no. You ate takeout for dinner? You know there’s leftovers in the fridge, right?”

“Oh, I’m on the phone with a customer.”

“Sorry! Sorry! I’ll just head to bed.”

“G’night. Sorry about that, Vera.”

“What? Oh, man. Don’t be sorry! That’s totally fine. Wow, it really is late, huh?”

“I guess.”

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. Thank you so much for all your help today, Cal.”

“Wait, you’re going? Are you all right?”

“Yup! Is there some sort of customer service survey I should stay on the line for?”

“Oh . . . no.”

“Okay, then. Well, have a good night. And please have someone from Curio contact me when the site is all fixed up, yeah?”

“. . . Of course.”

“Thanks again. Goodbye, Cal.”

“. . . Goodbye, Vera.”

Cal

I stare down at the black screen of my phone. She hung up. She actually hung up.

I feel like a line of rope arcing from me in Bay Ridge all the way to her in Prospect Heights has been suddenly sliced in two. There’s a weird slackness where there had just been a whole lot of tension.

What the hell just happened?

Everything had been going fine. Great even.

I was wondering . . .

God, I’d definitely shave a few months off the end of my life to know what the hell she’d been wondering.

Why did she hang up? Think about this logically. She’d been just about to say something and then Carla had come in. Vera heard another voice on the line for the first time. She heard a woman’s voice on the line. A woman who’d walked right into my home. A woman who’d called me honey.

No. Nononononononono.

She couldn’t possibly think that me and Carla . . . Blarf. No. That’s wrong. That’s so wrong it’s laughable.

I should call her back. I should call her right now and explain. And then she’ll see why it’s laughable and she’ll laugh. She’ll laugh instead of sounding all high-pitched and fake happy like she did when she got off the phone.

I freeze with my thumb over the call button.

Because I can’t call her back.

What would I say? *Look, I’m not going to ask you out yet because I don’t want to cross any professional lines here, but I just want you to know that the woman you thought was my girlfriend is not my girlfriend.*

No. That is freaking weird. And presumptuous.

This thing between us was balancing on the head of a pin. And unfortunately Carla came in and punted it off into no-man's land.

And please have someone from Curio contact me when the site is all fixed up.

I groan and toss my phone down on the couch next to me. She didn't even say *please let me know when the site is fixed up*. She might as well have said *please have someone else contact me, not you*.

And why *wouldn't* she feel weird? After the day we had together? The hours of conversation? The jokes? The what-I'm-pretty-sure was flirting? And then just like that, she realizes that the dude who's been in her ear all day has a live-in girlfriend and she feels stupid as hell.

She probably doesn't think much of me right about now either.

I stand up and gather my takeout containers to bring to the recycling. My fingertips are buzzing, my heart is racing. It takes everything in me not to leap back to the couch and call her up, awkward confessions and professional lines be damned. It's my personality to see a problem and fix it. As quickly and efficiently as possible.

But there's no way around it. I can't fix this until I fix her site.

Then, I can call her up as me. I won't be Cal the customer service guy. I'll be Cal, the guy who thinks she's unbelievably cute. I'll be the guy who solves problems for her. Not the guy who creates them.

It'll be really nice when I get to be that Cal. But for now, in her eyes, I'm the guy who majorly vibed with her all day while he has a live-in girlfriend who calls him honey and leaves him leftovers in the fridge.

I lean forward on the kitchen counter. To my left is my bedroom. I should go get some sleep, start fresh in the morning. To my right is my computer, still glowing in the living room.

Sighing, I start to brew some coffee. I can either not-sleep in my bed or I can not-sleep while I'm working. And one of them helps me clear up this situation with Vera faster.

I make the coffee weak, because I want to be able to see straight and I wasn't lying when I told Vera that caffeine makes me jittery. While it's brewing, I head to my room and change out of my stupid date-night clothes.

Jeez, I'm a goner. So into a girl I dressed up for her even when she couldn't see me.

I'm back in track pants and a T-shirt. For the second time that day, I stop and study myself in the mirror, wondering what Vera would think if she saw me right this very second. *Average*, I told her. *Needs a haircut*, I said.

Not as hot as you, was what I meant.

I think of her smile and visibly wince. It feels good and bad at the same time.

There's this gemstone that occurs only in Finland. It's called spectrolite. I found a piece once, out in the woods behind my dad's house. It was the size of my big toe, the color of a rainbow, iridescent and magical. For days I didn't tell my dad about it. I just carried it in my pocket. It was a secret, something that thrilled me every time my fingers grazed it in my pocket. A gift to myself.

That's what Vera's smile feels like to me.

A secret treasure that's mine and only mine.

Except, I finally showed my dad that spectrolite and he took it to a rock and gem shop where it was cleaned and polished. I watched as he bought a glass display case. It even had a row of lights on one side to make the stone glow.

Then we went home and he set the whole thing up on the mantle of our fireplace. My secret treasure had become the world's treasure. No longer mine. I wasn't even tall enough to open the case on my own. My pocket felt empty. I'd wrecked it by telling my dad.

And now I've done the same thing again. Wrecked something special by exposing it to the world. Why the hell didn't I mention Carla at some other point of the conversation? Vera had not been smiling when she hung up on me.

I arrive at the same inevitable conclusion once again. Fix site, fix situation with Vera. It's the only reasonable order of operations. I drink the coffee in three big gulps, take it like it's cough medicine. I'm cracking my knuckles and propping up my feet on the coffee table. My laptop is the portal to the world where Vera's wounded little site is hiding. Here I come.

Right as I'm about to get down to work, I hear an incoming email hit my inbox. It is addressed to my work email and the sender is just a bunch of letters and numbers. I eye it for a second and then click into it. I have strong spam filters set up on my account so there's no way this was a mass email.

You owe me. You have to make up for what you did. Wire \$5,000 to this account in the next three days or else your cat will get it.

I'm not messing around.

I blink at the letter. Oh, lord. The cat menacer strikes again. The first time this wacko emailed me two months ago, my first thought was, *Someone wants to assassinate Jule?*

My second thought was, *What the hell did I do wrong that's worth \$5,000?* It's such a strange sum of money. It's not little enough to brush off but it's not big enough to think I'm being extorted by someone who actually knows what they're doing.

Just like I've done with the last four emails from the cat menacer, I immediately forward it on to Jerome Matilda. Jerome is an old friend from college and someone we keep on retainer at Curio. He's sort of a cross between an IT guru and a PI. He's an odd duck. He couldn't find his own socks if they were on his feet. But there's no mystery he can't solve if it involves the internet.

Unfortunately the cat menacer isn't the first threat of this kind that I've had to enlist Jerome to get to the bottom of. Curio, though not as heavy a hitter as other content management systems, is a rising star. And the people behind it are rising in its wake.

I've gotten all sorts of strange emails to my work address. A surprising amount of nudie pics. And also a not-so-surprising amount of people hoping to squeeze or trick a penny out of me.

I put the issue out of my mind. That's the point of sending the email on to Jerome. He's supposed to think about it for me. I turn my thoughts back to Curio. Back to Vera. Fix site, fix situation. I dive in.

It's three hours later that I realize just how screwed I am. Because I've figured out the issue. And it's not with her site. It's with Curio. There's a systemic problem with how Curio interfaces with operating systems as old as hers. Which sucks. Because there are plenty of people around the world who use outdated operating systems and they deserve to build fully operational webpages as much as the next person. But also, it sucks because this means that in order to fix her site, Vera is going to have to start from scratch on building the questionnaire, something that no doubt would take her days, or I have to start from scratch on that part of Curio's interface.

Something that will take *me* days.

I think of the timer on the screen of my phone that had showed me how long my conversation with Vera was lasting. It blinked out of existence the second she ended the call. Thinking of the timer gives me an anxious feeling. Like it's taken up residence in my chest, but this time it's running backwards. There is no bomb when the timer runs out. Instead, there's only the complete fading of me out of Vera's life. If this timer counts down to zero, I'm just some guy she once had a really long phone call with. I'll be Customer Service Cal, a distant memory. If she saw me on the street, she wouldn't even recognize me.

Fix site, fix situation.

Looks like I won't be sleeping tonight.

Chapter Five

Tuesday

Vera

“Hi, Vera, it’s Mom. You’re not still sleeping, are you? I was just calling to tell you that Dad and I are so excited for the convention on Friday. I know you said that you could get us in for free but we went ahead and bought passes because we wanted to support you, sweetie! Rod and Miriam were hoping to come as well. We’re all so proud. Anyhow, I’m headed to the market this afternoon to pick up some groceries for your stay here. So, call me back if you need anything in particular! I really hope you’re not still sleeping, you’ll waste the day away, sleepyhead. Okay, love you.”

By the end of the voicemail my eyes are crossing.

I am incredibly, endlessly grateful to have a mother who loves me so much. Like *so much*. But she has this unique talent of lifting me up and cutting the legs out from under me at the exact same time.

Of course I’m not still asleep at 11 a.m. on a weekday.

And I can’t believe my parents paid the convention entrance fee. It’s a completely wasted \$150. I could have gotten them in for free. And what did she mean support me by paying for the tickets? It’s not like I get a cut of the door profits. Ugh. Now, because they paid for it, they’ll feel like they need to stay all day to get their money’s worth. Nothing says independent businessperson like having your parents stand beside your booth and insist to prospective customers that you’re really special.

And they’re bringing Rod and Miriam? They’re our old neighbors that my parents still keep in touch with even though they moved to a retirement community across town. I love Rod and Miriam. But Miriam’s a nurse

herself and has never really gotten over me quitting nursing school. She'll spend the whole time she's there looking over my booth with a very skeptical expression, as if asking me if I really think this is more worthwhile than nursing.

I have three care packages to drop off at UPS and a meeting with a woman who makes organic haircare products. I'm pitching Date in a Box to her and hoping she'll want to start collaborating with me.

I don't have time to spare today, but if I don't call my mother back and tell her what not to buy from the "market" (which is how she refers to Costco, btw) she'll use her intuition and come home with a six-pack of the deodorant I haven't used since high school.

I lean back against my kitchen counter and bring up my mom's missed call on my recents list. My thumb hovers over the screen. Because there it is. Curio's customer service number staring back at me with the time stamp of 10 hours and 18 minutes.

I remember this feeling. It's exactly like when as a kid I'd build a fort with my brother and spend the whole day playing in it. We'd create a land where our fort existed, give it a name, a language, a history. We'd battle for king of the fort and eat our lunches in there. For that day, our entire lives existed within the walls of Mom's old sheets she'd let us pin up in the basement. And then the next morning, I'd wake up and remember the fort and somehow the magic would be gone. I'd think to myself, did you really spend the entire day doing that? It would still seem fun, but I could never get myself back into the place where it was *real* again.

My phone call with Cal is exactly that.

I can't believe I spent the entire day chatting with a stranger on the phone. And I really can't believe I was about to ask him out. But it's not even that I'm embarrassed about. It's that I was both feet in, opening up to him, wanting to know anything he'd tell me about himself.

I have a vulnerability hangover.

But you know what? I can't think about this right now. I have a life. A life that involves commitments with people I actually know.

I call my mom and implore her not to buy me a whole cupboard of snacks. I'm only staying for two nights, I remind her. She tells me she's proud of me again and for some reason it makes my teeth grit. I email her the complimentary guest passes to the event, the ones that were supposed to be for my parents, and she prints them out to give to Rod and Miriam. I beg

off the call because of my meeting and I can feel the surprise in her tone that not only have I set up a meeting, but I'll be attending it in a punctual manner. ("So proud, Vera.")

Unfortunately, the phone call has eaten up too much time and I have to schlep the care packages across Brooklyn and find a way to mail them after my meeting but before I head to SoHo to pick up the cravats I had commissioned for my first ever Best Man in a Box.

I'm two steps behind all day. As it always is, it's a holy miracle I make it to the grocery store. I can only aspire to someday be one of those people who comes home on Sundays with a perfectly curated selection of fresh produce, destined to become a week's worth of balanced meals. As it is, I'm just glad I'm headed back home with a tote bag full of whatever groceries looked good. Grocery shopping is an accomplishment for me and I'm relieved to have it be done with for a few days.

I didn't go grocery shopping to spite Cal. I also didn't spend any time imagining him and his girlfriend perusing the aisles arm in arm, doing butterfly kisses in between shopping for perfectly nutritious meals that will eventually become delicious leftovers. Because if I'd done those things, I would have had to be thinking about Cal. Which I am not.

Except I am.

Because despite my jam-packed day, I'm in bed at 8 p.m. My phone is a silent black brick on the bedside table and I can't shake the feeling that it's accusing me of something. I stare at the ceiling of my bedroom. I'm an idiot.

I'm not married does NOT mean *I don't have a girlfriend*.

I created a fancy little world for myself yesterday. Just me and Cal sitting in a fort of my own making. Why couldn't he have been bored and disengaged? You know how many customer service reps I've spoken to who were obviously playing solitaire on their company-issued desktops? Why couldn't he have been like one of them? Why did he have to laugh at my jokes and order me dinner and stay on the line in my pocket and make me feel . . . cared for?

Hi, honey.

The woman's voice rockets through me and I curl into the shape of an armadillo under my covers.

She did *not* sound like some girl. She sounded like a sophisticated woman. She probably wears pantsuits that fit gorgeously. Her hair in a

French twist. I bet she's the head editor for a magazine that publishes thoughtful think pieces on the state of foreign affairs.

And he caught me researching sex toys for a client.

My armadillo curls even tighter.

I'd been one wave of courage away from asking out the person whose job it is to get my website fully operational.

What a bad freaking idea! You know what? Thank you, universe, for having Cal's worldly girlfriend enter stage left at that particular moment. It was practically a blinking neon sign reading *Don't self-sabotage, Vera!*

I do NOT need to make things complicated for my business right now. And frankly, I do not have time to burn before the expo on Friday. I need my website up and running with zero strings. I'm sure there are other customer service people for Curio who could help me, but Cal seems to have a hold on the problem. Why would I screw things up with him right before he fixes my site?

It was a moment of lunacy. One that his girlfriend allowed me to neatly avoid, like roadkill on the highway.

If I don't hear from Curio by tomorrow morning, I'll call the customer service line again and check on—

I freeze, the covers legitimately pulled up to my nose, my body stick straight in bed. My phone is ringing.

I'm like that lady in *When a Stranger Calls*.

. . . The call is coming from inside the house . . .

Except when I answer, it won't be a murderer on the line, it'll just be my own self reading a list of bad decisions I've made over the years. I shouldn't answer the phone. I shouldn't even look.

Of course I look.

I groan and collapse back onto the bed.

I'm not even surprised that it's Cal.

The phone is on its fifth ring and about to send Cal's ass straight to voicemail. It's the best thing that could possibly happen. I'll get to hear whatever he has to say without actually having to talk to him. I'm sure he's calling to tell me that my website is shipshape.

That'll be that. I won't ever have to talk to him—

My traitorous thumb accepts the phone call.

And would you look at that. We're at one second and counting.

"Hello?"

“Vera? Hi.”

“...”

“It’s Cal . . . from Curio customer service.”

“Right. Hi, Cal.”

“Hi. Sorry to call outside of normal business hours but I assumed you’d be busy with work today and didn’t want to interrupt, especially because Curio kind of stole a work day from you yesterday.”

“That’s okay.”

“Do you have a second to talk about your site? I have an update for you.”

“Sure, I have a second. I’m not doing anything. I was just about to go to sleep.”

“Oh. At eight? That’s early. Are you feeling all right?”

“Hm? Yes. Great, actually. Great day. It was a great day.”

“I’m . . . glad to hear that.”

“What was the update?”

“Okay, so, here’s the deal. The problem with your website was not actually a problem with your website. It’s technically a problem with Curio itself and the way it interacts with, ah, elderly operating systems.”

“Hm.”

“Which is a good thing for *Curio* because your issue alerted me to this whole host of other problems we have and now I’ll be able to fix them.”

“But it’s a bad thing for me . . . ?”

“Because it basically means that I can’t fix your site without fixing Curio.”

“Oh, my God. I *knew* it. Garbage barge fire. Dammit. My brother is such a self-righteous *arse* for pressuring me into using Curio. I should have just used Squarespace like every other entrepreneur on the planet. Why did I think avoiding the beaten path was going to be a good idea? This is probably what they teach you in business school. Day one there’s two-foot high words on the chalkboard that say *Don’t try to reinvent the wheel, dummy*. I was all ready for bed and now I’m sweating. Literally *sweating* and pacing around my room. I’m going to have to put on another layer of deodorant!”

“I probably should have mentioned that I’m gonna fix Curio, fix your site and everything will be fine.”

“But Cal, I need my site to be fixed by—”

“Friday morning at eight a.m. I haven’t forgotten. Vera, I swear I’m going to make this right. You can stop pacing and sweating. I’ve got this. I’ve got you.”

“ . . . ”

“Vera? You there?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m okay. What about you? Your voice sounds scratchy.”

“I just didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Oh.”

“So, I can keep you updated on my progress if you want. Or I can just let you know when I’m finished. Whatever you’d rather—”

“You didn’t sleep because you were working on my site, weren’t you?”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“Ugh, *why is he making this so hard?*”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

“What am I making hard?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just that most people don’t stay up all night to help other people out with this kind of thing. Actually, no one has helped me out with almost any part of Date in a Box. I think because no one really thinks it’s worth the time or effort because they assume I’m gonna give up on it. And yeah. Here you are staying up all night to help me out.”

“I wanted to.”

“ . . . I bet you do this kind of thing for all your friends? You’re the guy who people call when they need someone to proofread their ninety-page thesis paper, right?”

“I mean, I consider myself a good friend. But that’s not why . . . I’m serious when I say I want to fix this problem with your site, Vera. I really don’t want you to go to that expo feeling unprepared.”

“Cal, you’re killing me.”

“Why?”

“No reason. Look, we’re friends now. I’m putting my official stamp on it. Friends.”

“Oh. Great! That’s great. Does that mean I’m not just Cal the customer service guy anymore?”

“You’re officially Cal the . . . good buddy.”

“Great.”

“And because we’re friends, I’m going to make sure that you go to bed at a reasonable hour.”

“Hm?”

“I don’t want you to burn yourself out. Not for me and my site, okay?”

“Vera . . .”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“Sure. I got a few hours in the late morning/early afternoon.”

“Did you eat?”

“I did. Too much probably. When I don’t sleep I compensate by eating like nine square meals.”

“Good. Then it’s time for bed.”

“It’s only eight fifteen.”

“Go brush your teeth.”

“I’m not that tired, I swear. I can work for a few more hours.”

“Brush your teeth or I’m going to file a formal complaint with your manager.”

“I’m pretty sure friends don’t try to get each other fired.”

“You’ve never been friends with me before. It’s a real roller coaster ride.”

“You know what? That doesn’t surprise me.”

“What’s that supposed to—Oh, wow, you’re actually brushing your teeth, aren’t you?”

“Yoo tol’ me doo.”

“What?”

“You told me to!”

“Ooh, okay, I like this game. Jump on one foot!”

“Vera.”

“Venmo me a thousand dollars!”

“The power has gone to your head.”

“Go streaking through your neighborhood!”

“Oh, boy.”

“Jeez, you brush your teeth for a long time.”

“Hygiene is important. You only get one set of teeth, you know.”

“Not me. I had a bunch of extra adult teeth that I kept having to get pulled.”

“Like a shark?”

“Exactly.”

“Did you have to have braces and retainers, too?”

“So many. I cracked the camera lens in our family Christmas pictures for about ten years running.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“No, seriously. There’s one picture of me when I’m probably twelve that’s particularly bad. My brother has it framed in his house because he thinks it’s so funny.”

“That partially explains the smile, then.”

“Huh?”

“Oh. Nothing. I just . . . You have a great smile. And the orthodontia might have had something to do with that. Never mind.”

“I keep forgetting you’ve seen a picture of me.”

“Yeah. Sorry. That’s probably weird for you?”

“And you really won’t even things out, huh?”

“ . . . ”

“How about a celebrity?”

“What?”

“Give me a celebrity that you look like.”

“Oh, lord. There are none.”

“Come on.”

“I do not look like a celebrity.”

“I swear you get a kick out of being difficult. Hair color, then? Eye color? Give me something.”

“Ah! Dang it!”

“What happened?”

“I accidentally sat on Jule. He was hiding under my covers. No, Jule. Not there. Just go over there! You can’t take the whole bed!”

“You’re incredibly good at changing the topic.”

“What topic? Oh, my hair and eye color? Take a guess.”

“Mmm, white-blond hair and really light eyes.”

“Oh, great. You picture me like Draco Malfoy?”

“Ha. Would that be so bad? Everybody knows Draco’s a hottie.”

“He’s also the bad guy.”

“Right. Bad guys are hot.”

“I’ll . . . keep that in mind?”

“No, forget I said that. You’re a good guy. I can tell. You brush your teeth for the prescribed amount of time and let your cat sleep in your bed. You’re pure of heart. I don’t want you getting any ideas.”

“Why do you think I’m blond?”

“Because you’re Scandinavian!”

“Oh. Actually, it’s Nordic. Only the southern part of Finland is considered Scandinavia. Down where they speak Swedish.”

“You don’t speak Swedish?”

“Nah. I understand it a little bit, though.”

“Do you speak any other languages besides English and Finnish?”

“I studied Spanish in school. I’m proficient, not fluent. And I’ve been taking Japanese lessons because my mom’s husband is Japanese and I’ve been trying to connect with him more.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Hm.”

“You don’t think it’s sweet?”

“It kind of seems like bare minimum to me. He and my mom speak Japanese together. He doesn’t have a ton of English. If I want to have a relationship with him at all, it makes sense that I’d work on my Japanese.”

“I get the feeling that your bare minimum is other people’s top gear.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“You said your brother pressured you into using Curio?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Well, he used it to build his own site and was convinced it would be a better fit for me than other website hosting services. There’s another reason too, but I’m too tired to explain it all right now. Let’s just say he’s worried I’m going to choke on a chicken bone and no one will find my carcass for weeks.”

“That is . . . extremely specific.”

“He’s a worrier.”

“And he thought Curio could help you with the chicken bone thing?”

“Oh, no. No way. I see what you’re doing here.”

“What?”

“I’m avoiding answering *you* now, get used to it.”

“All right, fine. We’ll trade answers, okay? My hair and eye color for your brother’s motives.”

“Okay . . .”

“I’ll go first in a show of goodwill. Brown and brown.”

“Come on! Use descriptors! Sandy brown? Ochre? Like a polished coffee table? Chocolate brown? Gimme the details!”

“Dark brown and dark brown.”

“Oh, my God. I’m giving you a score of one on the customer service survey.”

“The one I’ve already told you doesn’t exist?”

“That very one.”

“I told you my hair and eye color so now you have to explain about your brother and Curio.”

“He thinks that using Curio will improve my love life.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . And? That’s it? That’s all the information you’re giving me?”

“Our answers were equally vague.”

“Why would he think Curio would improve your love life? It’s not a dating app. There’s not even a chat function between users.”

“It’s a mystery.”

“Not to you! You’re withholding the information!”

“As are you, Cal. Pics or it didn’t happen.”

“ . . . So, is he right?”

“My brother? About what?”

“Does your love life need improving?”

“Ugh. Are we really here already? I barely stamped us friends twenty minutes ago.”

“You don’t have to answer. Sorry. That was really forward. I should—”

“Oh, keep your pants on, Cal.”

“I—ah. Yes.”

“I guess my love life could use a refresh.”

“ . . . ”

“Cal?”

“I’m over here keeping my pants on. Sorry. Bad joke. I’m just trying not to stick my nose in your business.”

“That’s okay. It’s a conversation, isn’t it? I mean, don’t worry, *you* don’t have to feel obligated to tell me anything about your love life.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“Hm?”

“It’s not very exciting.”

“Uh huh. Well, um, gotta keep things fresh. I think the problem with my love life is that everything is always a bit *too* fresh. I don’t usually see the same person more than once. Lotta first dates, I mean.”

“And not any second dates?”

“Very few. If any.”

“You . . . don’t like any of the men you’re seeing?”

“Some of them I’ve liked, but it doesn’t seem to be mutual.”

“That’s . . . the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Ha. Not stupid. It’s a reality.”

“I mean. Who are these men?”

“Normal men. Internet men. Guys around Brooklyn.”

“You mean to tell me they go out to dinner with you and talk to you all evening and then don’t want to do it again?”

“Gosh, Cal. I also have a paper cut, you wanna come over here and squeeze some lemon onto it?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to rub it in or anything, I’m just really . . . astonished. If you were single—which I wasn’t sure if you were—I would have definitely thought it would have been by choice.”

“You make me sound like I should be beating them off with a stick.”

“Uh, I think the phrase is *fighting* them off with a stick. Beating them off has a, uh, different connotation. Anyhow, yes, the fact that you’re not fighting them off with a stick is inexplicable to me.”

“Because of my sparkling personality?”

“Well . . . yeah, to be honest. I mean, you’re very pretty, Vera, don’t get me wrong. But you know how much I’ve enjoyed talking to you? How much anyone in their right mind would enjoy talking to you?”

“I should call you before my next date. You can pump me up.”

“Oh. I—Sure. I could do that. Um, when is it?”

“When’s what?”

“Your next date.”

“I was *joking*, Cal. I’m not dating right now, not really. I’m trying to focus all my energy on my business. Once the expo is over and I know how

it all shakes out, then maybe I can try to balance my social life a little again. Besides, a break from dating has been in order anyhow. My last break-up was kind of a doozy.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It didn’t tear my heart out or anything, it’s just . . . lingered. I’m not sure why.”

“I’ve felt that way before. Sometimes a person sticks in your head. And not always for the right reasons.”

“Exactly!”

“Was he really charismatic?”

“Yes!”

“Did he have an answer for everything when you argued?”

“Always.”

“Did you end up feeling like everything was your fault?”

“Seriously, how are you doing this? It’s like a magic trick or something.”

“I’m not magic, I’ve just been there before.”

“Where?”

“Swept along in the inertia of someone who knew how to get what they wanted. And even when things are over, you still kind of bob along in that direction for a while. That’s the inertia part.”

“Does it ever wear off?”

“It did for me after a while. Especially after I dated someone else. That helped—how should I put this—reset my speedometer.”

“Well, you know what they say, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.”

“Oh! I wasn’t saying . . . Jeez.”

“Did I embarrass you, Cal?”

“I think you make it a goal to embarrass me.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes.”

“Apparently.”

“Wait, does it really bother you? I can totally cut it out.”

“No! No. You’re playful. I like that. I like . . . playing with you.”

“Hey, Cal?”

“Yes?”

“Um . . . you know what? Never mind.”

“What is it? You can ask me anything.”

“No, no. It’s fine. Let’s just . . . forget it.”

“Oh. Well. Okay . . . Are you still pacing and sweating?”

“No. I put on some lavender lotion and now I’m lying in the dark with an eye mask on.”

“One of those sleep thingies?”

“No. It’s a beauty thing. It’s this thing you keep in your freezer and you lay it over your eyes to reduce swelling.”

“Huh.”

“I’m also wearing a sheet mask underneath that. If you saw me right now you’d scream.”

“What’s a sheet mask?”

“Google it.”

“Okay . . . Ahh!”

“Told you.”

“This is the stuff of nightmares.”

“Oh. *Thanks.*”

“No. *You’re* not the stuff of nightmares, Vera. You’re lovely. I’m just saying that sheet masks look like Jason. Also like a face peeling off. It’s horrifying.”

“Well, they’re not made for looking at. They’re made for using and then discarding and feeling like a million bucks afterward. I take it you don’t use many beauty products?”

“Mmm. Do facewash and sunscreen count?”

“Those count! But, they’re kind of basement-level beauty treatments. I’m talking top-floor sort of stuff. If I were going to send you a Spa Day in a Box, I’d definitely include a sheet mask. And a foot bath. And essential oils. And a jade roller. And wow, I need to add this package to my site. People would flip for it.”

“Definitely. It’s almost as good an idea as your Sick Day in a Box.”

“You looked at all the menu options?”

“Of course.”

“Which one did you like the best? Which one would you order for yourself?”

“Well, honestly, I’m probably biased.”

“Why?”

“Because I personally know you. And I’d love any package you sent me, just because you sent it.”

“ . . . ”

“Vera?”

“It’s getting a little late.”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll keep me posted on the site?”

“Absolutely. Talk to you tomorrow, then?”

“ . . . Yes. Bye, Cal.”

“Bye, Vera.”

Chapter Six

Wednesday Morning

Cal

Maybe it's the fact that I haven't stopped working for God only knows how long, or maybe it's that things with Vera actually feel like they're . . . smooth again, but almost the second she hangs up the call, I'm plummeting into sleep. I stay there the entire night. When I blink awake, I'm still lying in the same position I fell asleep in and my phone is still clutched in my hand.

Guess I needed the sleep.

Well, it wouldn't be a crush if the first thing I thought about wasn't Vera's love life. Still processing that.

She really didn't want to talk about my love life at all. It was glaringly obvious to me because normally she's a generous conversationalist. Interested in my life. But this time she couldn't have pivoted away faster. *Gotta keep it fresh*, was all she'd said. Because when I'd told her my love life "wasn't very exciting" she'd thought I meant my relationship with my live-in girlfriend wasn't very exciting.

My relationship with *Carla*.

Which, incidentally, is true. But not in the way Vera thinks it is.

I turn over and bury my face in my pillow. Now that I think about it, this means that Vera thinks I'm the kind of person who would casually classify his life with his partner as "not exciting." If I were actually doing that, I would be a total dick.

I really should've taken the opportunity to clear things up but it seemed clumsy and overeager to just blurt out "I don't have a girlfriend." And she jumped away from the topic so fast I couldn't find a way to gracefully get back onto it.

I sit up in bed and lean over my knees. My big, dumb feet are not the only reason I'm bad at most sports. It's because I never have the timing right. I run out the shot clock. Swing too early. Try to weave around an opponent just a second too late.

I had an opportunity last night and I absolutely botched it.

Needing to offload some of these thoughts, I call my friend Eliot. He'll be thrilled to hear that I have anything to even discuss when it comes to my love life. My call rings through to his voicemail, though, which is unusual for him. He's the kind of person who always answers. Even when he's on the toilet, which I've repeatedly explained to him is highly unnecessary.

"Hey, man. I have something I was hoping to run past you. But you can call me back whenever. I'm gonna get into some work pretty soon, so I might be out of commission for the next few—oh, crap. I just realized it's six fifteen in the morning. Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to call so early. All right. And I never heard what ended up happening with that text message mix-up thing with you and that woman. So, yeah. Call me back."

I check my phone one more time, because I have a wicked crush and I'm looking to see if Vera's called or texted at the crack of dawn. Right. Okay. It's time for a run, I think.

Bay Ridge is a honeycomb of a neighborhood on the southwest edge of Brooklyn. Its perimeters are lined by highways and it has a long walking path along the Hudson Bay. One end is the Verrazano Bridge and the other end is a sweeping view of lower Manhattan. I've always liked the view on this run because it's so New York, but not in the iconic way that the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty are. It's always felt like my very personal slice of, arguably, the most famous city in the world.

It was emotional whiplash, as a kid, to go from NYC to my dad's lakeside town north of Helsinki. My time spent in NYC made me an oddity in Hollola. And vice versa. I'd return from either place having only spoken that respective language for a year—with the exception of phone conversations with the other parent—and have to figure out how to slide back into American or Finnish culture.

I feel like for many people this arrangement might have created two different versions of a personality. One for the years in Finland and one for the years in America. But I've never been one for duplicity. My split time in childhood really just created one very awkward me.

I like to think I've smoothed out a lot of those edges in adulthood. I got my degree in software engineering and made a few friends in the process. My first friends, really. But it was when I was cutting my teeth as a developer at a midsize company that I met Eliot. He was part of the design team.

Our brains work in extremely different ways but we were compatible with one another immediately. Unlike me, who never wants to bother anyone, he had no qualms about calling me up to see how my Thanksgiving with my mom went. Or shooting me a quick email with a link to an article he thought I'd like. When he noticed the triple-decker sandwiches I packed myself for lunch, he straight up asked me to bring him one every once in a while. Who does that? Someone with no shame.

And I mean that in a good way.

It's freeing to be friends with someone who is so comfortable in every situation. He's the opposite of me. Instead of feeling like he fits in nowhere, he feels like he fits in everywhere.

In some ways, he kind of reminds me of Vera.

I've made it down to the running path and the sun is up. The light is still filtering past the trees and buildings and there's a barge cutting through a thin layer of mist over the water. If I block out the loud, inching traffic on the shore parkway, it's *almost* peaceful.

I start my run, the Manhattan skyline at my back, and my thoughts instantly go to Vera.

Is she still sleeping?

Is she worrying about the expo?

Am I completely screwing this up with her?

Maybe I should call her right now and just lay everything on the table. *I like you, I'm single, and no matter what your reaction to that information is, it won't change the quality of my work.*

That is, no doubt, what Eliot would do in this situation.

A stray thought pops into my head. How did the person who sent me those threatening emails know I had a cat? I've been too distracted by Vera and the problems with Curio to really mull those emails over. As I'm jogging I check my messages and besides a note from Jerome confirming receipt of the last forwarded email, he hasn't contacted me with any additional information. *You owe me*, that email said. So personal. But who even knows I have a cat? It's not like I walk around town blabbing about

Jule. My parents know. Carla knows, obviously. Considering she cleans his litter box once a week. Eliot knows. And now Vera. But I really don't think any of those people are threatening Jule's life over \$5,000.

I'm running too fast and my thoughts are skipping like a scratched CD. I stop for a second, pull out my headphones and phone and go to my podcasts app. My thumb hovers over my daily news podcast. Do I really want to hear all the ways the world is tearing itself to pieces?

Considering I'm trying to lower my anxiety, instead I go to the search bar.

And there it is.

"Let's Talk About Sex, Baby" with Tasha Brooke, the podcast Vera was telling me about. I tap on the most recent episode and keep running.

Her theme song is catchy and silly but I fast forward through the canned intro and the ads. Call it solidarity for Curio, but Squarespace ads are nails on a chalkboard for me.

"Hi, Tasha. I . . . can't believe I'm calling a podcaster right now. Publicly talking about my problems is, uh, not my thing. But yeah. I don't really have many people that I can privately talk to about my problems either. So, here goes. I'm, ah, lonely? I guess. I don't like being in public because of . . . reasons. So, it's hard for me to meet people. I've tried the internet thing. Embarrassing as it is, I got catfished last year, so I'm pretty gun shy now. I don't have any remaining family. I have a few friends, but they all have partners and kids and families and I can feel that our relationships are imbalanced. I need them more than they need me. And it just makes things awkward. I'd really like to connect with someone, a woman, on a romantic level. But yeah. Like I said, I got catfished and that was terrible and humiliating and how do you try again after that? And I guess I don't know what to do next. I don't even know if I'm asking for advice. Maybe I'm just calling to talk to someone. I work from home, so I haven't spoken to anyone in a few days. And . . . okay. I guess I'm done now. Thanks for listening."

I slow my run down to a light jog as I'm listening to the call. Something about the man's voice plucks a chord. I want to invite this guy to go out for a beer or something.

I'm not now, but I've been very lonely at different points in my life. I was homeschooled in both Finland and the States. It was always hard to meet people my own age. Even harder to know how to act when I did meet

them. I know what it's like to go days without talking to another person. And I've spent enough time on the internet to understand how easy it would be to get tricked by someone.

Catfishing is one of the ugliest things humans do to one another.

Isn't that exactly what you're doing to Vera? a little voice says in the back of my head.

I slow my run down even further and now I'm just walking, my hands on my hips and my chest shoving in and out with my breath.

No. No, I'm not catfishing her. She just doesn't know the whole story yet. That's natural. We haven't known each other more than a few days. We've never even met in person.

But you're not who she thinks you are, that voice insists.

I groan and drop my head back, pacing and breathing hard.

A woman holding the hands of two children as they walk down the path skitters to the side, shooting me a dirty look.

I just haven't gotten around to filling Vera in on all the details. That's not the same as willfully deceiving her. I'm not extorting her. I have every intention of telling her everything.

I will tell her everything. As soon as her site is fixed. I'll tell her who I am.

Vera

"Hey, buttwad, you awake yet?"

This might seem like an odd message to leave with one's brother at 6 a.m. But not for my family. He has dyslexia and texting is really tough for him, so pretty much as soon as the technology became available, we started leaving voice memos for one another instead of texts.

I play the voice memo he's just sent me back. *"I am now, you turd."*

"Wanna meet for breakfast before work?"

He's a freelancer but he keeps scrupulous hours. My theory is that having a learning disorder in school has made him extremely strict with himself for anything work related. I think he thinks that if he lets even one tiny thing fall through the cracks his entire structure will come tumbling down.

"Can't this morning. I've been playing phone tag with Fred so I think I'm gonna swing by and see what he's working on."

Oh, lord. Here we go.

"Please do not send us down the Fred hole this early in the morning."

My brother has been trying to set me up with his friend Fred for years. He's obsessed.

"I know I want you to give Fred a chance, but please do not use the words Fred and hole in such close proximity. It's disturbing."

"Anything to get you off the subject of Fred."

"I just thought I'd mention, once again, that he's smart, gainfully employed, and funny."

"If he's so great, then why don't you date him?"

"You know, I would. But, as they say in Parks and Rec, sadly, we're both heterosexual."

I laugh.

"I can't believe you're choosing Fred over your own sister this morning."

"You wanna come with? You know, if you wanted an introduction to Fred so badly, you only had to ask."

"Oh, my GAWD. Goodbye. Do NOT say hello to Fred for me."

"I'll call you later."

"Kay."

I toss my phone to the side and drag myself out of bed. My brother's put me in an irritable mood.

I usually play it off as a lighthearted joke, but it actually drives me up the wall how much he tries to pawn me off on his friend. The thing is, this isn't characteristic of my brother at all. He's never tried to set me up with anyone else. He just actually thinks he's right. He thinks Fred is going to be the love of my life. My husband. Which is so freaking annoying I can't even think about it. Here I am, dating for almost fifteen of my thirty years on earth and I've had zero luck. My cocky-ass brother makes one friend and he thinks he's completely cracked the code?

No way. It's almost worth going on a date with Fred just to prove how ridiculous the whole theory is, but I don't want to give my brother the satisfaction.

Smart, gainfully employed and funny notwithstanding, Fred does not sound like my type. Over the last year I've also learned some tantalizing tidbits like, "Fred has a rock collection" and "Fred plays the flute."

Fred's characteristics don't exactly scream "sweeping love affair."

I wasn't lying before when I said that bad guys are hot. Rough around the edges is hot. Against the grain is hot.

Gio was hot.

So, fat lot of good that did me. Still, I'm not ready to do a one-eighty to Fredville. I'm looking for someone a little more interesting than that. I was the kid who was always really disappointed at the end of *Beauty and the Beast* when the beast turned into that blond dude. Who wants a Ken doll? I like 'em complicated. And a little wounded.

Yeah, but Cal isn't any of those things . . . Cal is sweet and straightforward and kinda nerdy.

"Shhh!"

Wow. Now I'm loudly shushing my own thoughts. It's true that Cal isn't my usual type. But Cal is also not available. And he referred to his life with his girlfriend as "not very exciting." Which isn't very cool. So, yeah. I'm on a Cal strike again.

Last night was a blip. A momentary lapse of self-control. It won't happen again!

I shower and get dressed, pretending I'm in the opening credits of a romantic comedy. Everything in my life is perfectly choreographed. I just happen to naturally grow perfectly highlighted hair. My jeans are tailored to correspond perfectly with the height of my designer ankle boots. Whenever I'm late for work, I illustrate this by taking large bites of a muffin while scurrying to catch a cab. Yet I carry zero muffin-weight on my ass. The man in the newsstand at the corner knows me by name and, for some reason, vocally roots for my career ambitions. When he sees my golden moment that happens to be broadcast on national television, he loudly tells people that he knows me.

In reality, I have no clean laundry. So, I just shove the ratty ends of my yoga pants into my rain boots where no one can see them. It's raining, so I don't bother drying my hair, it'll just end up in a frizzy cloud anyhow, so I shove it under a ball cap. I'm not late, per se, but if I don't catch the train in the next ten minutes, I'll have to fight commuter traffic into the city and I really don't feel like having a businesswoman's briefcase up my ass for forty minutes this morning. There is no newsstand where I live and the man in the bodega definitely doesn't know my name, let alone my career ambitions. When I enter the store he practically blinds himself with the newspaper he whips in front of his face. There may have been an

embarrassing incident involving a desperately last-minute condom purchase last year that neither of us has quite gotten over.

Either way, I'm not technically late, but I am rushing—sans muffin—and spilling hot bodega coffee all over my hand and rain boots because I forewent the paper napkins like the shortsighted little eco warrior I am. I make it to the train, and, miracle of all miracles, there's a spare seat for me.

I barrel into the city at light speed. Just joking. This is the New York City subway we're talking about here. So, actually I trundle into the city with all the grace and speed of a potato sack race.

There's nothing to do now but sit with my thoughts. Which, of course, means I spend thirty minutes thinking about Cal. No. Thinking sounds obsessive. Let's say I spend thirty minutes *pondering* Cal. Passively mulling him over.

You're lovely, he said last night. So easily. So comfortably. He didn't stumble over the words or make them weird or anything like that. *You're lovely*. Like it was an obvious and well-known fact.

He'd like any package I sent him simply because it was from me.

Coffee tumbles over itself in my stomach.

I get off the train in the West Village and walk a few blocks to the shop where I get all the spices and teas for my packages. My friend Paloma works there on weekdays, which is how I found out about the shop in the first place.

When I walk in, she's standing behind the counter with the shop's phone pressed to her ear, looking outrageously bored. She lights up like a florescent sign when she sees me.

One minute, she mouths, pointing at the phone.

But it's not one minute. I peruse the shop. Ten minutes pass and she's still on the line.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I jump for it embarrassingly fast. When I look, it's Paloma who has texted me.

Sorry! I'm on the line with a distributor and they're giving me the run-around on a lost shipment.

No worries, I text back.

She disappears into the back room and comes back out with my order, sliding it across the counter and starting to ring me up. I'm disappointed that we won't be able to catch up.

How was the grooming workshop? I text.

Paloma is an aspiring dog groomer and she spent last weekend upstate at a several-day crash course in show grooming.

Incredible. Worth every penny. I'm in love.

What? With who?!?

No, I'm in love with show grooming. Not a person

Ah. Right

Everything ready for the expo?

I make a face and she grimaces in response.

Uh oh.

Yeah. The website is a mess. And so am I.

Why are you a mess? Nerves?

Nerves, yes. And a stupid, inopportune crush on the customer service guy who is helping me figure out my site.

I wish it weren't true even as I send the text. It sounds so unbelievably . . . amateur. This is not the kind of thing that should be happening to an ostensibly polished professional. Yet, here I am.

If she were someone else, I might expect to see judgment. But, because she's Paloma, her eyes are the size of clementines as she open-mouthed grins at me. It's good gossip, I'm aware of this.

He called me lovely. And said that he'd love to receive any package I sent, because it would be from me. What do you think that means?

She reads my message and then raises an eyebrow at me. That eyebrow says *Don't be dumb, Vera.*

But I'm pretty sure he has a girlfriend, I text.

Paloma starts to reply but then the person on the line with her says something that catches her attention and she sets her cell phone back down. She's arguing with the man on the line but smiling at me. She swipes my card, pushes my box of spices across the counter and leans forward, kissing me on the cheek.

She points at the landline at her ear and rolls her eyes.

I'm all thumbs ups and conciliatory waves. She's at work, she doesn't need to be chatting about my love life.

I'm back on the train and looking down at the text strand a few minutes later. I can't stop looking at the words "pretty sure" that are tacked on to "girlfriend." It's the first time I've really considered them. When I first heard the voice of the woman who obviously lives with Cal, I was positive

she was his girlfriend. But there, in white letters on my phone, is evidence that maybe I'm not as positive as I thought I was.

Because he called me lovely. And pretty. And said anyone in their right mind would want to talk to me.

Those are facts.

And now for the harder questions. Is Cal the sort of person that would say that to one woman while in a relationship with another? Is Cal the sort of person who would call his current relationship "not very exciting" to someone he's just met?

Would I still have a crush on him if he was?

I get home, pack three care packages, schlep them down to the post office and head back to my house for lunch. My phone has been pressing awkwardly against my thigh all day, as if it's trying to remind me that it's there, ready to be put to use any moment I decide I want to talk to Cal.

It's too much. I want to pitch it out the window.

Instead, I decide to check and see how my website is looking. I log in to Curio on my laptop and go to my website building page. My homepage is beautiful and so are the About and Contact pages. But the questionnaire section is still a godawful mess.

I'm about to close my laptop when a little blooping sound has me peering at the screen again.

There's a chat window at the bottom of the site that's just popped up.

Hi.

My lunch almost comes up. I lose major cool points for the sound that eeps out of me.

Is this Cal?

No, this is Cal's manager.

I snort.

Good one.

There's no response and uncertainty creeps in.

Wait, is this actually Cal's manager?

Ha. No. Vera, it's me.

Prove it.

I own a gargantuan mammal by the name of Jule.

I snort again.

Jule is hefty? I had no idea. He sounds so petite when he's screaming for his Romeo.

Jule was quite paunchy when I adopted him from the shelter. His weight is something we're working on together.

I start to type more but my phone starts buzzing beside me.

My mother.

Sorry, Cal, gotta run!

I answer my mother's phone call and start wandering around the apartment, straightening up as I go. It's easier to talk with her if I have something to occupy my hands. She wants to have Rod and Miriam over for a celebratory dinner after the expo closes on Saturday. The thing runs for two days but I'm only staying at my parents' house on Thursday night and Friday night. When I tell my mom that after the expo closes down late Saturday afternoon, I will definitely head straight back to Brooklyn, she goes all soft and let down.

I know she'll have a lot to say on the subject so instead of straightening up the throw pillows in my living room, I sit back down at my computer and pull up my email. I need something to take my mind off my mother's disappointed tone in my ear. Besides, it's barely even rude to tune her out. I'm not exactly expected to be an active participant in this portion of our conversation.

I delete some promotional emails and then, weirdly, see one from myself. I sent myself an email? Oh! Right! This is how emails from my website appear. Whenever my website has engaged with a prospective client who wants to work with me, their questionnaire and order request gets sent through to my email.

But the site isn't live yet. Who could this be from?

I click into the email and my stupid heart gets stuck to itself inside my ribs. Because, of course, it's from Cal. The user name he's selected is CalCojones69. A hysterical laugh almost bursts out of me. But I'm confused. Is this his way of telling me that somehow in the last five minutes he's fixed my questionnaire? That my site is humming like a bird now?

No. The email was sent a few hours ago. And when I look closer, I see that the questionnaire was barely filled out. He was obviously testing it out to see if it was fixed, realized it wasn't, and then had to go back to square one. So, does that mean that this was a meaningless email just sent as a test? Or does this mean that he actually attempted to fill out the questionnaire as a customer?

Out of curiosity I scroll down to see what kind of package he'd been attempting to sign up for.

A white buzz of noise fills my ears. Because of course. I should have known. Cal's in a relationship that needs some excitement thrown into it. We're friends now. Of course he's going to order a Date in a Box from me. I stare at his order. He wants Date order number A4. I can't recall that number off the top of my head but I don't enter into the order to look it up either. I can't bear to look.

I don't want to see if he wants to plan a casual date for her. I don't want to see if it's a fancy date. I don't want to have to start planning all the little special touches I'll add in to the order to make sure that he and his girlfriend are satisfied customers.

I slam down the lid of my laptop and unfortunately that notifies my mother that I'm multitasking through this phone call. She reminds me again, with an extremely counterintuitive tone of voice, that she's proud of me. Then she hangs up, irritated at me and—I'm sure—more worried than ever that her scatterbrained daughter doesn't have the attention span to actually get a business off the ground.

I'm aggravated, sitting at my kitchen table and staring at my traitorous laptop. Why couldn't I have updated my operating system a million years ago like a normal person and then I never would have had this problem with my site in the first place?

Then I never would have even talked to Cal.

And I wouldn't be feeling like sending my first ever online customer a box filled with stale bread and flat seltzer and a Post-it Note with the words *Have fun on your date, jerks*.

No! I can't let this split my focus. I can't trip at the finish line. I have to make sure Cal fixes this damn problem. No more small talk. No more chit-chat. I have to check in to make sure he stays on task. I have to let him know that I mean business.

Chapter Seven

Wednesday Afternoon

Cal

I watch the cursor blink where Vera had just been typing to me. Even though she's gone, my heart is still banging in my chest.

Why did I think that telling her everything over DM would be easier? No, it's a blessing she signed off. That would have been crazy.

I can just picture it. *Hey, Vera, I know I'm a complete stranger to you whose voice you've only ever heard on the phone. But turns out I'm even more of a stranger to you and now all you can see are words I'm typing out. Please believe it's me. But not the me you thought I was.*

Eesh. Crash and burn.

I'm just trying to follow Eliot's advice. We ended up catching up this morning after my run and I filled him in on my situation.

Be honest, he told me. *No subterfuge.*

He doesn't think I'm catfishing her. But he does think the margin for error is incredibly slim. I couldn't agree more. Say this whole thing magically works out and we end up in a serious relationship. Do I really want to set the precedent that I'm willing to split hairs about what qualifies as deception? Nope. Definitely not.

I'm supposed to—I refer to the list I made during our conversation—tell her about the crush, who I really am, and that I'd like to meet her in person.

It sounded so easy when he said it this morning.

I can't believe I was going to do it over DM.

This isn't the easiest thing in the world for me. Explaining all this. People get weird when they find out who I really am.

The computer screen in front of me is starting to blur a little, the light from the screen bleeding into the world around me. That's typically when I

know I need to take a break. I really, really don't want to take a break because I feel eons away from being able to fix this problem and fix things with Vera.

But I've been sitting in this chair for six hours straight and I need to stand up and get my blood moving. I see there's a grocery list on the fridge from Carla and I decide to do a quick trip to the market.

I jam my sneakers on, grab some canvas bags from the closet and jog down the big cement stairs of my apartment's main entrance. Carla and I are on the top floor of a four-story apartment building three blocks south of Owl's Head Park. I spent my childhood running this exact route out my front door and to the grocery store four blocks away. To the halal butcher if my mom wanted chicken for dinner. To the Russian grocery if she was craving zefir. And Key Foods for everything else.

I'm in the grocery store, pushing a cart and working my way down Carla's list, supplementing with items of my own when I feel my phone start vibrating in my pocket. I stop in the produce aisle, a bag of baby carrots in my hand, and check my phone.

Oh! I stare at the caller ID. I feel like I swallowed a beehive.

There's no reason I should be feeling like this just from getting called by a girl. I'm not, I don't know, *suave*, but I've been called by women before. But there's something about seeing Vera's name there that's making me sweat in the produce aisle.

I toss the baby carrots into my cart, nervously smooth my hair down and answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Cal."

"Wow, what's with the mood?"

"What mood?"

"Come on. You can't tell me there's not a mood."

"Are you a psychic, Cal?"

"No, I'm just a good listener. Why the mood?"

"There are a million reasons. And they're all more stupid than the last."

"Hit me. With at least one of them."

"Well, let's see. One of the reasons I'm in a bad mood is because of my phone call with my mother. She keeps telling me she's proud of me. See? I told you it was stupid."

"Hmm. Elaborate."

“How do I explain this? Okay, it’s not the kind of ‘I’m proud of you’ that comes at the end of the movie when the main character is holding a trophy over her head and her mom is like ‘I always knew you had it in you.’ It’s not like that. It doesn’t feel good. It just feels like pressure.”

“Because you’re worried you’ll let her down if your site isn’t ready in time for the expo?”

“No. I know you’ll get it fixed in time, Cal. I’m not worried about that. It’s more that her tone is . . . she’s *reminding* me that she’s proud of me. Like she wants to go down in the record books as having been proud. But I can still *feel* her wondering if I’m going to bail on this commitment. If it’ll get too hard and I’ll tank the business.”

“Ah. It comes with strings attached.”

“Exactly! It’s transactional. What she’s really saying is ‘Remember that I’m proud of you, Vera, so you really have to stick with it this time. Don’t make me eat my words.’ And that just . . .”

“Makes you wanna scream?”

“Makes me wanna *scream*. Exactly. You get it.”

“I’m extremely familiar with mom-guilt kung fu.”

“Your mom is like that?”

“She’s the Bruce Lee of mom guilt. I swear she’s never saying just one thing. She says one sentence and it really means like twelve things at once. And half of them are ‘Why don’t you call me more?’ ”

“Well, why *don’t* you call her more?”

“Probably because of the mom guilt.”

“Vicious cycle.”

“Don’t you wish we could send out a worldwide memo that informs people that passive aggression actually makes things *less* likely to work in their favor?”

“Ooh, yes. And we should add a P.S. at the bottom that says ‘manipulation isn’t communication.’”

“People would probably think we were being passive aggressive.”

“Ha! Yeah. Hey, what’s that noise in the background?”

“That’s just a radio station playing over the speakers. I’m at the grocery store.”

“Jeez. You and the grocery store. A love story for the ages.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just working out my inferiority complex with jokes. I think you’re better at adulting than I am.”

“You got all that from the fact that I’m currently at the grocery store?”

“I’ll bet you have an accountant.”

“I—well. Yes. I do actually have an accountant.”

“See!”

“I refuse to believe you’re not good at adulting, Vera. You started your own business. That’s very adult.”

“Just wait until you see my shower curtain. You’ll reevaluate everything you thought you knew about me.”

“What’s on your shower curtain?”

“It’s not what. It’s *who*.”

“Ooh. Interesting. A cartoon character?”

“No.”

“A celebrity crush, perhaps?”

“Ding. Ding. Ding.”

“Ha! Yes. I bet I can guess who it is in three.”

“You’re on.”

“Wait. Wait. I’m getting sidetracked again. Has anyone ever told you you’re distracting?”

“It was on basically every single one of my report cards from kindergarten through high school.”

“Look, there’s something I really need to tell you.”

“Are you still in the grocery store?”

“Yeah. I’m in the pasta aisle.”

“Okay. What do you need to tell me so bad you’ll do it in the middle of the pasta aisle?”

“Vera, I haven’t been totally transparent about—Oh, *shit*.”

“What? What!”

“Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, *shit*.”

“Cal, what the hell is going on?”

“Shhh! Crap! I think she saw me.”

“Who saw you? What’s happening right now?”

“I’m hiding in the freezer section because I think I just saw my ex-stepmother.”

“Oh. Wow. And you don’t want to see her?”

“What is she even doing in this neighborhood? She lives in Greenpoint!”

“I take it you’re not on good terms?”

“I . . . I guess I don’t really know. We haven’t talked much since their divorce. But—shit! She’s coming over here. She saw me. She sees me. Oh, my God.”

“Cal, is this person crazy? Is she dangerous? Should you abandon your cart and get the hell out of there?”

“No. This is just going to be really, really awkward.”

“Okay, then listen to me. This is going to be totally fine.”

“Stay on the line?”

“While you’re talking to her? That’ll be so weird!”

“You’re on my headphones. I’ll just keep one of them in.”

“Oh. Okay! Then that’s cool. I’ll help talk you through it. Be calm. Be polite.”

“Hi, Cal.”

“Oh, hello, Laura.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“Um. Yeah. Since the divorce.”

“Oof, Cal, maybe don’t mention the divorce again.”

“A little over a decade, then.”

“Ask her how she’s been!”

“How, uh, have you been?”

“Oh, you know me. I’m always keeping busy. And how are you?”

“Oh, ah, keeping busy too.”

“Right, I heard about the website thingy you’re working on.”

“Yup. Yup.”

“Ask her a question about her life.”

“Um. Still running your tailoring shop?”

“Of course. It was my mother’s business, you know. I’ll keep hanging on to it as long as I can.”

“Cool. Very cool.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Okay, Cal. Smile at her and tell her it was really nice to run into her.”

“It was really nice to run into you, Laura.”

“You too. Maybe me, you, and your father could all have dinner together.”

“Oh . . .”

“Say yes, Cal! You can always beg off later.”

“Yes.”

“Say ‘that sounds nice.’”

“That sounds nice.”

“Say goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Laura. Have a good one.”

“Bye, Cal.”

“Okay, now wave and walk away. You did spectacularly.”

“Ha. Good one.”

“No, seriously! You did well. Are you done shopping?”

“Done enough.”

“Great. Check out and get out of there fast so you don’t risk awkward run-ins in random aisles.”

“Smart. Gimme a sec.”

“... ”

“Okay, I’m outside. I’m on my way home with my groceries.”

“Wow, Cal. How you feelin’?”

“That was intense.”

“Yeah. God.”

“Remember how you said I was better at adulting than you? Well, here’s some pretty good evidence to the contrary.”

“Oh, come on. Everybody hates awkward situations like that!”

“Wow. It took twelve years but I finally ran into her.”

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, I thought you said your dad lived in Finland? How did he come to have two ex-wives in Brooklyn?”

“Only one. He and my mom were never married.”

“Ah.”

“And he does live in Finland. He has his entire life. Except for a six-month period when I was about fifteen. I was going through a hard time. Sick of being homeschooled. Did I tell you that? That I never went to school with other kids?”

“No, you hadn’t mentioned that.”

“Well, yeah. And I switched years between living with my mom and dad. And when I hit fifteen, I was just completely over the whole thing. I wanted to live in one place and stop shuttling back and forth. So, we tried this new arrangement. Where instead of me going to live in Finland, my dad came and rented an apartment here.”

“Oh, wow. Big change for him. And for you.”

“It was huge. He doesn’t like speaking English, though he’s good at it. He didn’t have a job. He didn’t know anyone but my mom. For the first time in my life the three of us were actually spending time together.”

“Were you all getting along?”

“Yeah. Really well. My parents are actually really compatible. And I’d always remembered that one of the reasons my mom told me that they hadn’t stayed together was that they lived in different countries. I kind of fixated on that.”

“And it seemed like that obstacle was removed.”

“Right. It’s embarrassing, it was even then, to be the kid who thinks that his parents are going to get back together.”

“It’s not embarrassing, Cal. Anyone would want that.”

“Anyhow, I constructed this whole fantasy in my head where we all lived happily ever after. And then, about two months into his stay here he met Laura.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t take it well?”

“Honestly, it’s a testament to a father’s love that my dad and I survived that year. I was a complete shit.”

“You were fifteen.”

“And an asshole.”

“What ended up happening?”

“I made things so terrible that my mom and dad decided that this whole Dad-lives-in-Brooklyn thing wasn’t really working out after all and we went back to our old arrangement. I mean, I know it wasn’t completely my fault. My dad still hadn’t found work, he was depressed living in the States. And he’d finally found a woman who’d want to move to Finland with him.”

“Oh, wow. Did Laura go?”

“Yup. Though, I think it was kind of hard for her because she left her son, Michael, behind. He was in college then, but he’d still been living with her at the time. Anyway, she moved with my dad and they got married a few months after that.”

“Did things ever smooth over?”

“Remember how I told you that I’m learning Japanese in order to get closer to my mom’s husband?”

“Of course.”

“And I said it seemed like the bare minimum?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s just say I’ve learned from all the mistakes I made with Laura. I’m never going to mistreat another one of my parents’ partners again.”

“Uh oh.”

“Yeah. Poor Laura. While they were married I never really got over the whole my-parents-would-be-together-if-it-weren’t-for-you mentality.”

“Oh, Cal.”

“I know. It’s terrible. I mean, I wasn’t *awful* to her the whole time. But I didn’t make things easy on them. She must have just dreaded the years I came to live with them.”

“And then they split up?”

“Yeah. They were married for eight years. Got divorced when I was twenty-four. That, at least, is not my fault. I was happier after I went to college and made some friends. I stopped hurting so much. Stopped taking it out on them. But their marriage didn’t make it. My dad doesn’t like to talk about it much.”

“And even after all this time you dreaded seeing her that much?”

“I’m sure I owe her an apology for how I treated her when I was a teenager. And even though things stopped being contentious once I hit my twenties, they weren’t ever *easy*. Seeing her is a pretty intense reminder of who I was. How I treated her. I definitely have amends to make. Gosh, that was so *weird*.”

“Will you tell your dad that you saw her?”

“Definitely. You know, it’s strange that she said she wanted to get dinner with me and my dad.”

“Why? Maybe she wants to put the past behind you all?”

“No, I just mean it’s strange because my dad hasn’t been back to the States since before their divorce. I would be surprised if he *ever* comes back, to be honest. I would think she’d know that. That’s why I hesitated in saying yes. It surprised me was all.”

“You did incredibly well, considering all of that.”

“I’m equal parts grateful that you were there to coach me through it and embarrassed that you had to witness that.”

“I was happy to help! I mean, you’ve helped me out so much over the past few days. It was nice to return the favor.”

“Even so, I’m like, trying really hard not to be embarrassed that you witnessed me hiding from my ex-stepmom in the freezer aisle.”

“Hey! We’re friends, remember?”

“...”

“Cal? You still there?”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m just running through all the shitty things I ever said to Laura. Seeing her really threw me.”

“I think you might be being a little hard on yourself. You were a kid.”

“I knew better. Even then.”

“If I knew your address, I’d send you a Forgiveness in a Box care package.”

“What would be in it?”

“Hmmm. A journal and really nice pens for starters. Maybe some sage for smudging your house. Chocolate for making yourself feel better. This one book of essays by Cheryl Strayed. A list of podcasts I think you should listen to. Same with some links to certain playlists. Stationery and stamps in case you wanted to send a letter to Laura.”

“How do you know how to do that?”

“Do what?”

“How to take care of people so well. Just off the top of your head you could come up with a perfect recipe for helping me make amends with Laura. And myself. It’s really a special skill set.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s just the way my brain works.”

“Now the nursing and psych thing make sense to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that it’s so clear that helping people, understanding people, is super important to you.”

“Definitely.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking—Ah! Jeez! Jule, get back!”

“What’s going on over there?”

“Oh, nothing. He just sneak-attacked me when I came in through the front door.”

“How vicious!”

“Whenever I come home he trounces my leg with these gentle little bites. And then—yup, there he goes—he disappears back to wherever he hides until dinnertime.”

“Hey, what was it that you’ve been thinking? You were about to mention something when Jule trounced you.”

“Right! You know how you were saying that you leaving nursing school and not graduating from undergrad and having all sorts of unrealized businesses makes you a quitter?”

“Um. Yes. I really hope this is going somewhere.”

“It is. I’ve been thinking about it over the last couple of days and I kind of think you and your family are classifying all those experiences in the wrong way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you look at yourself and you see someone who quit basketball and dancing and nursing and your psych degree. But I look at you and see someone who *tried* basketball and dancing and nursing and psych. I don’t think you should be faulted because they weren’t a match for you. Some people choose one thing and it becomes *their* thing and they stick with it no matter what. And there’s merit in that. But I think there’s also merit in searching for a good fit, too. It’s a skill to try and try and try. It takes work and patience and bravery. It’s definitely not something to make fun of. It’s *admirable*.”

“ . . . ”

“Vera? You still there?”

“Uh, I forgot . . . something. I gotta—Can we talk later? Sorry. I gotta go.”

“Oh. Uh, sure. No problem.”

“Okay. Bye, Cal.”

“Bye, Vera.”

Chapter Eight

Wednesday Late Afternoon

Vera

I hang up the phone and set it on my kitchen counter face down. I stare at its case for a moment, a bright blue brick that blurs at the edges as tears fill my eyes.

Ugh.

Why did he have to say that to me?

I might have gone my whole life without thinking of myself from that perspective. It's such a lovely, generous way of thinking about something that I've only ever viewed as a shortcoming.

I turn away from my phone and leave it sitting in my kitchen. I put my boots on and grab my raincoat just in case May decides to get cute again today. I almost never leave the house without my phone but right now it feels necessary to be on my own. Truly on my own.

I wander my neighborhood on the cool, gray day, considering Cal's words. Maybe I'm not a quitter. Maybe I'm a trier.

The concept is nice. It's like I've been wearing a too-tight pair of jeans for years and I'm only now sliding into a pair that fits me well. It's like I can breathe. Finally. But it's too much air all at once and I feel dizzy. I should double back to my apartment, but instead I buy a cup of tea at a coffee shop I've never gone into before and sit in the window. It's an almost empty side street so I don't watch anything but the building across from me.

The word *try* rewrites my past. Everything looks different now.

I frown.

It's not just me who looks different. It's my family too.

I've had two phone conversations today, my mother and Cal. Quitter and trier. Ugh. Whiplash.

You can't quit everything, Vera.

What's the league's refund policy? You know you're not going to go to more than one game.

Don't tell me you're quitting nursing. Oh, Vera.

Are you sure you want to invest your money into this business? That doesn't feel like a waste to you?

Angry tears tighten my eyes. They come from an old place. A young place. I remember leafing through the rec and ed pamphlet as a middle-schooler, trying so hard to figure out which after-school sport I'd like the best, knowing that if I didn't like it, my folks would hang it over my head. I think about my first day of nursing school, sitting in class and wondering if all the other students felt some sort of calling to the profession. I had wondered if I was deficient. If being unsure would mean I wouldn't be as good of a nurse as the rest of them. If I would put people in danger if I practiced nursing without it being the one, true passion of my life.

I press my sleeve into my eyes and when I pull it away, there's a damp pattern left behind that looks like two smiling mouths.

I finish my tea and head back toward my apartment. I kind of can't believe I'm having such an intense reaction to this. It's such a simple adjustment to my way of looking at things.

The thing is, there are so many things I stuck with. So many things I didn't quit. I kept my job as a waitress for six years while I was figuring stuff out in college. I only quit that in order to jump at a chance at health insurance when I found a receptionist position. Where I stayed for four years until I had enough saved to do Date in a Box full time. No one could say I left those jobs willy-nilly. I did choir all through junior high and high school. It never even crossed my mind to quit.

It's not like school was a breeze for me the way it was for some kids. My parents would never have let me quit that, but it's not like I wanted to either. I was loud and hyper and kind of bamboozled by how easily the academic stuff came to my friends. It was embarrassing and awkward but did I ever entertain the idea of quitting? Did I even drag my feet on the way to school? No. I worked hard. I went to tutoring without complaint. I endured the critical comments on my report cards, trying to shrug it off. Should all of that count for nothing?

The real question here is why have I been measuring my life by the things I *haven't* seen through to the end?

Why count my failures and not my successes?

And apparently Cal doesn't even see them as failures.

I realize then that I haven't walked back to my apartment, I've walked to my brother's. He only lives three blocks from me and I have his key hanging on the keyring stuffed into my coat pocket. But I don't go in. I stand on the sidewalk and look up at his house.

He used to make fun of me for quitting things as well. But he's been nothing but supportive of Date in a Box. Come to think of it, he hasn't directly made fun of me for quitting anything since I left my undergrad program.

I try to think back to Christmas, to when I opened up that gift bag and pulled out the Never Do Your Best, Quit shirt. Had his name been on the card? Had he laughed along with my parents?

It's hard to remember, but I don't think so.

Suddenly it seems extremely important that I know the definitive answer to that question. But I don't have my phone on me and I don't want to barge up there.

I turn on my heel and power-walk back to my apartment building. I'm breathing hard when I make it through my front door, kicking off my boots and practically sprinting to my phone.

"Did. You. Give. Me. That. Shirt. At. Christmas?" I pant into a voice memo and send it off to him.

I've barely collapsed onto my couch when he responds.

"What shirt?"

"The never-quit shirt."

"Oh. Of course not! That shit was rude. After you left I told Mom and Dad not to do something like that again."

I play the message again. And then one more time. He sounds so vehement. So offended on my behalf.

I sit up. Could this have really just been my mom and dad's thing? Why have I been thinking that it was an incontrovertible fact that I am a quitter? That everyone knew it and I should just accept it?

Another voice memo from him.

"Why?"

I gather my thoughts and then respond.

"I was talking to my friend about it and he mentioned that maybe I'm not a quitter, maybe I'm a trier. And it made me reframe some

stuff in my head.”

“*Sounds like a good friend.*”

I chew my lip and get up, wandering into the kitchen. He IS a good friend. Maybe even a great friend. And aren't I lucky to have made such a

Oh, who am I even kidding?

I'm not stoked about having a new friend. I'm incredibly bummed that Cal's not available. His order for a Date in a Box sits accusingly in the middle of my inbox right now.

I plunk into a kitchen chair and drop my forehead down onto the table with a little more force than I meant to. *Thunk.*

Ouch.

Why does this have to be so complicated? All I want is for my website to be fixed, to knock it out of the park at the expo, and . . .

There's no use denying it anymore. Cal has fully infiltrated. I want Cal. He's officially added to the list of things I want.

And I don't mean that in a selfish *but I want it!* type of way. I mean that in the purest sense. Simply that things are better when I'm talking to Cal. He makes things better. Easier. Funnier. Brighter.

And I want to be the person who can do that for him too.

I open up my phone again and this time I see that I have a text that I missed. I thunk my head down again onto the table. It's from Cal and it's time-stamped from just a minute or so after we finished our phone call. He must have texted as I was storming out the door.

It reads, *When you get a free minute, give me a call. I really have to tell you something.*

My stomach cramps and I set my phone to one side, pressing my cheek to the table. I know exactly what he's gonna say when I call him back. He's gonna tell me he has a girlfriend. He's gonna tell me all about the woman who makes him leftovers. Because at this point, we know way too much about one another's lives for him to avoid telling me about his girl.

I'm the one who called us friends, and this is what friends do for one another. They let each other into their lives. They support one another's relationships.

I pull up his contact info. My thumb hovers over the call button. But in a last-second act of sanity, I hang up and set my phone back face down on the counter.

I can't call him back in the state I'm in right now.

At some point, I *will* be happy for him. I will be able to listen while he describes her, whoever she is. I will be able to be a good friend. But that's not in the cards today. I'm not ready to tell him how I feel and I'm not going to be able to fully support him.

Right now I need to be a good friend to myself. And asking myself to do this with Cal right before the biggest professional responsibility of my life is just too much. I need to get used to the fact that I . . . feel this way about Cal. I need to get used to the fact that he has a girlfriend. And I need to give myself some time.

Reaching listlessly across the table I tap one finger against the back of my phone.

I decide then and there not to talk to him again until after the conference.

Cal

You can't avoid me forever, Cal. I'm not messing around about that \$5,000. Either you transfer the money or you can kiss the cat goodbye. Your choice.

I read the email once, twice, sigh and forward it on to Jerome. Within five seconds my cell phone is ringing.

"Hey, Jerome."

"Jee-zus, this thing is weird, huh?" He sounds like he hasn't slept in three days, which, knowing him, is actually possible. He's a night owl anyhow, but if he's in the middle of solving a mystery or he gets sucked down a gaming wormhole he truly survives on catnaps and Red Bulls.

"Yeah. The cat threats are . . ."

"Just bizarre," he finishes my sentence.

I can hear an unusual note of concern in his tone that has my ears pricking up. Usually we're laughing together at how far off the deep end the wackos of planet earth really are. "I'm not particularly worried about it," I tell him.

"Actually, I was about to call you anyhow, before you forwarded me the new email. I figured you weren't going to be sweating it too much, but I actually think there's a chance we should notify the police."

“What? Why?” I ask. “We’ve never gone to the cops about any of the other cyber threats we’ve gotten in the past.”

“I know, but none of them were local.”

“You mean . . .”

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh. “I traced this IP address to a spot in Bay Ridge. It’s only about fifteen blocks from your house.”

“Damn.”

“I don’t mean to worry you,” he says.

“No, I’m not worried, I’m just irritated that I have to actually give this some brain real estate. I’m slammed with work and . . . personal stuff.”

“Oh. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, yes, nothing too serious. Just, ah, girl problems.”

“Is that right?” he asks, suddenly a little intrigued. “Nice, man. I didn’t even know you had a girl to have problems with!”

“I don’t. That’s the problem.”

“Ha. Well, I’ve been there before. Look, if you need anything, mine and Sarah’s door is always open.”

“Thanks,” I tell him.

“You want me to go ahead and file that police report?”

“No. Actually, would you mind sending me the address instead?”

“Cal . . .”

“I just want to know where it is.”

“So you can avoid it?” he asks pointedly.

“Sure.”

“*Cal* . . .”

“I’m not a kid, Jerome.”

“I just want to go on the record again and say this is different than that guy who was sending you nudes with your face copied and pasted in.”

“I agree this is different.”

“I don’t want to send you the address.”

“Jerome.”

“Fine. But you’re one of the smartest guys I’ve ever met in my life. Act like it, yeah?”

“You got it.”

I wait at my computer until Jerome texts me the address and I find it in Maps. He’s right. It’s only fifteen blocks away. I stare at it for a long

minute. I often walk to that sushi spot and pick up dinner. It's also right around the corner from the Bay Ridge branch of the public library. I go there a lot. I could have walked past this person's house a hundred times in the last few months. I could have walked right past *them* a hundred times and likely not even noticed.

I frown. This is stupid.

Who threatens a cat? It's both menacing and silly. Also, I'm not particularly worried about someone harming Jule. First of all, they'd have to be able to find wherever his elusive hideout is—I've been trying and failing at for months—and second of all, that cat has a built-in security system of his own. He's got teeth and claws and isn't scared to tear your socks to shreds.

I'm irritated that this distraction is taking up valuable brain space. The clock is ticking down to Vera's expo and I need to finish fixing Curio.

I pick up my phone and enter into my texting app just to make sure that my text to her still reads as delivered.

Of course it still does.

It's been a few hours since I sent it. And no word from her.

My leg starts to toggle up and down, bouncing my laptop around. I'm not sure I can keep waiting. This is torture.

I go back to my inbox, click away from the stupid cat menacer's email and bring up a clean email.

I carefully type in Vera's email address.

I crack my knuckles.

And I tell her everything.

Hey man how did it go with your customer service cute tea?

I read the text from Eliot. I consider calling him. Texting with Eliot can take a long time sometimes. His texts always have no punctuation and a ton of typos in them that sometimes confuse the meaning and he always takes a really long time to text back. But if I call him, I'm going to have to completely stop working, so instead I just text back.

Not good. I didn't get a chance to tell her.

He texts back a few minutes later:

What do you mean I thought that was going to be the whole point of the phone call

I tried to tell her but then I ran into someone unexpected and we got sidetracked and then she hung up really fast.

Why didn't you call back.

There's no question mark at the end of the text and for some reason that makes his question all the more accusatory.

I sent her a text to call me when she got a chance but she still hasn't called back. It was this afternoon.

Damn bro you been gone out of your mind

I read the text twice. I think he means going out of my mind.

A little bit. I've been keeping busy with work. Plus I sent her an email thoroughly explaining about the whole thing.

You sent her an annotated email while I'm in a tent was there a bibliography

I send him a question mark back, because I don't understand the whole tent business and a few minutes later a new, asterisked text comes back to me.

You sent her an annotated email? Wow, man, intense.

Was there a bibliography?

He's obviously carefully worked on that last text to get it right.

Ha. No. No bibliography. I guess I just wanted to put it all down in one place so none of it could get lost, you know?

What she say back

Nothing yet. She hasn't opened it.

For some reason, it hurts to admit it.

How do you know that Oh my God you sent it with a read request on it like she's your work subordinate

Okay. Yeah. Maybe not the best move. Too late now.

Good luck mana

Maybe it's the lack of punctuation but I can't help but feel like he might have just told me it was my funeral.

I was out of moves. I think she's avoiding me. I guess I just wanted to make sure she knew the whole truth.

You're really like her home

I send a question mark again.

Damn! Sorry. I meant you really like her, huh?

Oh. Yeah. I really do.

All the luck, man, really.

Hey, I keep forgetting to ask. Whatever happened with that girl you accidentally texted?

A few minutes pass and I still haven't gotten a response from him. Either he's forgotten to text back or he's choosing to ignore the question. He told me over the phone last week about a mix-up with a woman he'd never met before. He meant to be texting one person but he accidentally texted a wrong number and apparently the text was . . . NSFW. He ended up in some sort of back and forth with a mystery woman and now he really, really wants to figure out who she is.

His lack of a response leads me to believe that he's not having any better luck than I am.

On a different day I might call him, pester him a little bit. Eliot is a good friend. And on most things he can be an open book. But there are a few things he really doesn't volunteer much information on. Which is fine. I don't want to push him too far, but sometimes we need someone to push us just a *little* bit.

I think of Vera in my ear in the supermarket. As embarrassing as it is, I probably would have abandoned my cart and left if she hadn't coached me through that interaction with Laura. She pushed me. Expected more from me. And lo and behold, I delivered. I'm not saying it wasn't awkward as hell with Laura, but it was way better than if I'd tried to handle that conversation on my own.

Vera makes me better.

I tap my fingers on my knee and check my email again. My email to her is still unread.

Fine. That's fine, too. Because I don't need any distractions. The countdown is on until her expo.

Chapter Nine

Thursday

Vera

I drum my fingers on a cracked linoleum countertop and try to look scary.

Lionel the tow truck driver is being difficult.

It's Thursday morning and I have a million errands to run. In nine hours I need my car to drive me and my booth out to the convention center in Jersey. After that, I'll carry on to my parents' house where I'll stay for the two nights of the convention since it'll be too late to drive back to Brooklyn. The car keys sit askew on the countertop between me and Lionel. He makes yet another shooing motion with his hands.

If he says the words "no charge" one more time I might scream.

"Lionel, seriously, you have to let me pay for your services. This is ridiculous!"

I cross my arms over my chest, refusing to pick up the car keys and refusing to leave without compensating a person who drove an extra eighty miles just for me.

"Anyone ever explained to you about gift horses before?" He's as aggravated as I am.

"Is this because you feel sorry for me? Because I seem helpless? I swear, I'm never going to idle on the side of the road again. That was stupid and I learned my lesson. I know my car is a junker. But I can pay you. I don't need pity. Or charity. I'm telling you—"

"Oh, good lord. Just look." He spins his computer screen around and shows me an electronic invoice for an ass-clenching amount of money. Big red letters at the top of the invoice read PAID.

"It's paid already? I don't understand."

“Some guy from some company called in and paid up your invoice. He said not to tell you. He said I should just act like I’d decided not to charge you. Which seemed like a fun idea before I realized it meant you were gonna start glaring at me and threatening to never leave my shop.”

“Cal paid it.” I’m whispering to myself and staring into nothing.

“No. That wasn’t his name. Some other guy.”

“Was it someone from Curio?”

“Yeah. I think so. I don’t remember. Are you gonna leave now? Because most customers tend to leave after their cars are fixed.”

He’s nudging my car keys across the countertop and I realize that this is definitely not Lionel’s problem. I thank him one more time, grab my keys and drive back to Brooklyn. I stop at a signage shop and pick up my banners and promo materials for my booth. I stop at a furniture builder I went to high school with and pick up the walls of my booth that she swore would be easy to assemble on my own. They might be easy to assemble, but they’re so heavy my eyes cross as I load them into my car. Then, I run down an entire shopping list.

I’m recreating four different packages that I’ve designed for people in the past so that they can be displayed at the expo. I have the customers’ satisfied quotes and photos of them receiving their boxes and using them for their intended purposes. Their recreated boxes will be laid out beneath.

I get home and unload everything. It’s just past lunch. Now I have to painstakingly build each package so that it looks expo-ready and impressive. I only have five hours until I need to drive to the expo center and get everything set up.

Did I mention that this entire time I never stopped thinking about Cal getting my auto shop bill paid? I tried to fill my brain with checklists and errands. I tried to not stop moving for even a moment, that way the thoughts couldn’t catch up to me.

Unfortunately, that didn’t work. I can’t stop thinking about his sweet, generous ass.

Four different times I find myself picking up my phone to call him, thank him for taking that enormous expense off my shoulders.

But I can’t. I can’t lose focus now. I have to make these packages look utterly perfect.

I make myself a quick sandwich and am just about to sit down and start making the packages when my doorbell rings.

I check the peephole, fling the door open and nearly jump into Paloma's arms, sandwich and all.

"Loma! Whatcha doing here?"

"I figured you could use my help getting ready for the expo. And I guess I was right." Her big brown eyes are wide as she surveys the grocery bag bonanza on my living-room floor.

"You didn't have to do that! You're already helping me out so much tomorrow and the next day."

Paloma offered to relieve me for a few hours on both days of the expo so that I could leave my booth and try to make connections with the other vendors.

"I'm here for selfish reasons, too. You always overbuy for things like this. I'm scrounging up your leftovers."

"Please, come in. Scavenge away!"

Two hours later we're nearly buried in eco-friendly raffia. Paloma is currently trying to get two of her fingers unglued from one another and I've just realized that I've spilled an entire jar of glitter on my pants.

The boxes, though? They look fantastic.

I've also unloaded the whole sorry customer service tale on Paloma and she's looking at me with very serious eyes. Well, as serious as a person can look with their thumb and middle finger glued together.

"So, you're just not going to talk to him until the expo is over?"

"Well. I thought it would be best not to talk to him until then, but then he went and did this incredibly generous thing and now I have to find a way to thank him!"

"Oh, good." She sags backwards into a pile of discarded grocery totes. "I was worried you weren't going to thank him."

"No. I need to thank him. But how? If I call him, we're just going to get sucked into the compatibility vortex we always spiral down into."

"What about texting him?"

"We've DMed before and we have just as much chemistry there."

"Basically, you're worried that if you talk to him again you'll fall even more in love with him and it'll totally screw with your head right before the expo?"

"I'm not in love. I'm just . . . I just . . . I have a crush, all right?! And yes, I need to focus before the expo."

"Email?"

“Oh. That’s good. I know his company email address, he told it to me on our first phone call. So I can just write him a thank-you and tell him that I’ll talk to him after the expo.”

“Let’s do it right now so that you don’t have to think about it anymore.”

I pull out my phone and go into my inbox. “You’re the best, Paloma. What can I do to repay you? I know! I’ll do all your Christmas shopping for you this year.”

Paloma absolutely abhors Christmas shopping, but her parents always buy her at least ten gifts and she always feels the need to reciprocate. Looking at her right now, I think she might be about to propose to me.

“Are you serious? Vera, I’m holding you to that. You said you would. So there. Deal’s done. You can’t go back on it!”

“I won’t. I swear . . .”

But my voice fades away as I look at my inbox and see an email waiting for me from Cal. The subject line makes my stomach drop out.

I wordlessly show the phone to Paloma. She throws her hands in the air. “What is it with this guy!”

We both agree that I cannot deal with reading this email now. And I can’t email him a thank-you, or else he’ll know I saw his original email and ignored it. So, instead, we go the genius route of sending him an e-card through an e-card website. That way I can thank him, he can’t reply, and I still have plausible deniability about whether or not I’ve checked my email.

Paloma helps me pack everything into my car and waves me off as I start the drive to Jersey. At the first stop light, I check the text I’ve just gotten. It’s from Paloma.

For the record, you’re tough enough to handle this.

The sentiment buoys me even though I’m not entirely sure which *this* she’s referring to. Cal? Cal’s girlfriend? The expo? The combination of all three?

I fight a little traffic but make it to the expo center. I flash my badge at the guard and then start the backbreaking work of hauling everything inside. On a normal day, I’d probably try to lift all this crap and be flattened to the sidewalk like a latke. But on the day before the expo? With all this new-crush adrenaline rushing through my veins? I drag it all in in record time.

The center is a gigantic warehouse, somehow both vacuous and filled to the brim with potential. A hundred vendors scurry around, setting things up.

There's the distinct vibe of backstage right before a big show goes on.

I enlist the help of a neighboring kombucha vendor to help me assemble the walls of my booth, which were not quite as user-friendly as they'd been billed. But the rest of the booth I put up all on my own. I lovingly straighten out my banner. Position the testimonials. Tip the packages this way and that.

When I'm done, I step back and survey my handiwork. My booth is bright and stylish and inviting. If I'm honest with myself, it's the nicest-looking booth in my row. I done good.

My chest expands with pride.

I'm doing this. I'm here. Months and months of work and here I finally am.

Cal

I spend the day frustratedly troubleshooting the site and trying not to think about the email I sent Vera.

Right before dinnertime my email pings and I pounce, the way I have for every email I've gotten that day. This one says her name in the subject, but it isn't from her email address. I click into it and jump three inches up off the couch when an explosion of light and sound fireworks out of my computer screen.

There's a dancing unicorn informing me that Vera says "thank you."

Thank you for what?

Oh. Now there's an animated car zooming across the screen singing a high-pitched rendition of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." She must have gone to get her car and realized that Curio picked up her bill.

Actually, *I* picked up her bill because even though I thought it was, indeed, the company's fault she got into that pickle, I didn't want to expense the company for it. I would do it a hundred times over if it meant that she got home safe that night.

I click out of the card and back into my inbox. Nope. She hasn't replied back to the message I sent her earlier. And she hasn't read it yet either.

But she did send this very intense thank-you card. I click back into the card and stare down the dancing unicorn, willing him to give me any more information he possibly could about Vera's mindset.

Is she ignoring me?

Has she just not checked her email yet?

The card is from an automated email address with the e-card company, so I can't reply. I can't stomach sending her another email right now. But when I pull up my texts, there's my last message to her, unanswered.

I definitely need to chill.

Contacting her too much more without reciprocation borders on pestering her. Not the tone I want to be striking right now.

Read the email, Vera.

I try to transmit brainwaves across Brooklyn.

Before I know it, I'm up on my feet and pulling on my running clothes and shoes. I have too much excess energy right now. Her site still needs hours of work, but I'm confident I can get it done. I'll just take a quick run.

I'm back half an hour later, sweating through my shirt and taking huge, heaving breaths. But my energy is barely halfway burned through. I quickly shower, grab a microwaved bowl of leftovers and sit back down at my computer when I get a text message.

It's from Jerome.

I really think it's time to notify the cops. Your corporate email account got two more emails from that IP address. More of the same. \$5,000 and cat threats. But their increase in frequency suggests a rise in desperation. This person is only fifteen blocks from you. We've gotta let the cops in on this one.

My body hasn't completely calmed down from my run yet, my brain is split in a million different directions over Vera, and I'm annoyed at the audacity of anyone who thinks they can demand money from me.

I text him back.

No cops yet. Can you get me the names of the people who live at that address?

I integrate a newly constructed piece of software into the site and know that it's going to take at least an hour before I can test to see if it works. An hour of nothing but watching the spinning bar at the bottom of my screen get fuller and fuller.

I'm over this. I can't just sit here and do nothing. Wait for Vera to read the email. Wait for Jerome to get to the bottom of this.

Vera is like an upended jigsaw puzzle on a table in front of me, only my hands are taped behind my back. She's a person, I understand this, not

simply a mystery to be solved, but this is the way my brain works. I want to understand her. I want to understand her so badly I can taste it.

The spinning bar taunts me.

Some mysteries in this world can't be solved. Might never be solved. But some can. I slip into my sneakers and grab a baseball cap. I'm out the door before I can talk myself out of it.

Chapter Ten

Thursday Night

Vera

There's something about my parents' house that makes me really crave Pop Tarts. And boxed macaroni and cheese. And Dr Pepper.

It's not that I didn't eat home-cooked meals growing up, it's just that I was a high-school girl the last time I lived in this house and junk food was my life blood. I lean against the island in their kitchen and drum my fingers, giving their pantry the stink eye. It's the night before the expo and the last thing I need is to hop myself up on high-fructose corn syrup and yellow dye number four.

I need to be zen. I need to be calm.

Cal still hasn't fixed the website.

Which is fine because what will be will be.

"Are you *sure* everything's ready? There's *nothing* I can help with?"

I almost pop a blood vessel. So much for zen. My mother's voice comes from behind me and as her words register I discover that my body can scream without making any noise at all.

It may seem like she's simply offering her help, but really she's expressing her doubt as to whether or not I could have possibly remembered everything, tied up all the loose ends. I'm more grateful than ever that I didn't tell her about the website.

"Yup!" I'm as sugary sweet as the Pop Tarts calling my name from behind the pantry door. "Everything's good, Mom!"

"You want a bedtime snack, sweetie? I'll make you something real quick. It's getting late, you know."

It's 8:45, for the record. And also for the record, in case you didn't catch that, she's not actually offering to make me food. She's reminding me that

I'll need a good night's sleep before the expo. As if that hasn't occurred to me.

"Actually, I was thinking of slamming some Red Bulls and pulling an all-nighter. Just so I can be EXTRA prepared."

"Oh, Vera, no! That'll just make you crash tomorrow in the middle of—"

"She was joking, Mom."

I do a one-eighty at the sound of my brother's voice.

"Dude!" I'm glee and relief personified. I didn't know he was going to come to our parents' house tonight. I thought he was just going to swing by the expo for a minute tomorrow. But here he is with a small overnight bag over his shoulder.

"Sweetie!"

"Hey, Mom. Hey, BB." He kisses Mom on the cheek and then gets me in a headlock. BB is his nickname for me from when we were kids.

"We're so glad you're here." Mom is beside herself with relief. Her eyes are as glassy as Christmas lights. She's got her hands clasped in front of her like Oliver asking for more. "We were just about to go over a checklist to make sure Vera's prepared for tomorrow."

I stiffen. He releases me and turns to Mom. "I'm sure Vera's prepared, Mom. She's been planning for this for months."

"Doesn't hurt to be a little over-prepared."

"Sometimes it does. If it makes her feel like we don't believe she can do it on her own, it hurts."

His defense of me feels foreign because, unfortunately, it is foreign. He's never said anything like that before.

"Oh." My mother's internal calculator is working a mile a minute. Her brow is knit clear down to her cheekbones. She clearly thought they were both on Team Vera's-A-Cut-Up.

"Actually, I came by to make sure that she wasn't working too hard." He reaches into his bag and pulls out a six-pack.

"Oh, sweetie, are you sure—"

"She's thirty years old, Mom. If she wants a beer on the night before a huge professional engagement, she can decide on her own."

A beer with my brother sounds like just what the doctor ordered. I grab one and pop it open, handing it off to him, and then take another for myself.

"Mom? Wanna join us?"

“No.” She’s still looking back and forth between us, frantically trying to figure out when our front became so united. “I think I’ll go tell your father that your brother is here.”

She turns and leaves the kitchen. It must be muscle memory from when we were teenagers sneaking beers from the fridge but we automatically head down to the basement together, sinking into the ancient beanbag chairs that are still arranged around an even more ancient television. There’s a VCR plugged in underneath and a chest of old VHSs next to it.

I decide to go with honesty. “So, this is unexpected.”

He winces and tugs at the paper label on the beer the way he always does. “I wish that weren’t true. I wish you’d been able to just assume that I’d be here to support you.”

I stay quiet because I can tell that he’s not finished.

“BB, it really screwed with me that you couldn’t remember whether or not I’d been the one to give you that stupid T-shirt at Christmas. I thought that joke was so rude. Like, maybe even *cruel*. And then when you thought it might’ve been from me. Well, I realized that I haven’t been supportive enough of you. I would’ve wanted you to open that gift and know, in your heart, that I would never do something like that.”

“Maybe you’re being too hard on yourself. You’re a good brother.”

“This isn’t just about being a brother. This is about seeing you clearly as an adult, you know? Date in a Box is a brilliant business idea. And anyone who’s paying attention can see that you’ve been working your ass off to get it off the ground. Not supporting you at this point is just stupid and shortsighted.”

“Mom and Dad just don’t want to be disappointed again.”

“So they assume you’re gonna fail? Nah, it should be the other way around. They should *expect* you to do amazing things and then if you fail, they should support you. Not expect you to fail just to gird themselves against disappointment.”

“Did you just say ‘gird’? Do people gird things besides their loins?”

“Joke all you want but you know I’m right.”

Maybe he is right. No, definitely he’s right. Unfortunately, nothing is going to drastically change before tomorrow morning. I almost wish that he hadn’t brought it up. The status quo wasn’t great. But at least I knew what was coming next.

My phone starts buzzing in my pocket, and with the preternatural instincts that only a new crush can give you, I know exactly who it is before I even look at the caller ID. But just to be sure, I pull my phone out and check.

I frown at Cal's name mostly because if I do anything else, my crush will be immediately obvious to my brother. I send the call to voicemail.

"Uh, oh." I look up at his tone and it's clear that my frowning trick didn't work at all. "Who's the guy?"

"Ugh! When did you become all-knowing? It's annoying!"

"Oh, crap. So it really is a guy? Vera, no!"

"What's wrong with me getting a phone call from a guy?"

"It's not the phone call that's the problem. It's your taste in guys."

"What's wrong with my taste?"

"You have a proclivity for fuckboys."

"I do not! I . . ." My denial almost immediately loses air. I'm like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade Snoopy wilting over a crowd of thousands. "Oh, fine. Yes, in the past I've been attracted to fuckboys."

"In the past? So this guy isn't a fuckboy?"

"Welllllllll."

"Oh, Vera."

"He's definitely the best guy I've ever had a crush on. He's sweet and supportive and a good listener."

"Then why did you just reject his phone call?"

"Well, he's got this thing called a girlfriend."

"Vera!"

"It's not my fault! You can't control who you have feelings for. And it's not like anything is gonna happen."

He gives me the skeptical eyebrows he's famous for.

"Seriously! That's why I'm avoiding him right now. Because I'm trying to get over him. That way I can be a good friend and be happy for him and his perfect girlfriend."

"You're avoiding him so that you can get over him?"

"Yup."

"Are you dating anyone else?"

"No, but say, that's a good idea. Why don't you set me up with Fred?"

"I know you're joking, which is the only thing that's keeping me from strangling you right now. Your timing is unreal. Fred's finally taken."

“What? Fred, my sweet, sweet destiny, is dating someone? How *dare* he?”

“No, he’s not dating her. He’s just really into her. It’s a long story.”

I open my mouth, about to continue razzing my brother about Fred, because, let’s face it, this is the most fun I’ve had since I last talked to Cal, when my phone rings again.

Now my frown is real. It’s Cal again. Why would he be calling twice in a row? My stomach plummets. Is something wrong with the site? Is he calling me to tell me that it won’t be ready? It rings through to my voicemail.

My brother is saying something but I’m not listening because just then a text comes through as well.

I know you’re avoiding me right now, and that’s totally fine. We don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. But will you answer your phone? I’m doing something stupid and I need your help.

I frown at the text. I can practically feel the question mark floating over the top of my head. “I’m actually gonna take this call.”

“Stay strong.” My brother, the walking, talking eye-roll.

I wander upstairs and into my parents’ backyard. There’s an old hammock there that gives the perfect view of the stars through the leaves. The ropes are crusted and stiff and creak underneath my weight.

I call him back and when the call connects, I can hear the wind on both my end and his. We’re a state away from one another, but it makes me feel like we’re right next to one another.

“Vera?”

“Hey. Is everything all right?”

“Yes. I think so. But like I said, I’m doing something stupid and you’re the only one I trust to tell me whether to stay or go.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Have I told you that someone has been threatening Jule’s life?”

“... The cat?”

“Yes.”

“Someone has been threatening your cat’s life?”

“Yeah. Unless I give them five thousand dollars.”

“Five thousand dollars. That’s ... a lot of money to pay for a cat.”

“And not a lot of money for extortion. Weird amount, right?”

“It does seem specific. Hold on. Do you know this person?”

“They’ve been anonymously emailing me.”

“I’m . . . speechless. Did you call the police?”

“No. There’s a guy on staff at Curio who handles cyberthreats of all kinds. He’s sort of a PI.”

“Do you get a lot of cyberthreats?”

“This is definitely not my first.”

“Why are people threatening the customer service reps at an internet startup? That is so weird!”

“. . . Uh, I think they hear ‘startup’ and see dollar signs.”

“If you say so. Okay, what’s the stupid thing you’re doing?”

“Well, the PI guy who’s on staff tracked down the IP address of the server that the anonymous email was sent from and linked that to a physical address and now—”

“Oh, Cal, NO.”

“I take it you think it’s a bad idea that I’m camped out across the street?”

“Someone sent you a threatening email and that is making you want to meet them in person? Are you nuts!?”

“I don’t want to meet them. I just want to *see* them. It’s an interesting person who chooses to menace cats.”

“You’re the king of identity safety! You wouldn’t leave me alone with the tow truck guy, yet you’re stalking your stalker?”

“Well, that was different.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

“No! Because stranger-danger is real and kind of common. Cat menacers are . . . very rare.”

“Cal, do not pass Go. Do not collect three hundred dollars. Go home, tuck your ass into bed, and get a security system installed.”

“Ugh. You’re right. I know you’re right. I was just letting my curiosity get the best of me. That’s the reason I called you. I knew you could talk some sense into me.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I’m—Oh, shit.”

“What?!”

“The door is opening.”

“Run!”

“They’ll see me!”

“Then hide, you fool!”

“Hide. Hide. Right. Where to hide? Okay, here!”

“Where are you hiding?”

“Behind one of those big blue mailboxes. The people in the sushi restaurant behind me think I’ve lost my marbles.”

“You *have* lost your marbles! Stay where you are! Don’t let them see you!”

“You don’t have to whisper. I’m the one who has to whisper.”

“Shhh! . . . Can you see them?”

“See? You’re curious too. Everyone wants to know who the cat menacer is, yet it’s only the brave few willing to actually get their hands dirty and hide behind a mailbox.”

“Can. You. See. Them?”

“Not yet, their back is turned. Talking to someone inside. I think it’s a man, though. He’s wearing a raincoat with the hood up.”

“If I get white hairs from this, you’re paying for my dye job.”

“Ha. Yes. I’m deeply sorry to have put you through this trauma. You can definitely get your hair done on my . . . dime.”

“Cal? Are you all right?”

“I . . . can see the man.”

“Are you okay? Are you still hiding?”

“Vera.”

“Yes?!”

“It’s . . . it’s my dad.”

“What?!”

“The man in the doorway. In the raincoat. It’s my dad.”

“Wow. Okay. Cal, are you still hidden? Can he see you?”

“He’s just walking down the street. Like he’s on his way somewhere. He’s . . . in the United States. In Brooklyn.”

“Cal, if you can, you’ve gotta get off the street, okay? We don’t know anything for certain yet, besides the fact that someone sent you a threatening email from that address. So, first things first, stand up and walk away.”

“O-okay.”

“Are you doing it?”

“Yeah. I’m down the block. I’m walking in the wrong direction.”

“Wrong direction of what?”

“My apartment.”

“That address was close enough to walk to from your apartment?”

“Only fifteen blocks. JESUS. *My dad was only fifteen fucking blocks away?*”

“Oh, Cal, I’m so sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. I just. I can’t believe this. He came to the States without telling me?”

“Maybe he just arrived? Did you check your email or messages? Maybe he just told you?”

“I’m checking. Nope. Nothing.”

“Okay, long shot, but is it your birthday? There’s no chance this is, like, a surprise party sort of thing?”

“No. My birthday is in December. This is literally just my father not telling me that he’s fifteen blocks away from me because he doesn’t want to see me. And maybe even extorting me for five thousand dollars while he threatens the life of my *fucking rescue cat*. FUCK.”

“Is your dad really hard up or something?”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. He has family money. He’s barely had to work. His father made elevators.”

“He has money because your grandfather repaired elevators? That doesn’t seem very lucrative.”

“No. My grandfather was part-owner of a company that now manufactures eighty percent of the world’s elevators. He sold his shares before it got really big, but still, unless something has gone horribly wrong, my dad has money.”

“Cal, can I have your address?”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m going to send you some dumplings and beer. And I have to tell the Uber Eats guy where to go.”

“You’re sending me dumplings and beer?”

“It’s the ultimate break-up combination, but I think it would do just fine for receiving really fucked-up news too. It’ll help, I swear.”

“I’m at Narrows and 70th. 6914. Apartment 3.”

“Okay. Dumplings and beer on the way. Now we just need to get *you* there, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Are you still walking?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you almost home?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m . . . confused. And I *hate* being confused. I mean, I love problems that I haven’t solved yet. Like your website. That’s fun for me.”

“You like puzzles.”

“Exactly. But this? This isn’t a puzzle. Whatever his reasons are. They’re just going to be bad. No matter what the answer is, if I ever figure it out, it’s just going to be bad news. Something for me to reconcile. And I’m sick of reconciling shit when it comes to my dad. And that’s if I ever even find out his reasoning. Which is highly improbable right now.”

“Why?”

“Because . . . I’m not going to tell him I saw him.”

“What? Wow, Cal, that’s . . .”

“That’s what we do in my family, Vera. We pretend like we don’t see each other.”

“Oh, Cal.”

“You know my mom speaks perfect Finnish and my dad speaks English really well, but neither of them will speak it with me? When I’m with them, they completely ignore the other half of my life. Of who I am. It’s *always* been that way. Even when I was six years old, flying back and forth across the world. It was like the other half of my life didn’t exist. Constantly. You know how confusing that is?”

“It must have been so confusing. And lonely.”

“I was homesick *all the time*. As in, one hundred percent of my life . . . My father spends almost my entire life pretending like America doesn’t even exist, and now he’s apparently here without telling me? You know what that tells me, Vera? It tells me that it’s not America that he was ignoring. It was me. It’s that half of *me*.”

“No.”

“. . . Vera? Are you crying?”

“No! Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because that’s so sad. And because I don’t want you to feel that way. Homesick one hundred percent of your life? Constantly denying half of who you are? You’re the most wonderful person, Cal. So lovely and

considerate and patient and sweet. I don't want to think of anyone hurting you. Let alone someone who should be caring for you and protecting you."

"You're crying for me."

"If your dad were here in front of me I'd . . . give him a wedgie. An atomic one."

"I'm afraid to ask what an atomic wedgie is."

"It's when you pull their underwear up so far you can jam it over their heads."

"Only you could make me laugh at a moment like this . . . I'm home now. Walking up the stairs to my apartment."

"Okay. According to my phone, your dumplings and beer should be there in fifteen minutes. Don't tip the guy, I took care of it through the app."

"Hi, Jule, sweet guy. I won't let anybody get you. I swear."

"What'll you do tonight?"

"I'm going to eat some dumplings and drink some beer in fifteen minutes. Doctor's orders."

"And after that?"

"I'm going to put the finishing touches on your website and make it live."

". . . Are you sure you have the . . . space to do that tonight? You've just had a horrible shock."

"Vera. I'm not letting my dumbass dad get in the way of launching your site. I'm fixing it tonight if it's literally the last thing I do. I swear. It'll be the perfect distraction for me."

". . . Are you really not going to talk to your dad about this?"

"I mean . . . do you think I should?"

"Well, I don't know. I'd never want to make things worse for you. But in general, burying stuff doesn't really work. Trust me. It just comes back to bite you in the ass later."

"I wouldn't know what to say. Or how to say it. I'd be completely under water."

"I would help you. I mean, not like with Laura. Because it would be weird to have me in your ear for a conversation like that. But we could practice what you wanted to say. We could write it down. Index cards or a powerpoint. Make a little presentation so that it would all be organized and polished and you wouldn't have to worry about messing anything up or leaving anything out."

“ . . . ”

“Cal? You there? Sorry, did I overstep? I don’t mean to push you.”

“Vera.”

“Yeah?”

“You have to read my email to you. Please.”

“Oh. I . . . Um.”

“I know you’re avoiding it. And I’m sure you have your reasons. But you have to know the truth. I can’t keep hoping—I can’t keep wanting—Please. I just have to know what you think, okay?”

“ . . . Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, then.”

“Do you think we’ll ever say any other word again, Cal?”

“I—I’m hoping you’ll read that email, call me up and say a lot of words.”

“Okay.”

“Heh. Oh, my dumplings and beer arrived early. I’m gonna answer the door.”

“Bye, Cal.”

“Bye, Vera.”

Chapter Eleven

Later Thursday Night

Cal

The call clicks off, I accept the delivery at my door before turning around and sinking to the ground. I grab the back of my head. I'm assuming the position they tell you to assume when the plane's going down. My chest is filled with Vera. My head is filled with my father.

Before I can stop myself I'm clicking through my photos. I go back to last July. It's the last time I saw my dad in person. Ten months ago in Finland. And there's not even a picture of the two of us from that trip. Just one of him from the back. We'd gone on a long hike together and I took a photo of him looking out at the vista.

When I'm with him all I get is his back.

He's not a verbose man. Mostly quiet except for these rare moments when he gets in a mood and can be intensely funny. Sharp. When we're apart, it's when he's in those moments that he calls me. It's always been something I've been proud of. That when he gets like that—worked up and energetic and wants to laugh with someone—I'm the one he calls. Our relationship exists on those phone calls.

But this picture is an important reminder. Those moments are not who he is, at least not exclusively. Being with him, side by side with him, can be an extremely lonely experience. He can go quiet for days. He plays dozens of instruments. And sometimes those would be the only noises he'd make for an entire day in my childhood.

He's the one who put a flute in my hands when I was eight. He's the one who showed me how to play it.

I used to think that that was enough. Hysterical phone calls once a month, one or two late-night jam sessions whenever we got together.

Silence in between.

But seeing him on the street today. Here without even telling me. Ten months. And his back walking away from me on the street is all I get . . . It broke something in my gut.

This is wrong. The way he and I interact is wrong. You shouldn't be homesick for someone when they're standing directly in front of you.

Being with someone you love should fill you with light and warmth. And I don't mean that in a fairy-tale sort of way, I mean that in a baseline sort of way. My mother isn't perfect by any means, but when I'm with her, I'm really with her. I'm warm and protected and often annoyed, but safe. No wind whistles through the cave. Time with my dad is a snowy landscape. Pretty. Campfire every couple of miles. But mostly a frozen blue.

I sit up and look at my phone, black and quiet in my hands. Being with Vera fills me with light and warmth. And I've never even seen her in person. Her smile has been a burning ember in my gut since the one and only time I've ever glimpsed it. I wonder what it would be like to sit next to that smile. To sun myself in that heat.

She's probably reading the email right this very second.

Vera

As soon as my phone goes dark from Cal's call I sit up off the hammock and head back inside. I just want to be wrapped up in one of my mother's ridiculously plush off-brand Snuggies that she orders from the QVC channel.

I grab one from the chest where she keeps them and settle on the couch in the living room. My blood feels acidic and fizzy, like it's made of Mountain Dew. My hand is shaking as I tap into my inbox.

My thumb freezes over the top of Cal's email.

Subject line: Something I probably should have told you from the beginning.

Please.

His word echoes in my head. Imploring me to read this email. But I don't want to read it. I don't want to know.

I'm so far gone on Cal I can't even see the shore anymore. And honestly? I don't want to. I've never liked someone in this way before. It's unsullied. Pure. He's good for me.

It's kind of like my whole life I've been craving and indulging in Big Macs. And then one day the most delicious, nutritious salad comes along and would you look at that, *I want it*. More than a Big Mac. But now I'm half a second away from learning that the salad dressing is made of lard and salt and it's really not good for me anyway.

But, I digress.

The email.

Please.

I sigh and lower my thumb.

"Wait a second. Who is that email from?"

I jump out of my skin as my lurker-ass brother looms over the back of the couch and yoinks my phone from my hand.

"Hey! Buttwad! Give that back."

I lunge over the back of the couch but the traitorous Snuggie gets caught under my foot and I end up just kind of aggressively sagging back down.

"Damn it! This stupid—I'm serious. Give. Me. My. Phone."

He's standing five feet away, staring at my phone screen with an absolutely bamboozled expression on his face. He tugs at his brown hair and it stands up straight, cactus style. An insane laugh bursts out of him.

"This is the guy, Vera? Your newest fuckboy?"

"GIVE. ME. MY. PHONE."

I finally wrestle free of the traitorous Snuggie and clear the couch. I attempt to karate chop him right in the moneymaker but he simply palms my forehead and holds me an arm's length away. My phone he holds over his head. I can see that he hasn't opened the email at least.

"Vera, can I ask you something?" He's incredibly calm now, looking like the cat who ate the canary. "Did you ever Google Fred?"

I channel Jule and attempt to scratch his face off.

"Vera. God! Just quit it a minute and answer my question!"

I sag, sadly exhausted. I should probably work out more. "No. I never Googled Fred. Why would I? I knew I was never going to date him."

He laughs maniacally and holds my phone even higher.

"Give me my phone!"

"Let's go to his Wikipedia page, shall we?"

"I'm literally going to kill you. Not to sound like a nineties movie, but say your prayers, you twerp! Wait, why does he have a Wikipedia page?"

“Here we are. His page. I’m going to show it to you and you need to promise to look. Don’t just rip the phone away.”

“You will truly be lucky if you see the sunrise.”

He holds my forehead again and turns my phone toward me. It’s a Wikipedia page with no photo. I squint at the header.

It reads: Frederik Kal Kantola.

“I call him Fred. Because I met him at work and he goes by Frederik or Fred at work. But in his personal life? He goes by his middle name.”

I squint again. *Kal*, it reads. With a K. My heart turns into stone. But spelled with a C when he’s in the States.

“Eliot.” He must hear the note of seriousness in my voice because he drops his hand from my forehead. “Give me my phone.”

He hands the phone over but I don’t do anything but stare at nothing for a long moment.

“Wait. Crap. Vera, I didn’t think you’d be this upset. It seemed funny to me, but . . .”

“Cal is *Fred*.”

“Yes—”

“He lied about who he was?”

“No. Well—”

I think of everything Eliot has ever told me about his dumb friend Fred who I just had to meet. He’s a computer genius. He’s the owner of a startup. Eliot’s insistence that I try out Fred’s company was the entire reason I signed up with Curio in the first place.

And the whole time that was *Cal*?

“Why the hell is he masquerading as a customer service representative!?”

“He wasn’t trying to be deceptive—”

“This entire time I’ve been talking to the *CEO* of the company!?”

“Really, Vera, he was trying to—”

“Don’t talk right now!”

I point a finger at him and it’s like I’m brandishing a dagger. He literally lifts his hands up in surrender.

“Let me just—”

“Eliot!”

“Say one more—”

“I swear to God.”

“Read the email, Vera.”

“How do you know what’s in the email?”

“He’s one of my closest friends! I helped him—”

“This is *sick*. This is next level. Even for you. Tell me the truth, did you know? Did he?”

“What? No! Vera, I’m not a good actor. Do you honestly think I had *any* idea before the last five minutes?”

I concede that point. Eliot is a horrible actor and we have a high school production of *Fiddler on the Roof* on home video in the VHS chest downstairs proving that. His Tevye was excruciating.

“Read the email, BB. Seriously.”

I turn on my heel and head back down to the basement. I need to be somewhere that no one will bother me. My parents never come down here and I’m positive that my brother will give me space.

I collapse onto one of the beanbag chairs and immediately exit out of the Wikipedia page. It feels wrong to read it.

I pull up the email again.

Subject line: Something I probably should have told you from the beginning.

I had thought for sure that the thing he should have told me from the beginning was that he had a girlfriend. But this? I was not prepared for this. I tap my thumb down.

Dear Vera,

I’m just going to tear the band-aid off. I’m actually the CEO of Curio. Okay. Still with me? Still reading? I hope so. My full name is Frederik Kal Kantola. I go by Cal with my family and a couple close friends, but most people call me Frederik.

So, why customer service, you might ask? Well, it started about a year ago, actually. I was having issues with the site and feeling frustrated that it was so hard to pinpoint the problems. One of the surest fire ways to identify the issues with the site is to hear straight from the customers. They are basically people who are paying to beta-test it. No offense. So, I started checking in with my two customer service reps. They occasionally gave me good intel, but the problem was that I was the CEO. They were both nervous to tell me about the real issues with the site. I’m sure they felt like their jobs

might be on the line. I'd never fire an employee for honesty, but there was no way for them to know that. I started listening in on the customer service call recordings. I gleaned more information, but often felt frustrated at the questions that my reps weren't asking. It seemed to me that they were solving many of these issues superficially instead of dealing with the site itself. Of course, I was expecting too much of them to both deal with customers and perform on-call IT services to the site.

One of my good friends had the idea of me posing as a customer service rep to get some first-hand knowledge of my site's issues. He also suggested that dealing with customers directly would be good for my social skills. For the most part, I interact with my staff virtually. So, most of my time I spend at my house. In my house. Alone. He was right that I could use the socializing. So. I started answering customer service calls one day a week.

Generally, it's my most dreaded day of the week. I don't think anyone enjoys being yelled at by strangers, but I was being yelled at by strangers because this thing I'd spent years building had apparently failed them. Still, it felt good to solve their issues with the site, so I soldiered on.

And then one day, you called. God. Can you believe that first phone call was only on Monday? It already feels like months ago. Maybe because we've already talked more in just a few days than most people do in the first couple months of getting to know one another.

I guess what I'm saying is that I'm so grateful that I was the one who answered your call that day. You could have been transferred to either of the other customer service reps, but the automated system transferred you to me.

At first, it didn't make sense to tell you who I was because you were a disgruntled customer and I didn't want to make you feel awkward. But then, honestly, I forgot that you didn't already know. Even though Cal is the name that only the people closest to me call me, I use it during the customer service calls because I actively respond to it and because, not to be braggy, but Frederik Kantola is the figurehead of the company. I needed to be more incognito. Over the last year, having strangers call me Cal has become a matter of

course. But not with you. It felt different. I felt, over the course of that first phone call, that you were calling me Cal because you really knew me.

It was only after we hung up that I worried I might have catfished you.

So, why didn't I tell you right away after that? Well, you've been there for all of our conversations. You know how wonderfully off-track we can get. And any time I did remember to tell you, well, Vera, I worried that you'd think I'd purposefully lied. And I worried that you'd hang up on me the way you did that first night. You never explained why you bailed so fast at the end of that conversation, and you don't have to. I won't pretend I knew exactly what you were thinking, but I think I get it. At some point, I'll be able to explain everything. But basically, I think you realized that I was a stranger who you knew nothing about. Who might be hiding things from you. Or willing to deceive you.

I was scared to tell you that I wasn't even a customer service rep. That I was both Frederik and Cal. That I was even more of a stranger than you'd thought.

Because, if it's not already painfully obvious, I really like you. I hope we'll keep talking even after your site is perfectly fixed.

Look, I know there's more to say. And more to tell each other. And more to learn about one another. But I don't want to be presumptuous or pressure you. Let me just say that I'm working hard on your site. I believe in your kick-ass business. And I'm going to do everything I possibly can to make sure you show up to your expo on Friday completely prepared.

If we don't talk before then, that's okay. I'll understand. I'm in no rush. Let me say just one more thing:

I hope I'll know you for a long time.

Sincerely,

Cal

AKA Freda

AKA Frederik

AKA CalKan@curio

AKA CalCojones69

My first reaction is to roll face down into the beanbag chair and laugh hysterically. And when I say hysterically, I mean it in its true sense of the word. Not the way dads in kiss-the-cook aprons describe Monty Python. I mean that I'm making hyena noises while emotions I can't identify accordion my heart like a squeeze toy. I only lift my head when it becomes clear that the beanbag chair wants to murder me.

I gasp for air and flop backward, staring at the familiar basement ceiling.
"BB?"

Eliot is standing at the top of the basement stairs, calling down warily. He's obviously heard me making the sound a dying alien makes and is now scared to come down here. Good. He should be scared.

"If you come down here, I'll kick your ass!"

"Noted."

The basement door closes again.

I read Cal's email again. And then one more time.

The last few lines are sticky as tar. It takes me as long to read that one sentence "I hope I'll know you for a long time" as it does for me to read the rest of the email.

I exit out of my email and bring up my browser. His Wikipedia page is staring at me. I start to read it and immediately exit the page. It feels wrong to research him behind his back.

I know that he didn't violate my privacy, because if he had, he would have almost immediately figured out that I'm Eliot's sister. Even a quick perusal of my Instagram would have told him that. And I really don't think he knew.

Instead, I go to Google Images and type in *Frederik Kantola*.

But I don't press go.

It feels like a dividing line, this Google Image search. If I search him, and the first time I see what Cal actually looks like is on a screen, then it will mean that I was simply curious about the customer service guy on the other end of the line.

But if I don't Google him . . . Then it means that I'm waiting to meet him in person to see his face. It'll mean that I *want* to meet him in person. It'll mean that the first time I see his brown eyes and brown hair (what a poet he is) it'll be because we're standing in front of one another. No phone. No subterfuge. Just us.

The question is, which do I want?

The question hinges on information I don't have. The information I assumed this email was going to give me. The information I dreaded hearing but now am absolutely dying to hear.

"Eliot!"

The basement door creaks open.

"Yes?" He sounds like a nervous minion desperate not to incense his evil overlord.

"What did you mean when you said that Fred was really into someone? I mean, I think I know but I don't want to assume and then be an idiot. So, just tell me honestly, does he have a girlfriend or not?"

But he doesn't have time to answer because my phone rings in my hand.

Cal

I told her that I would wait for her to call me, but it's been half an hour since we hung up and I *know* that she's opened the email.

I've been standing in the corner of my living room, my hands laced over the top of my head, staring at my phone that hasn't rung for the last thirty minutes. And I'm about to lose my marbles.

Frankly, I'm almost grateful for this torture because it's the only thing that's kept my mind off the fact that I've been fifteen blocks away from my father when, in fact, I thought we had the entire Atlantic Ocean between us.

You'd think that would be the only thing I could think about at a time like this. But over the last thirty minutes, the composition of my thoughts has shifted from being primarily about my dad to being primarily about Vera. Because she still hasn't called and I'm pretty much freaking out so hard I'm going to go bald.

My phone rings and I literally vault over my couch, scramble forward, knock the phone off the coffee table and bang the shit out of my shin on the way down. I land in a heap on my rug, eye to eye with my phone that proudly displays the word "Mom."

I groan and send her call to voicemail.

As soon as her message rings through I listen to it.

"Hi, honey. Sorry I missed your call. Call me back when you get this. I'll be up for another hour or so. Love you."

Earlier, after I'd hung up with Vera, I called my mother. But a ring and a half into that phone call I realized that I didn't actually *want* to know

whether or not she was aware that Dad was in the States. If she didn't know, then she was going to be as betrayed and pissed as I was. And if she *did* know, well, let's just say I had no interest in going two for two on parental deceit tonight.

I'm crumpled on the floor, listening to a voicemail from my mother, trying desperately not to think about my father, and sweating through a T-shirt while waiting for Vera to call back.

This is how Carla finds me.

"Cal, honey, is everything all right?"

"Carla!" I sit up too fast and whack my head on the coffee table. "Ouch. Dammit. Sorry. I didn't realize you were home."

"Got back about an hour ago while you were out."

"Didn't mean to disturb you. I'll go to my room."

I'm stepping past her, palm to my aching forehead, when she stops me with one hand on my shoulder. "Is this about that girl?"

"Which girl?"

"The one you've been talking to at all hours of the night?"

"Uh."

"I don't mean to be nosy. I just wanted to say, it's nice to see you so scrambled up. You've always been such a . . . balanced boy."

"Thanks?"

"You should invite her over. I'll make something delicious for you to eat and then make myself scarce."

"It's not . . ."

I can't finish that sentence. It's not . . . *like that*? It's not . . . *that simple*? It's not . . . *ever going to happen*?

God, I hope it's not that last one.

"We're still . . ."

"You're still figuring things out. I get it, sweetie. Don't stay up too late. You'll get premature wrinkles."

She touches her cool palm to my cheek and then disappears back into her room.

A minute later, I'm sitting on my bed and deciding I can't take it any longer. I don't want to be a balanced boy. I don't want to never mention to my father that he's a complete and utter asshole for coming all the way across the ocean—to my neighborhood—and not telling me. I don't want to miss my chance with Vera. I *want* to be scrambled up. I actually like

sweating through my T-shirts. Well, not really, but I like having a *reason* to sweat through my T-shirts.

Look, I waited half my life to have a home. A permanent one where I could really just *stay*. But maybe I've taken it too far in that direction. I don't want to hide in my apartment anymore.

I don't want my phone to be my only connection to the world.

To her.

Step one? I have to find out how she feels.

I pull up her contact info and hit call.

"Hi, Cal! *No! Quiet! Get out of here! Go back upstairs!*"

"Vera?"

"Sorry! Not talking to you. *I swear to God I will bleach your hair while you're sleeping tonight if you don't get the hell out of here!*"

"Is everything all right?"

"Sorry. Yes. My brother was just being annoying."

"Oh. You're with your brother?"

"Yeah. I'm actually at my parents' house for the night. It's closer to the convention center. And he surprised me by coming out to support me."

"That's cool of him. Um. Vera?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm kind of dying over here."

"Right. Okay. I read the email."

"You read the email."

"Yup."

"Okay. So, uh, now you know everything."

"Well. Not *everything*."

"What do you mean?"

"..."

"Vera? Are you there?"

"I don't want to say what it is that I don't know. I'm in my own head about it. And if I say what it is that I don't know, then you'll know exactly *why* I want to know that and then things'll get so awkward and—"

"Vera, for the love of God. Are you done with me or not?"

"Done with you?"

"For catfishing you?"

"Ha. Cal, you didn't *catfish* me."

"I deceived you about who I was."

“Unintentionally. And fairly innocently, I might add. Besides, you *tried* to tell me. I was the one who didn’t read the email.”

“Right.”

“I guess it makes a little more sense now. Why people would be sending you threatening emails. You’re the head honcho. They want something from you.”

“Yeah. That’s kind of one of the reasons I was so nervous to tell you . . . People sometimes get weird when they find out.”

“Because you’re a rich genius who made Forbes 30 Under 30 list?”

“I—God. Did you Google me?”

“Wait! What?! You really did make that list? I was just teasing you!”

“So, you didn’t Google me?”

“No, Cal. I didn’t Google you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess it felt wrong to learn stuff second-hand.”

“Well, I’m an open book. Seriously. Anything you want to know, I’ll tell you. No more secrets. I swear. God. I’m so relieved you’re not mad at me.”

“So, you didn’t Google me, either.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m assuming if you did you’d already know one extremely pertinent piece of information about me.”

“What’s that?”

“Ooh. Maybe I should wait to tell you. It’s almost too good to spoil it.”

“What? No!”

“It’ll be your penance for making me think you were customer service Cal. *Wait a second!* I just realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“I just realized that every time we were talking to your manager who secretly listens to the customer service phone calls *we were actually talking about you!*”

“Oh.”

“Cal. YOU’RE *Manager*.”

“I guess technically that’s true.”

“Wow. How many rabbit holes does our relationship have? This thing goes all the way to the top.”

“Vera, I’ve gotta say, you’re really taking this whole thing a lot better than I expected.”

“You should’ve heard the sound I made when I read your email.”

“Make it now so I can hear it.”

“Absolutely not. I’d prefer to retain the image of a calm and collected, suave and debonaire woman.”

“You . . . think of that as the image you usually put off?”

“Ha. Ha. Let’s just say I’ll never willingly make that sound again as long as I live.”

“You were upset, then?”

“Upset? When I first found out, yes. But then I read the email and now I’m just more mixed up than anything else. And nervous. Are you nervous? I feel like I swallowed a bunch of jumping beans.”

“Wait. What do you mean ‘when you first found out’? Isn’t the email the way you first found out?”

“Oh. Right. Well, remember that thing you’d definitely know about me if you’d Googled me?”

“The one you’re withholding for your own amusement? Of course.”

“Well, ah, it’s pretty pertinent to how I found out that you’re actually Frederik Kantola.”

“Vera . . .”

“Hold on, the email thing was a good idea. I’ll just write it down and you can read it and—”

“Vera!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell you. But I’m warning you. Your mind is about to be blown. It’s not my fault if you have to stare into nothingness for the next hour.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? The power has completely sullied your integrity.”

“Buckle your seatbelt, Cal.”

“I’m ready.”

“No, you’re not, but I’ll tell you anyway.”

“For the love of all that is holy, just tell me.”

“Cal, do you happen to know my last name off the top of your head?”

“Sure, it’s . . . Oh. Wait. Actually I *don’t* know your last name.”

“It’s Hoffman.”

“Okay . . .”

“That doesn’t illuminate anything for you?”

“Not unless you’re trying to tell me that your father is Dustin Hoffman.”

“Ha! No. My father is Neil Hoffman and has, unfortunately, never won an Oscar.”

“Neil Hoffman? I know that name.”

“Almost there. You’ve almost got it.”

“Hold on.”

“There it is.”

“No.”

“Yup.”

“Are you telling me that—”

“Eliot’s my brother.”

“No.”

“Really!”

“I . . .”

“He’s upstairs in our parents’ kitchen right this very second.”

“You’ve gotta be . . .”

“I could put him on the line if you need proof.”

“That’s not . . . but Eliot’s sister’s name is Bea.”

“Ohhhhhh. Now it makes sense how you didn’t put the pieces together. I was starting to get offended that maybe my big bro, like, *never* talked about me to you. To clarify, my nickname was BB growing up. Because that’s what Eliot always called me when I was a baby. His widdle bebe sister. He and my dad are the only ones who still call me B. Or BB.”

“ . . .”

“Cal? You there? Have you expired on the spot from shock?”

“You’re the one with your ponytail caught in your braces.”

“What?”

“You said that your brother had a bad picture of you framed on his wall and I’m just now putting two and two together. You’re the one with your ponytail caught in your braces.”

“Mmmmmggggghrrrrrgggfffff.”

“Vera? You all right?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Just aspirating my own humiliation. I can’t believe you’ve seen that photo.”

“Well, I’ve known Eliot a long time.”

“You’ve seen that horrible photo before you’ve even met me in person. This is *such* awful news.”

“I can’t believe you’re Bea.”

“I can’t believe you’re Fred.”

“Oh, so, *jeez*, when you found out who I was, you were finding out that not only was I Frederik Kantola, I was also one of your brother’s closest friends?”

“One he’s talked about for years. Before this you were basically a mythical creature to me.”

“This . . . is . . . a lot.”

“Remember the hyena-screaming I was doing earlier? Feel free to partake if you need. I’ll wait.”

“Hold on. Does Eliot know yet?”

“Yeah. He was the one who figured it out. And then I got upset and he realized it wasn’t a joke and gave me my phone back and then I read the email and got less upset and a lot more mixed up. And then you called. So here we are.”

“You said he gave you your phone back . . . Did Eliot read the email?”

“No. He just saw the email address that it was from and put the pieces together.”

“Okay. Okay. I should probably call him at some point.”

“So far this conversation is way more about Eliot than I would like. This always happens! He gets involved and then everything is about him. You and I, Cal, we’ve got our own thing going. Remember?”

“We do. We definitely do. I’m just . . . a slow processor for this kind of thing.”

“And, gosh, you’ve already had a hell of a night for surprising news. I’m sorry, Cal. I’m being insensitive by getting so much glee out of this. I should have just told you straight out.”

“No! No. It’s really nice to have something to take my mind off all of that, to be honest. I think I’m just trying to remember everything I said about you to Eliot. I think I’m in for about three years of teasing from him.”

“Yeah. Me too. You know how long he’s been trying to . . . What do you mean ‘everything’ you told him about me?”

“Uh.”

“You told him about me when I was just an anonymous customer service caller?”

“I mean, I mentioned you when you were just Vera, if that’s what you mean.”

“Mentioned is not the same as telling him everything.”

"I . . . can we go back to talking about . . . *not* what I told Eliot about you? Hey, I just remembered. A while ago you said that the reason you used Curio to build your website was because your brother forced you to. So, that was Eliot, huh?"

"I wouldn't say *forced*."

"You said he pressured you. And that you wished you'd just used Squarespace like a normal person."

"Mmmmgghgghrrrghfffffffff."

"What's happening now? Are you aspiring another emotion?"

"I'm just running through all the terrible things I've said about Curio. Oh, my GOD. If I'd known that you'd conceived and built the entire site, I would've found a nicer way to say it all."

"Vera, this is why I do customer service incognito. This exact reason. Because I need real feedback on the site. When people know who I am, all they do is compliment it and then the site never improves."

"So, in a way, I helped you by relentlessly insulting your site?"

"At least you did it to my face and not in the online reviews. Hey."

"Yeah?"

"I just remembered something else."

"What's that?"

"You said that Eliot wanted you to use Curio because he'd used it and liked it, but also because there was another reason."

"Oh. Um. Right."

"And that that reason was basically because he didn't want you to choke on a chicken bone and have no one find your carcass for weeks."

"You have an irritatingly sharp memory."

"What did you mean by that? I mean, I would have assumed that Eliot's other reason was that he wanted to support my site. But I don't see what that has to do with you choking on a chicken bone."

"Oh. Ah. Well, this is embarrassing. Maybe let's just forget about it."

"I'm too curious to forget about it."

"Mgmgflfhghf."

"This is the most flustered I've ever heard you! You *have* to tell me now."

"Cal . . ."

"I'm invoking the traitorous dad card. Papa already broke my heart, Vera, please don't keep secrets."

“Wow.”

“You gotta tell me.”

“Oh, fine. But this is *Eliot* making things awkward, not me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Basically Eliot thinks I’m going to end up an old maid. He’s a hypocrite, really. Because he never likes anyone I date but when I’m single he’s always worried that I’ll die alone.”

“Why would he possibly care so much about your dating status?”

“He’s a mother hen. And he doesn’t want me to be alone. He likes for me to have company.”

“But he loves spending time by himself!”

“I know. Like I said, a hypocrite. He has a fear of loneliness. But, like, *my* loneliness. It’s kind of sweet if you squint.”

“So, what did that have to do with you signing up for Curio?”

“Okay, here’s the embarrassing part.”

“Hit me.”

“Well, for the last couple of years, especially since me and Gio broke up, Eliot has been on and on about his friend Fred and how good he thought we’d be together.”

“Um. Oh.”

“Yup. And how his friend Fred is a genius who invented a whole website building service that’s the coolest thing ever and he’s such a nice guy and creative and handsome and blah blah blah and finally I was like put a cork in it about this Fred loser, already!”

“Ha.”

“And so Eliot promised that he’d lay off about it if I just used Curio. He thought that if I saw how creative and intuitive and interesting the site was, I might want to meet the man who was behind the whole thing.”

“And you didn’t want to tell me that before . . .”

“Of course not! I thought you were Customer Service Cal! Why would I ever make things awkward by mentioning that my brother wanted to set me up with your boss’s boss’s boss? That would have been super weird.”

“I can see that.”

“So. Anyway. That’s the whole awkward story. The end. I’ll go die now.”

“Don’t go die.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Cal? Why aren’t you responding?”

“Because I’m processing this information.”

“Well, give me some window into your thought process! I’m curling into a mortified raisin over here.”

“Eliot called me handsome?”

“*That’s* what you took from all that?”

“He was just really talking me up is all.”

“He’s a salesman, for sure.”

“He mentioned that to me a few times as well.”

“That you’re handsome?”

“No, that he had a sister who might be a good match for me.”

“And you never took him up on his generous offer? I’m hurt.”

“You never took him up on the offer either!”

“That’s because Eliot had . . . quite a way of describing you. Let’s see, what are some things that Eliot told me about Fred over the years. Oh! I know. Will you play me something on your flute?”

“He told you about the flute.”

“He sure did.”

“And that didn’t make you immediately wanna date me? You weren’t clambering for my phone number?”

“He also told me about your rock collection.”

“God. *Eliot*. Way to lead with the sexiest attributes. Apparently he’s a terrible wingman.”

“So, you’re confirming the existence of a rock collection?”

“It’s a rocks and gems collection, to be exact. And it’s actually kind of cool. I got interested in it as a kid when I found this special kind of rock behind my dad’s house. After that I wanted to learn more about geology.”

“That actually does sound cool. What did he tell you about me?”

“Nothing, really. Just that he wanted us to meet.”

“And that was enough to nix the idea for you?”

“I mean, first of all, I didn’t want to mess anything up with Eliot. He’s a really good buddy. And crashing and burning with someone’s sister is the fastest way to make things awkward. Also . . .”

“Also?”

“Also, I kind of hate being the guy that people set up with their sisters? It’s, ah, happened to me before. And it might seem like a compliment, but it’s not really.”

“What do you mean? Doesn’t it mean that that person really trusts you?”

“Yeah, sure. But if people want to set you up with their sisters it also means that you’re a certain type of person.”

“A sister-dater?”

“Yeah. A pension-plan contributing, under-the-speed-limit driving, multi-vitamin chomping sister-dater.”

“Uh huh. And Eliot had you all wrong because you don’t do any of those things?”

“I mean . . . *technically*, yes, I do all of those things.”

“Ha!”

“Sometimes I just wish I were . . .”

“Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*?”

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds stupid.”

“No! I didn’t mean that disparagingly. I think we all fall prey to that kind of thinking at some point or another. Just the other morning I was pretending I was in a romcom. You know, perfect clothes, charmingly clumsy, dealing with problems that could be solved in under ninety minutes.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, the romcom thing sounds better than the *Die Hard* thing. In romcoms you don’t have to walk over broken glass.”

“All right, then, Cal. Instead of a pension-plan contributing, slow-ass driver, who would the movie version of you be?”

“Hmmm. The movie version of Cal would have become a lawyer. Environmental law. I’d be stopping greedy corporations from polluting the earth one lawsuit at a time.”

“Now we’re talking. Dun dun!”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Dun dun!”

“Oh. That’s the *Law & Order* noise.”

“Right. Of course. How could I have missed that?”

“Stay on track! What else would Movie Cal do?”

“Oh. Honestly, Jule would probably be a dog. One who could catch frisbees in the park.”

“Cute.”

“One day he’d . . . catch the wrong frisbee and I’d meet a nice woman who could make me laugh.”

“Would your dogs fall in love?”

“Definitely. And because of that, we’d have no choice but to see each other again. One day I’d cook her a meal in my incredible kitchen and she’d feed me the last bite of dessert.”

“And then what happens? You left out all the juicy parts!”

“What juicy parts?”

“The bow chicka wow wow.”

“Exactly what kind of movie did you think I was describing?”

“I mean, throwing frisbees in the park? You’d probably be shirtless. And then she’s seductively feeding you the last bite of ice cream? Come on. This is majorly porny.”

“Well, I guess if that *were* my persona then I wouldn’t have to deal with the sister-dating problem anymore. That was fun. What would Movie Vera do?”

“Movie Vera would definitely be . . . a writer. I’d write the next *Gone Girl* and use the money to travel the world. I’d get really into rock-climbing and base-jumping. I’d meet a plucky old woman while eating alone at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Tokyo and one day I’d find out that she’d left me everything in her will. I follow her last request to me. To track down her long-lost grandson that no one has ever been able to find before. I find him. He’s super hot. We totally fall in love. But something isn’t quite right. I hire a PI and find out that the grandson is just using me to get his hands on his grandmother’s inheritance. That’s the last he ever hears from me. I get the hell out of Dodge. The last shot is me chalking my hands at the base of a gigantic cliff face. Oh, wait, did I mention that I’d injured myself in a fall earlier in the movie? Well, I did. But now, after my incredibly emotional journey, I’ve learned that I won’t be able to trust anyone else unless I trust myself first. I start climbing. The sun catches on the camera lens, blotting everything out. The end.”

“Wow. I . . . have never met anyone else like you, Vera.”

“Cal?”

“Yeah?”

“How would Movie Cal deal with this situation with your dad?”

“Ugh.”

“Was that nosy? I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

“No. It’s not nosy. It’s a really good question. Which is probably why I don’t want to answer it.”

“You don’t have to answer.”

“No, I will. Just let me think for a second . . . Okay. If my life were a movie, I’d go back to that address and wait on the front steps for my dad to get back from wherever he was going. I’d ask him why the hell he was in the States and why the hell he was keeping it a secret from me. I’d tell him that I spent half of my life split between two homes and that I was constantly homesick for one parent or the other and the fact that he could be here without telling me is so incredibly painful to me . . . I’d tell him that it hurts on an adult level and hurts on a childhood level. I’d tell him that he needs to apologize to me. And mean it. I’d tell him that he needs to visit me more. And then, in the movie, he’d cry and say I was right and give me a huge hug and apologize and make plans to visit at Christmas. And before he got on the plane back to Finland, he’d call from the airport to tell me he loved me and that he was glad we were in the same city, even if it was just for a few more minutes . . . Is that embarrassing? I feel like that’s embarrassing. Ugh.”

“That’s not embarrassing! At all. You’re dad’s a dick. You want an explanation and an apology. And then you want him to do better. That all sounds completely reasonable to me. But here’s the thing.”

“Oh, boy.”

“You can’t control what your dad’s gonna do. He might surprise you, sometimes people do. Eliot surprised me tonight by coming out to support me. But more than likely, your dad’ll react however you’d predict he’s gonna react. The only thing you can actually control is what *you* do in this situation.”

“Right.”

“Cal, is there really anything keeping you from being the movie version of yourself?”

“Well, I mean, showing up again to that address is probably not the best idea considering that someone, maybe my dad, has threatened violence if I don’t pay them money.”

“Right. Right. So, not that part. But the rest? Telling him he owes you an apology. Explaining why it was painful. Explaining more about why your situation growing up had lasting effects. Is there any world where you could see yourself actually doing that?”

“At the risk of sounding like the sister-dater again . . . well, it would be extremely out of character for me. Besides that teenage year I threw a fit

and made everyone's lives miserable, I pretty much never object to my parents. Like I said, we really just smooth everything over as best we can."

"Maybe it's time to break the habit?"

"Oh, shit. Is that the time? Is it midnight already?"

"Oh. Yes. Wow. I really have to go to bed."

"And I have to finish your site."

"Oh my gosh. It totally slipped my mind. Is it going to be finished in time?"

"If I go right now and don't stop, I can finish it."

"Oh, I wish you didn't have to work through the night, but also, Cal, finish my site! The future of my business may just depend on it!"

"Hey, Vera?"

"Yeah?"

"If I don't get to talk to you before the expo opens, maybe you should be the movie version of yourself tomorrow as well."

"Go rock-climbing and befriend an elderly woman?"

"Ha. Always. No, I meant that you should kick ass and take names. That's the kind of character that you described. Someone who feels capable and self-sufficient. As a third party observer, I've gotta say, you have literally every skill required to meet this challenge head on. If I had to choose from ten thousand people to go there tomorrow and sell the crap out of Date in a Box, I'd choose you every time."

"I . . . thanks, Cal."

"Knock 'em dead."

"Bye, Cal."

"Bye, Vera."

Chapter Twelve

Little Bit More of Thursday Night and Then Finally Friday Morning

Vera

I hang up the phone and needle the corner of it into my forehead. For a solid two minutes I lie in the beanbag chair and consider calling him back, getting it out of the way. I could ask the whole thing in one long breath. *Who is the woman who lives with you and are you into me?*

I chickened out on the phone call simply because asking is going to show him my hand. The only reason a person would ask those questions would be if she were into him. So as soon as I ask, he's going to know. Would that be so bad? Maybe not at another time. But right now? Hours before the biggest professional engagement of my life?

Maybe I'll wait to base-jump off an emotional cliff until after the expo.

I drag my exhausted, wrung-out carcass out of the beanbag chair (which is harder than it sounds—those things basically eat you alive). I'm up the stairs to my childhood bedroom. I pause outside of my brother's room, knocking lightly and then creaking the door open a crack.

He's asleep in a pile on top of his covers. He's been sleeping like that since he was a little kid. Some people sleep in neat lines, their hands folded over their stomachs. Not Eliot. He sleeps like he just got tossed onto the side of the road. In an absolute scramble.

I close the door quietly and frown. I briefly consider waking him up and demanding every bit of insider intel on Cal.

But no. I'm pivoting, remember? I'm not thinking about Cal and his dating status until after the expo. I'm focusing on Date in a Box and only Date in a Box.

After I'm brushed and washed and pajama-ed, I fall into bed and stare at the poster of Edward Cullen I taped over my bed in high school.

"It's gonna be a long night, Edward." There's no way I'm going to fall asleep with all this adrenaline in my veins.

But it's not a long night at all. The next thing I know, my phone alarm is beeping at me. I sit up and, as usual, my blankets barely look disturbed but my hair is an absolute haystack. What a mystery. I look up at my poster. Only Edward knows the secrets of the night.

I can't wait another second and grab my computer from my bag next to my bed. My heart races in my throat for altogether way too long as my page loads (my parents seriously need to upgrade their wifi). I click through my site quickly. Everything looks perfect. Gorgeous. Fully working—damn it.

The questionnaire section is still just a jumble of alien script.

But that's okay. It's only 5:30 in the morning and technically I don't need it to work until 8 a.m.

Cal can do it.

Fred can do it.

The sister-dater is on the case.

If only he *were* the sister-dater.

I shower and take extra care with my morning routine, getting my hair and makeup just right. After all, I'm the most important part of my brand.

I carefully pull on my suit. When I first signed up for the expo, I spent a few frantic days combing through New York City consignment shops, convinced that hidden on a rack somewhere was a perfect vintage Dior pantsuit just waiting to fit like a glove. After many (obviously) fruitless searches, I just went to Ann Taylor like a normal person and bought a perfectly fine light gray pantsuit. Today I fancy it up with a colorful silk waistcoat underneath and some good jewelry and a pair of green heels that'll have me in traction by the end of the day.

I don't care. I look great. Honestly? I kind of look like Movie Vera. Cal was right. I need to channel her today. I'm going to kick ass and take names.

It's 6:30 now so I check my site again. I hold back a wince when it's still not fixed. That's okay. Cal is not going to let me down.

I head downstairs and try not to let my frustration show when both my parents are already in the kitchen. They're never up this early and I'd really

been counting on having a quick, contemplative breakfast before I head to the venue.

Instead my mom is cooking up a full fry while my dad dices up fruit for a salad and listens to NPR.

“Oh, BB! You’re up early! I was just about to go knock on your door.” My dad’s jaw is on the floor that his thirty-year-old daughter has managed to wake up on her own.

“Of course I’m awake. I have to be at the venue in twenty minutes.”

“Oh, do you have time for breakfast? If not I can just pack it up to go.” My heart softens as I watch my mother over the stove, her spatula balanced in the air as she waits for my answer. They woke up early to make me breakfast on my big day. They can be a lot to handle, but this is sweet.

“I can eat with you. I’ll just eat quick.” I take off my suit coat and the waistcoat so I don’t get any food on them. We all sit down to eat and I’m almost believing that we’ll make it out of this meal without undercutting my competence when my mother speaks.

“Vera, sweetie. Are you sure those heels are a good idea? Your feet’ll be killing you by tonight. I have some flats upstairs. Why don’t you run up and get them before you leave.”

“No, Mom. I don’t want to wear flats. I want to wear the heels.”

“But your feet. I really think—”

“My feet will hurt, but that’s fine. The heels are important for the outfit I chose.”

“Okay. All right. The flats will fit in my purse anyhow. If you change your mind, I’ll have them.”

“No!” I bring a hand down on the table and it makes both of my parents jump.

“BB!”

“Dad, I love you and I’ll always be your little girl, but maybe it’s time to start calling me Vera. Mom, so help me God if you bring those flats to the venue . . .” I gulp air, praying for calm. “If I needed backup flats, I would have packed them myself. And I don’t know what you’re planning, but honestly, it’s inappropriate for you to hang out at the venue all day. I know you’re just trying to be supportive, and I really want you to come and see my booth. But I don’t need you hovering all day. Talking to my potential customers and fixing my hair—”

“We wouldn’t do that!”

“Mom. Come on.”

“We . . . we just want to see you succeed, Vera.”

“Then stand back and watch! Because if you stop by the venue and check out my booth, you’ll see it! You’ll get a front row seat, in fact.”

“BB—erm—Vera, sweetie . . .”

“You don’t interject yourselves into Eliot’s affairs. So, maybe it’s time you extended the same courtesy to me.”

I stand and am about to walk away when I sag a little at the shoulder and look down. “Okay. It would have been awesome to march out after that, but I can’t. Look, I love you both so much. Everything that I am, that I have, I owe it all to you. To what good parents you are. But I can do this. On my own. I really can. So, thank you for breakfast. Thank you for coming out later today. Thank you for letting me stay here overnight. Thank you for wasting all that money on my nursing degree and never asking me to pay you back. I’ll never be able to thank you enough. But you don’t have to worry about me. I can do this, today. I really can. I have everything taken care of. From the booth to the business plan all the way down to my outfit choice. I have it all under control.”

I kiss them both on the cheek, grab my clothes, my bag, and a yogurt from the fridge and march out of the kitchen. Eliot stands in the hallway with a huge grin on his face.

He lifts his hand for a high five and it’s epic. I don’t shake my hand out afterward because that would diminish the coolness. Instead, I march straight out to my car and drive two blocks before I pull over and lean my forehead against the steering wheel.

My heart is thumping and I can already tell that my extra-strength deodorant was a good choice.

Movie Vera *does* kick ass.

I can’t believe I said all that to them.

I have no idea how it went over with my folks, but I guess I’ll find out when they show up at the expo today.

I grab my phone from the cupholder next to me and am already clicking into my recent calls, about to press on Cal’s name, when I stop myself. I want to tell him all about this. I want to hear his voice.

But it’s a little before seven in the morning. Either he’s crashed out after working all night or he’s still working on my site.

I pull up the mobile site on my phone and my heart sinks when the questionnaire page is still a mess.

That means he's still working.

I won't interrupt him.

I pull into the venue ten minutes later, park, and drag the rest of my stuff inside. The booth is the same shining perfection that it was last night and I am hit with a dizzying surge of confidence. I eat my yogurt, fix my clothes and makeup, and then do a quick circuit of the expo. The venue hasn't opened to customers yet but most of the vendors are already there, making finishing touches and chatting with one another. I stop and talk for a minute with a representative from a small vineyard in Maryland who is looking to expand his brand and he seems impressed by my Date in a Box elevator pitch. He takes my card and I refrain from asking if I can take a photo of him putting it in his wallet.

I've made my very first professional contact today! If that turns out to be a successful contact, then I might have already made up for the participation fee.

I practically float back to my booth. My phone vibrates with a text in my pocket and I pounce. *Please be Cal telling me the site is ready. Please be Cal telling me the site is ready. Please be—*

It's Paloma telling me that she's leaving the city and she should be at the expo in two hours.

When she gets here, I'll be able to leave the booth in her capable hands while I try to make more connects with other vendors. Which is, of course, half the reason I'm even here at this event.

My laptop is set up as part of my display so that anyone who is interested can fill out the questionnaire on the site and check out the kinds of packages I would design for them. I check the site at 7:38 and then at 7:56. The questionnaire is still bonkers both times.

Now I'm wishing that maybe I'd applied a fifth layer of that extra-strength deodorant. I tell myself it's okay if Cal doesn't have the site fixed exactly at 8 a.m. It's a Friday after all, very few attendees will actually be here this early on a—Oh, my gosh.

From my booth I have a view of the main doors of the expo center and when they open them at 8 on the button, at least thirty people pile inside.

I'm about to check the site again when a very short woman in very tall heels comes strolling up to my booth.

“Care package subscription service. Interesting.” She’s squinting at the lettering on the top of my booth. “I assume you send food and drink in these packages?”

“In most of them. But it depends on what kind of package the customer has signed up for.”

“Client, dear. No one wants to be a customer when they could be a client. It makes them feel high-end.”

“Oh. Um. Yes. Of course.” I feel about six inches tall, even though I have at least five inches on this force of nature in a three-piece suit. I bet it’s a vintage Dior.

“I’m Eleanor Kleinberg. I’m the head of Wernick’s—”

“Grocery and Wine. Yes! Hi, hello! I’d heard you’d be here but I didn’t think you’d be the first person I spoke to. Wow. Hi, I’m Vera Hoffman.”

Okay, admittedly I need to take it down a notch. But she seems pleased that I know who she is and pleased that I’m clearly stoked to meet her. We shake hands. Or rather, I attempt to shake her hand and she attempts to grind my bones into table salt. Wernick’s is a famous Upper West Side high-end grocery that’s expanded downtown and into Brooklyn and Queens. They also cater events. Their big orange W is on trucks all over the city. Eliot says their pastrami lox will make you believe in God. But as raw fish sandwiches aren’t exactly my bag, I can only vouch for their cheesecake. And yes. I can confirm that God will peekaboo you on every single bite.

Eleanor squints as she reads my satisfied customer blurbs. I hold my breath and she takes one step and then another until she is fully ensconced in my booth. “We’ve been toying with a package service like this. Recipe boxes, curated groceries, that sort of thing.”

“Smart. That way customers—er—*clients* can feel catered to while also being exposed to products they might not have naturally gravitated toward in-store.”

“Exactly.” Her eyes are obsidian dark and searching every inch of me and my booth. “You have a card, I assume.”

“Yes!” I pull one from my pocket and hand it to her. “I could show you how my service works, if you have a minute.”

She looks at her delicate gold watch, considers, and then nods. I resist a fist pump. I’m just ushering her toward my computer when I remember that six minutes ago my site still wasn’t working. There is a very real chance

that I'm about to show Eleanor Kleinberg that I very much do not have my shit together.

Which would be a royal shame, considering the fact that, for the most part, I very much *do* have my shit together. This faulty website is the last remnant of Vera Past. The one who slept through her SATs and, sure, let her car run out of batteries just the other day. But the Vera who stands in this booth looking polished and confident, that's the only Vera that Eleanor Kleinberg need know exists.

"I like your site." She's clicking through the About page and the testimonials. "Good colors."

I nod and laugh a little too nervously—if only she knew about my tumultuous love affair with that celery-green home page—and then there she is clicking closer and closer to the questionnaire. This is it. This is the moment. She follows the website's prompts to take the quiz that will tailor the service to her personal needs and then she clicks on the link to the questionnaire.

And the page goes white.

It's loading.

Please don't be alien script. Please don't be alien script.

It's still loading. It's still white.

Come on, Cal. Come on, Cal.

I'm praying with every fiber of my being to Cal Kantola. Computer god who holds the fate of my business in his hands. Please. Please. Please.

"I would just hit refresh real quick. The wifi in here can be slow." My voice is surprisingly calm considering the fact that there is a wildfire in my stomach.

She clicks the refresh button. This one is for all the marbles. The page goes white again and then . . .

There.

Sweet Cyber Mother of Everything Interwebs. HE DID IT.

There. There she is. My beautiful questionnaire. Functioning gorgeously, prompting Eleanor gently on to each question. I step back to give her a bit of privacy while she fills it out and I have to say, one more reason it was smart of me to wear these foot-pinching heels? The fact that they prevent me from breaking out into an Irish jig directly behind one of the most important business connects I may ever encounter.

If I opened my mouth, I'm positive that a Disneyesque song would just magically spring forth. Birds and squirrels will be inexplicably drawn toward my joy. In approximately ninety minutes, I will be marrying a prince of some kind. *That's* how good I feel right now.

"Interesting."

I turn back around to Eleanor, who's just finished the questionnaire, and try to tamp down my extremely unprofessional vibe.

"I like this set-up you have here. You're able to use the questionnaire to get to know your clients well enough that you can tailor their packages to their wants and needs while still being able to surprise them." She's tapping a manicured finger against her chin. I already know I'm going to practice her exact expression in the mirror later.

"That's the goal."

"Very interesting."

I'm in the throes of wondering whether or not "interesting" is a good thing when her hand is shooting out and once again, she's trying to teach my bones a lesson.

"Thank you for stopping to chat with me, Ms. Kleinberg."

"You're very welcome, Ms. Hoffman."

She's walking away now. Is there something else I should say? Should I have gotten her card?

"Enjoy the convention!"

She stops and turns, eyeing me once more with those obsidian eyes. She holds up my business card. "Talk soon."

I nearly swallow my tongue as she walks away. I watch her go and good lord, she couldn't look cooler. She's the Terminator. She's Miranda Priestly. She's calmly walking away as an entire building explodes behind her. She doesn't even flinch.

I just met my new idol.

And I'm pretty sure she wants to work with me.

Cal

My vision pixelates. I reach for the glass of water on the side table next to me. My hand greets nothing. Of course. I'm in my home office, not on my couch. There is no glass of water. I've had nothing to eat or drink for at least the last six hours.

I'm surprised I've even remembered to breathe. I ran into—count 'em—four unexpected issues and had to work faster and harder than I ever have before to get Vera's site done in time. There are currently five different computer screens staring at me. I'm wearing reading glasses as thick as fishtank glass.

I scrub my hands underneath the glasses and wait for my vision to clear enough to read the time. It's 8:02 in the morning. Two minutes after I promised I'd have the site finished. But there it is, functioning perfectly. Hopefully those two minutes didn't cost Vera anything precious.

Vera Hoffman.

Eliot's little sister.

The one he's been hinting would be my soulmate for years.

I've literally been nonstop working since she broke this news to me eight hours ago and I haven't had a second to process it.

Not to mention this is my second all-nighter in five days and I'm not as young as I used to be.

My vision pixelates again, but this time my stomach grumbles in concert.

My body has no idea what it needs.

Sleep. Food. Answers.

Probably in that order because I don't even think I can make it to the kitchen right now. I rise, joints cracking in places I didn't even know I had joints. I'm so grateful to leave my home office behind. I only work there in the direst of circumstances, preferring my couch above all else.

I see that Carla has already left for the day and I'm grateful. I definitely don't have it in me to chat with anyone. I feel a thousand years old. I'm to the door of my bedroom, considering whether or not I have the energy to shuck my jeans off, when I hear my phone ring back in the home office where I left it.

I know instantly who it is.

I turn on a dime, take the hallway in three sprinting bounds, almost decapitate Jule who appears out of nowhere and tries to scratch my pants off as I leap over him, and then I'm scrabbling for my phone, answering breathlessly.

"Vera?"

"Has anyone ever given you a Hollywood kiss before?"

"I . . . what?"

“I mean like where they bend you backward and your dress blows in the wind and your high heel pops in the air?”

“I’m gonna go with no. That has never happened to me before.”

“Well, you deserve one, Cal. You deserve a Hollywood kiss. I hope you win the lottery. I hope you run into your favorite rock star in the grocery store and they give you backstage passes just because you’re so freaking awesome. Because you are, Cal. You are the BEST.”

“I’m guessing you’ve discovered that your site is working.”

“Like a charm. And right at the perfect second. The most important business contact of my natural-born life just filled out the questionnaire and I’m pretty sure she was impressed. She took my card and told me she’d talk to me soon about working with her.”

“Vera, that’s *incredible*.”

“I’m over the moon, Cal. I’m beyond the moon. I’m—I’m—I’m—”

“Deep breaths, Vera.”

“Right. Breathing. Important.”

“I’m so glad the site is working. I’m just sorry it had to be this close to the wire. I wish it had never malfunctioned at all.”

“I don’t!”

“What do you mean?”

“If my site hadn’t malfunctioned then I wouldn’t have had to call the customer service line.”

“Right. And we’d have never met.”

“Unless I finally succumbed to Eliot’s pestering.”

“Vera—”

“Cal, maybe it’s the adrenaline—because honestly I feel like my heart is pumping rocket fuel—but I have to tell you something.”

“Oh. Okay. Shoot.”

“Remember how I said that I didn’t want to tell you that my brother wanted to set me up with Fred? Back when you were just Cal and I thought Fred was a nerdy flautist?”

“Yes. I remember. And for the record I *am* a nerdy flautist.”

“Well, I said that I didn’t want to tell you because Fred was your boss’s boss’s boss and that would have just been awkward.”

“Right.”

“There was another reason I didn’t want to tell you that Eliot was trying to set me up.”

“Okay . . .”

“I didn’t want to tell you about Fred because I wanted to make sure I seemed unattached.”

“Oh.”

“Like, *completely* unattached.”

“Vera—”

“And I don’t know what your deal is. I know you live with someone. A woman. I heard her on the line that first night. But Eliot mentioned . . . Anyway. It doesn’t really matter. He doesn’t know everything, despite what he may think. If you’re with someone who makes sure there’s leftovers for you in the fridge, that’s great, really it is. I want you to be happy, Cal. Because I think you’re great. The greatest. I . . . wow. So many words I’m saying. I just wanted you to know how I feel. That I think you’re the best person I’ve met in a really long time. And that I am currently completely unattached. So. Okay. Do with that what you will.”

“. . . Vera, I—”

“Crap! There’s more people coming to my booth. I have to go. I really have to go. Bye, Cal!”

“Bye, Vera.”

Cal

I can’t feel my legs.

It might be the exhaustion.

But more likely it’s the fact that I’m pretty sure the person I have a debilitating crush on just flat out told me that she likes me and that she’s single.

I flop backwards and it’s a good thing I wind up lying on my bed because I don’t even remember walking back into my bedroom.

My body tries to coax me into sleep but my mind fights it. I can’t believe this is happening. This is something that happens to Movie Cal. Not Real-Life Cal. Rock-collecting Cal. Flautist Frederik.

I’d call her back right this second if she wasn’t in the middle of her expo. The expo that might make or break her career. It will only last until dinnertime. I can wait that long.

Even though it gives me spiders in my shorts to think that she’s out there floating in the wind, thinking she just declared her feelings for a guy with a

girlfriend.

I pull out my phone and draft a quick text.

It's blurry because I'm quickly expiring from fatigue so I grab my reading glasses from the nightstand and read the text back to myself.

I don't have a girlfriend. I like you.

I sound like a serial killer.

I delete the text. My declarations can wait. I won't do anything that could screw with her mojo right now. There's too much at stake for her.

But I wish there were something I could do to let her know that I'm thinking about her. Something that will go on the record as me having responded to her right away without actually distracting her from the expo.

The idea hits me like a slap across my face but I have to fight with my body for a full ten seconds before my arms and legs allow me to get up from the bed.

There's one more thing I have to do before I crash.

Chapter Thirteen

Friday Afternoon

Vera

The day is a tornado.

And not just because every time I turn around there are more people in my booth, asking questions, filling out the questionnaire, handing me business cards, taking mine.

But also because I hauled off and blurted out my feelings for Cal.

I blame Eleanor Kleinberg for that one.

It's six hours later and I still can't believe I did it.

Apparently a little bit of professional success goes to my head like champagne. I was riding so high that, frankly, I'm just glad I didn't propose to the man.

Paloma arrived around 10:30, took one look at me and shoved me out of the booth. She demanded I get a cup of herbal tea and do some yoga breathing.

Her remedy helped enough for me to start circulating around the expo, talking with other vendors. I'm just stepping back into the booth and sending Paloma off for lunch when two new booth-gazers appear in my peripheral vision. I turn to them and I feel my professional smile slip when I realize it's my parents standing there.

They look nervous to see me.

My mother is playing with the strap of her purse and my father is having trouble deciding whether to put his hands on his hips or in his pockets. He apparently decides that one of each is best and then promptly looks like he'd rather just chop his arms off altogether.

"Hi."

“Oh, *Vera*.” My mother is rushing forward, her nervous spell broken by the sound of my voice. “Your booth is lovely. And so professional. Not that that is a surprise! You’ve obviously worked so hard on it.”

She takes my hands and then drops them with a glance around. I can practically read her mind. Her natural instincts are to reach up and fix my hair right now, maybe straighten my blouse. A metaphorical pat on the head. But after my speech in the kitchen this morning, she’s utterly terrified of undermining me in any way at all. Which means that her purse is twisting in her hands a mile a minute. She might end up worrying the strap in two if she’s not careful.

It breaks my heart. I wanted them to treat me with respect. Not *fear*.

I open my arms for a hug and she practically launches herself toward me.

“I’m glad you’re here, Mom.”

“Oh, *Vera*, we’re so sorry. We’re so, so sorry.”

“We are.” My dad is peeking out from behind my mom, a grimace on his face. “We really are.”

I unhand my mom and hug my dad.

“I’m sorry too, you guys. For not speaking up earlier. I think I could’ve saved us all a lot of heartbreak if I’d just ’fessed up a couple of years ago and told you you were annoying the crap out of me.”

“*Vera*.” My mother looks torn between hysterical laughter and hysterical tears. She’s glancing around to make sure no one heard me say *crap*. I feel a swell of love for her and hug her again.

“Your parents are supposed to annoy the crap out of you at least a little.” My dad has officially gotten comfortable enough to put both hands in his pockets. “That’s how you know we care.”

“I never once questioned that you care. Really, I didn’t. I just think that sometimes your constant concern ends up showing me how little you think of my ability to get stuff done. You never worry about whether or not Eliot will make it to his professional engagements on time.”

“Yes, I do!” My mother’s cheeks are pink as she lowers her voice a touch. “I worry about both of you *constantly*. Whether you’re getting enough rest, exercise, if you’re eating well. I worry about who you’re dating and if you’re wearing a seatbelt. I certainly worry about your careers. Whether you’re managing them well and whether they’re fulfilling you. But a few years ago Eliot firmly instructed your father and me to butt out of that part of his life and we—we’ve respected that, haven’t we, Neil?”

“Of course. We didn’t want to hold your hand through life *forever*, Vera. But for as long as it seemed like you needed us, we were gonna be there.”

For the second time that day, prospective clients interrupt one of the most important conversations of my life. I’m misty-eyed and staring at my parents and wondering if some part of me maybe *did* need all that well-intentioned nagging to get to this moment, in this booth that I designed and set up and paid for. Would I have ever parlayed with Eleanor Kleinberg if I hadn’t been determined to prove to my parents—and myself—that I could do this?

My father nods meaningfully toward the two women sidling up to the display care packages, and I take a quick breath, getting myself prepared to talk them up.

“Thank you, Ms. Hoffman. We will certainly be in touch about doing business with you.” My mother sounds both freakishly mechanical and insanely proud of herself for coming up with this ruse. She elbows my dad out of the booth and then, like two people who truly did not coordinate on this plan, he awkwardly walks one way and she walks another.

“*Neil!*” Her whisper is a hiss that is actually much more attention-grabbing than if she’d just called to him, but he doesn’t hear her anyway and she’s forced to scamper after him.

I force down my laughter, feel another swell of love for them, and turn my attention to the two people in my booth.

Hours later, Paloma is bodily shoving me out of the booth again, insisting I grab a bite to eat. I haven’t seen my parents again, but they texted to say that they were proud. For the first time in a long time, the words “we’re so proud of you” actually feel good.

Has anyone ever been as scrambled up as I am right now? Professionally, I’m dancing on the ceiling. Emotionally, I can’t tell if I’m waterskiing or just getting dragged behind the boat. Underlying everything today, even that conversation with my parents, is the constant thrum of Cal.

I said what I said. He’s a smart man. He understands. Either Eliot is confused and Cal really does have a girlfriend. Or Eliot was right. And Cal is single and crushing on someone. And maybe that someone is me. And right now, on this very Friday afternoon, Cal is single and I’m single and—

“Are you okay, lady?” The kid behind the food stand I’m ordering from is looking at me like I might tear the seams of my Ann Taylor suit as I shift

into a werewolf at any second. Honestly, I'm also a little scared that might happen.

"Right! Food! Yes."

I get a grilled cheese and fries and suddenly realize I'm absolutely ravenous. I make a conscious effort not to double-fist the sandwich. There are potential clients milling around who don't need to see me snarf a trough of cheese and grease.

I channel Eleanor Kleinberg. To keep myself focused, I check my email for orders from the website. I grin as I see the two orders that I knew I'd see there. Because I was standing next to the people when they filled out the questionnaire and made the order request. One was for a Twentieth Anniversary in a Box and the other was for a Seder in a Box. Both are new packages for me and I couldn't be happier.

I look again though and realize there's a request for a third order there. One that came in at 8:18 a.m.

It's. From. Cal.

I swear time slows for a moment. I'm in a snow globe with no snow. Everything frozen except for my heart.

My hand trembles as I click into the order.

Oh, boy. Oh, boy. Oh, boy.

It's an order request for a First Date in a Box.

I read those words three times before my brain truly understands them. This is not any old date in a box. This is a **FIRST** date in a box. That's something you only get to do once. With someone new. Someone you've never dated before.

There is no misunderstanding this.

In the additional info section of the request he's typed in, "Not actually expecting you to design your own first date. Just wanted to put the request in. x Cal/Fred."

First date. First date. First date. The words beat like a drum in my over-excited heart. It'll be a holy miracle if I make it out of this weekend without permanent damage to my circulatory system.

If he were here in person I'd jump straight into his arms.

Actually, if he were here in person I wouldn't even know who he was because I've never seen this man's face in my life.

Before I can think twice I open up my phone to his text thread.

I got your order request.

He texts back immediately.

Wanna call me when you get off tonight?

Yes. I'll call around ten.

I might sound calm and cool over text, but in reality I'm hyperventilating into my fry basket.

The alarm chirps on my phone and I realize that this is not the time nor the place for an emotional crisis, even an extremely positive one. I have to get back to my booth. My lovely booth with its perfectly functioning website.

If my life really were a romcom, I'd be too flustered to finish my meal. But I'm a real, human woman with real, human organs that require fuel to function so I finish off my food fast enough to make a bulldog proud and do a quick touch-up in the restroom.

The rest of the afternoon is a pastiche of a Van Gogh painting. Up close, everything is a swirl of color and emotion. From a distance, at the end of the day, as I watch the security guards lock the doors, I can see quite clearly what this was: an incredibly successful day.

My pockets are bulging with business cards. My email is bursting with new orders. I have vendors interested in partnering with me, storefronts willing to offer discounts on my services to their customers, and even a college kid who asked if she could apply to be my first ever employee.

Unfortunately, my mother was, indeed, right. If they could, my feet would be screaming obscenities at me in these heels. But I don't care.

I quickly close up my booth and practically run to my car. I'm tempted to call Cal from the road but part of me is scared I would just fly my car into the sky à la *Grease*. I drive to my parents' house, glad that I decided to stay there and not drive all the way back to Brooklyn.

My parents are already in bed when I get there but my mother's left a covered bowl of leftovers in the microwave. It's only when I peek down the hall at Eliot's darkened, open doorway that I realize that he's not here and I didn't see him at the expo all day.

I bring up my texts and sure enough I missed one from him. It's a photo. A selfie. He's standing in front of my booth, grinning, flashing a thumbs up, and in the background I can see myself speaking with a man who ended up wanting to talk about me putting his artisanal chocolate in my packages. I grin as I look at the picture. Both because Eliot looks so unbelievably proud of me, but also because I look so competent in this candid I hadn't known

was being taken. All day I was internally freaking out for a million reasons. But I look calm and professional in this photo.

Eliot obviously hadn't wanted to interrupt me but wanted to show that he'd shown up and reveled in my success. I quickly change this photo to his contact photo. It's an artifact of his support and I couldn't love it more.

It's 9:35 and I told Cal that I'd be calling in twenty-five minutes so I make quick work of dinner and a shower, trying to calm myself down in increments. But it's all shot to hell when I dive between the sheets of my childhood bed. Edward Cullen is staring down at me and it only increases this teenagery racing in my gut. *I'm going to talk to the boy I like on the phone.*

I allow myself a single bed-stomping pillow scream before I bring up his contact info on my phone. The phone barely rings once before he answers.

"I'm single."

"Oh. Hi, Cal."

"Hi. Yes. Hello. Look, I know that's really abrupt. And I really want to hear every single detail of the expo. But you and I are famous for getting massively sidetracked in these conversations and then we hang up before I can say all the things I meant to say so I'm starting there. I'm single and I have been for a few years. And I've been pretty content with that until recently. Very recently."

"Um."

"The woman you heard on the line that first night is Carla Shimer. She's sixty-three years old. And not that that precludes a romantic relationship. I mean, I don't have anything against intergenerational relationships. But Carla is . . . not . . . *that*. She's one of my mom's very best friends. Like an aunt to me. I actually called her Aunt Carla until about ten years ago. She's been around forever. But she broke her foot a few months ago and lives in a walk-up so I offered her the spare room at my place so that she could use the elevator here while she recovers. She'll only be living here a few more weeks."

"That's so sweet."

"It's the decent thing to do. She's not my girlfriend. There's no girlfriend."

"That's . . . good."

"God, Vera. You've got one of those smiles that's so bright I can actually *hear* it through the phone."

“I can hear yours, too.”

“Because I’m so relieved. About the website. About the expo. About Carla. I just had to make it to Friday without losing you. And here we are.”

“You were afraid you were gonna lose me?”

“Absolutely. A million things could have gone wrong. And I guessed that you thought Carla was my live-in girlfriend from how fast you hung up that night.”

“Why didn’t you clear it up?”

“Well, because the only reason to clear it up was if I was interested in you. And I really didn’t want you to think I was hitting on you when I held the fate of your website in my hands. My worst nightmare was you thinking I was holding your website hostage in exchange for a date.”

“Cal . . . I . . . That’s . . .”

“Just to be clear now, Vera, I’m interested in you. Like so interested in you.”

“Me too, Fred.”

“Yeesh.”

“Yikes. Yeah, wow. I thought I’d try it out just to see but, yeah. No. That was just awkward.”

“Can’t believe Eliot was right this whole time. For years he’s been pestering me about meeting his sister.”

“He’s going to be insufferable when we tell him we’re dating.”

“ . . . ”

“Cal? You there?”

“So, there’s a ‘we’?”

“I mean . . . I thought . . . Yes?”

“That’s good. That’s really good.”

“It’s so nice to talk to you and have both of us know everything.”

“Well, not *everything*.”

“What do you mean? Cal, we’ve logged dozens of hours on the phone this week, what could you possibly not know yet?”

“You never told me who’s on your shower curtain.”

“Oh, God. We’re here already. No matter what, you still have to go on a date with me, okay? You can’t break up with me before we even get started.”

“Pinky promise. Who is it?”

“It’s Edward Cullen.”

“The *Twilight* guy?”

“Yeah. I was kind of obsessed in high school and I had all these posters of him and then it sort of became a good luck charm for me to have him in whatever apartment I was living in. And when I was buying stuff for the place I’m in now, I saw the shower curtain and now every morning I shower with Edward.”

“Ha. Yes. Didn’t have you pegged for a Twihard.”

“It’s the dorkiest thing ever. I know this.”

“No way! The *Twilight* fandom is really cool. They’re devoted but self-deprecating and funny.”

“You really don’t think it’s pathetic?”

“No way! It’s no dorkier than other fandoms. People just hate on *Twilight* because it’s culturally acceptable to hate on the things that teenage girls like. If the *Twilight* movies were remade on, like, HBO or Showtime as gritty dramas, suddenly they’d be getting self-serious write-ups in the *New York Times*. Everyone would change their tune.”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Turn all the things I think are negatives into positives?”

“I didn’t realize I was doing that.”

“That’s because it comes naturally to you. You’ve gotta be the sunniest person I’ve ever met.”

“That’s exactly how I think of you.”

“Stop it! I can’t take any more happiness today. I’m at capacity! I’ll explode!”

“I take it that means the expo went well?”

“Cal, it was *unbelievable*. Even if tomorrow every single thing goes wrong and not a single person stops by my booth, this was still worth every modicum of time and energy. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Like you knocked it out of the park?”

“Is it blowing my own horn to agree with you? I don’t care. I absolutely *knocked it out of the park*. I’ve never been so proud of myself before in my life. This feels better than running that marathon I quit.”

“I’m so happy for you, Vera. My main goal this week was for you to feel proud of yourself after the expo.”

“Cal?”

“Hm?”

“ . . . Will you come tomorrow?”

“To the expo?”

“I mean, I know it’s all the way in Jersey. And that, you know, we haven’t really met each other yet. And—”

“Sorry, I should have started out by saying yes. Absolutely. One hundred percent. I would love to come.”

“Okay.”

“What’s happening to your voice?”

“I’m trying as hard as I can to hold in a squee.”

“Ha. Okay. Do you need me to put the phone down for a second?”

“Would you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay, Cal! All’s clear! You can come back!”

“What time should I come to the expo?”

“Well, if you came at the end, then maybe you could help me pack up my booth and then I could drive us back into the city? I mean, I know that’s not the most romantic first date but—”

“It’s perfect. And I really mean that. A first date where we just sit at a table and watch each other eat is my nightmare. I’ll be a lot less likely to spill soup in my pants if I have something to do like help you take down your booth.”

“Soup *in* your pants?”

“I only used it as an example because it’s literally happened before. Don’t worry, it was gazpacho.”

“I can formally promise there will be absolutely no gazpacho on our first date.”

“I bet you’re exhausted, huh?”

“No, but I think it’s one of those things where as soon as I close my eyes I’m going to be asleep.”

“You wanna hit the hay, then? You’ve got another long day tomorrow.”

“You’re probably right.”

“It’s nice to know that when we hang up, it won’t be the last time we ever talk to each other.”

“I hated hanging up with you this week. Every time.”

“Me too.”

“Frederik Kantola. Who’d a thunk it.”

“Vera Hoffman. Coulda dated you years ago if I’d succumbed to Eliot.”

“I dunno. I think it’s happening right on time. Bye, Cal.”

“Bye, Vera.”

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday

Cal

By the grace of God, I fall asleep not long after I hang up with Vera. I'd had so much buzzing adrenaline after our conversation I'd wondered if I needed to go on a run to burn it off. I'd ended up just deliberating with my bedroom ceiling for a little longer and now I'm blinking awake in the morning light. I feel rested, but also a little like every single one of my cells is turning in 360-degree circles.

Vera Hoffman, owner of the most brain-fryingly brilliant smile I've ever seen, has feelings for me. And she wants me to come to Jersey to bask in her success with her. And she wants to drive home with me. Considering she's a person who routinely helps other people sweep their dates off their feet, taking Vera on a date is something I'd begun to stress about yesterday. But as usual, she makes the hard stuff easy.

I think again about something she asked me on Thursday night. About why I couldn't follow Movie Cal's lead and be dead-on with my dad. At the time, I felt like there was way too much history there for me to ever do something like that. It would be too hard. But maybe I need to trust Vera on this one.

Because if there's anything the last twenty-four hours has taught me, it's that the line between Movie Cal and Real-Life Cal has never been blurrier.

I eye my phone on the nightstand for a long minute and then get out of bed. Five minutes later, I'm back, toothbrush in my mouth, giving my phone the stink-eye. My phone finds its way into my pocket and then it's staring me down across the countertop while I drink weak coffee and work my way through a bowl of cereal.

Cal pre-Vera would have had no problem telling my phone to shove it where the sun don't shine. Cal post-Vera thinks my phone might have a point.

I need to call my dad.

"Cal?"

"Dad."

"Is everything all right?" His voice is clear as a bell and that annoys me almost as much as the question does. It takes half a second for my brain to switch over into Finnish for this conversation.

"You're wondering why I'm calling you unexpectedly?"

"You just wanted to chat?" he asks.

I pause because I'm standing on the edge of the deep end and I truly don't know for sure if I can swim. I think of Vera. I think of Movie Cal. I jump. "I saw you on Ridge Boulevard on Thursday night."

"..."

"I know you're in the States," I continue.

"Cal..."

"And didn't tell me."

"I—"

I cut him off because it's become very clear to me that there's nothing he could say that's more important than what I have to say. I didn't call him to hear explanations or excuses. I called him to tell him exactly how I feel right now.

"You know, I've spent the last day really hoping there's some miraculous excuse. Some perfect reason that makes it so you not telling me you're here *isn't* cruel. But then it hit me. I really don't care. Even if there is a great reason, I don't *have* to care about it. Because I'm allowed to be really fucking hurt by this, Dad. I'm allowed to ask you why the hell you thought it was okay to do something like this. I'm allowed to be so goddamn angry I can't see straight."

"Yes. You're allowed to do all that," he says after a beat.

"..."

"..."

"That's all you're going to say?" I demand.

"I didn't get the impression you wanted an explanation."

"Dad."

“It’s Laura,” he says after a second. “She’s not doing well. She had a cancer scare about six months ago and needed support. She’s doing all right physically, but her emotional health is . . . rocky.”

“Are you—Jesus Christ—tell me you haven’t been here for six months.”

“No! No. I visited her once then, when she was getting her results back from the doctor, and then again just this last week.”

“What were you doing in Bay Ridge, then? Is she not up in Greenpoint anymore?”

“I . . . actually own that apartment on Ridge Boulevard. I bought it when I was living in New York, back when you were a boy. I thought it would be a good investment, and it was so close to you and your mother. When she ran into that health trouble, I let her move in.”

“Why wouldn’t you *tell* me any of this?”

He sighs. “Everything with you and Laura was always so . . . bad. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Are you back together?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know, Frederik,” he says.

“Dad, I’m not a kid anymore. I can handle my feelings. My life. I wouldn’t throw a temper tantrum if you decide to date someone. Especially if it’s Laura. Who you’ve obviously had feelings for for a very long time. I can’t believe you didn’t give me the benefit of the doubt on this.” I’m pacing back and forth in my kitchen but I’m seeing nothing. I wonder where he is and what he’s doing at this very second, but I won’t ask.

“You’ve never liked Laura,” he says. “I never understood why.”

“Oh, God.” I throw my free hand in the air in exasperation. “I didn’t like Laura because I was a *teenager*. And because she wasn’t Mom. And because right when I was about to have both of my parents living in one country, she agreed to move to Finland with you. And then not only did I have to keep going back and forth, whenever I was there, she was there too. I got even less of you than I had before.”

“Cal . . .”

“And now, as soon as she’s back in your life, you’re coming all the way to the States without even bothering to tell me. I’m not crazy when I say that having her around means you don’t consider my feelings as much.”

“That’s not—dammit.” He’s pausing, grappling for words. This actually might be getting through to him.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“About some of it.”

“Which parts?” I demand.

“I don’t know. Maybe all of it. What do you want from me?”

“An apology would be a great place to start.”

“Do you understand my points at all?” he asks.

“Dad.”

“Fine. I really am sorry, Cal. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was trying to spare you.”

“I . . . guess I can see that,” I concede after a beat. “But I’d rather not be spared from things like this. I’d rather know.”

“I’m on my way back to Finland on Tuesday.”

“Is that your way of asking if I want to see you before you go?”

“You . . . could come by the house.”

“Actually, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I’m guessing that you and Laura aren’t the only ones living there right now?”

“Michael’s there too.”

“Could’ve guessed,” I say with a sigh. “I take it you’ve mentioned at some point that I have a cat?”

“I think it came up. Why?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s anonymously extorting me for money. Over email. Threatening my cat if I don’t comply.”

“*What?*” My dad is truly, utterly shocked and part of me is relieved that his surprise is so palpable. At least he didn’t know about this.

“Five thousand dollars. Any idea what he needs it for?”

“Yeah,” he growls. “He wants to get involved in this business. It’s obviously a pyramid scheme. I said I wouldn’t give him the money.”

“He says I owe him the money for what I did.”

“That’s . . . probably my fault. When I refused to give him the money I said that I wasn’t his stepfather anymore.”

“And he thinks I’m the reason you and Laura got divorced.”

“Yeah.”

“That was a nasty thing to say to him, Dad,” I tell him.

“I know. It’s part of the reason I’m not sure if me and Laura will get back together or not. Michael hates me.”

“I . . . don’t envy you.”

“Ha. Guess I deserve that.”

“Tell Michael to cut it out with this email thing. But if he wants a job he can send me his resumé and I’ll see if I can find something for him at Curio.”

“You’re a good boy, Cal,” he says.

“I know. I’ll call you about seeing you on Monday, maybe.”

“All right.”

“Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, Cal.”

I hang up the call and drop my head between my knees. There were a dozen different times in that conversation that my muscle memory had me wanting to smooth things over. To tell my dad that it was okay. That I understood.

I’m so freaking glad I didn’t.

This is so much better.

It feels strange, this shift in our relationship. Like a coat I’ve tried on a million times suddenly fits differently. I can’t be sure if it’s good or bad yet.

But that’s okay. I don’t have to know right away.

Suddenly, I can’t wait to tell Vera. To hear what she has to say. I’m positive she’ll have a hundred points and thoughts and ideas I would’ve never thought of in a hundred years.

I’d call her but the expo started an hour ago. All there is to do is buy my train ticket out to Jersey, and get ready to finally meet her.

Vera

If I could go back to two days ago and give myself a big kiss for the way I packed for the expo, I would. Saturday morning, I’m feeling pretty great when I slip into my high-waisted trousers and a dark blue silk blouse. The heels I’ll be wearing for a second day in a row, and even though my feet are already groaning when I put them on in the morning, I still feel pretty badass.

The expo starts slowly compared to yesterday. And though it picks up a lot by midday, it never quite reaches the fever pitch it did the day before. I called Paloma early this morning to tell her she didn’t need to come out

because I'd already talked to all the vendors and wouldn't need to leave the booth besides a quick bite to eat for lunch.

It's still thrilling and fun and exciting, but I don't make nearly as many connections today as I did yesterday. Which is totally okay, yesterday was intense. The expo closes at 8 tonight and Cal is set to get here at 7:45. That way he'll get to see the booth in all its glory, but hopefully I won't have to balance interacting with prospective clients and meeting Cal for the first time.

By 7 my teeth are chattering with nerves. I bum a piece of gum from the kombucha vendor next door even though I know chewing gum looks unprofessional. I don't care. I'm starting to crawl out of my skin. By 7:30 the crowds have thinned and a lot of the vendors have started closing up shop. There's chatter all around about how strangely low key the last day of the expo was but I couldn't care less. In fact, I'm beyond relieved there's not hordes of people for Cal to fight through.

I'm ridiculously nervous that I won't recognize him. Which, like, of course I won't considering I have no idea what he looks like. For the first time, I'm really, truly starting to wonder. Before, it was an idle curiosity. Now it's a burning, insatiable need to know.

I've never had a specific type of person that I'm attracted to. And generally, if someone has a nice personality, the more I get to know them the more I'm attracted to them, no matter what they look like. So, I'm not nervous about being attracted to Cal. I already know that he has the most wonderful personality of any man I've met in so long.

It's 7:40 now and I'm standing in the area in front of my booth, looking one way and then the other, making eye contact with the attendees still milling around. None of them give me any spark of recognition. They are definitely not Cal.

My phone rings in my pocket and I jolt, scrambling for it and scampering back into the safety of my booth. It's Cal.

"Hi, Cal!"

"Hey."

"Are you here?"

"Yup. I'm standing right outside the entrance."

"Wow. Oh, my gosh. Okay, once you come through the entrance just look to the left about forty feet and you'll see my booth next to the kombucha stand. You'll know it's mine because I'll be standing in the middle of it."

“Do you have people in your booth right now?”

“Nope. It’s actually been pretty empty all day.”

“I’m not interrupting?”

“Nope.”

“So . . . I should just . . . come in?”

“Definitely. Post haste. I’m gonna keel over from nerves if you don’t. Wait! Let me spit my gum out.”

“We’re really about to meet.”

“We’ve already met, in my opinion, Cal. There are not very many people who know me the way you do.”

“I feel the same way. Okay. I’m coming in. Oh, jeez. A big group just cut in front of me.”

“Of course! There’s, like, nobody at the expo all day and then right when I’m about to see you for the first time they all crowd in.”

“I’m inside.”

“Where? I don’t . . . *oh*. Wow.”

“Wow? What does ‘wow’ mean? I don’t see your booth.”

“On your left. Your other left. I’m waving.”

“I don’t . . . wow.”

“What does ‘wow’ mean?”

“So, should I . . . come over there?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, here I come.”

“Tall.”

“Hm?”

“Remember when I guessed you were forty, tall, and bearded? And you said that I got one out of three?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Well, it was tall. That was the one.”

“Yup.”

“And it’s sable brown, for the record. Your hair. But I can’t tell with the eyes yet. Oh, gosh, you’re getting close awfully fast.”

“Should I slow down?”

“No!”

“You’re tall too.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just wearing skyscrapers on my feet. My mother said not to wear them but here I am. Wearing them. I’m gonna stop talking

now.”

“No, Vera. Don’t stop talking. I pretty much never want you to stop talking.”

“Well, um, here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“Should we hang up now?”

“Probably.”

“Hi, Cal.”

“Hi, Vera.”

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