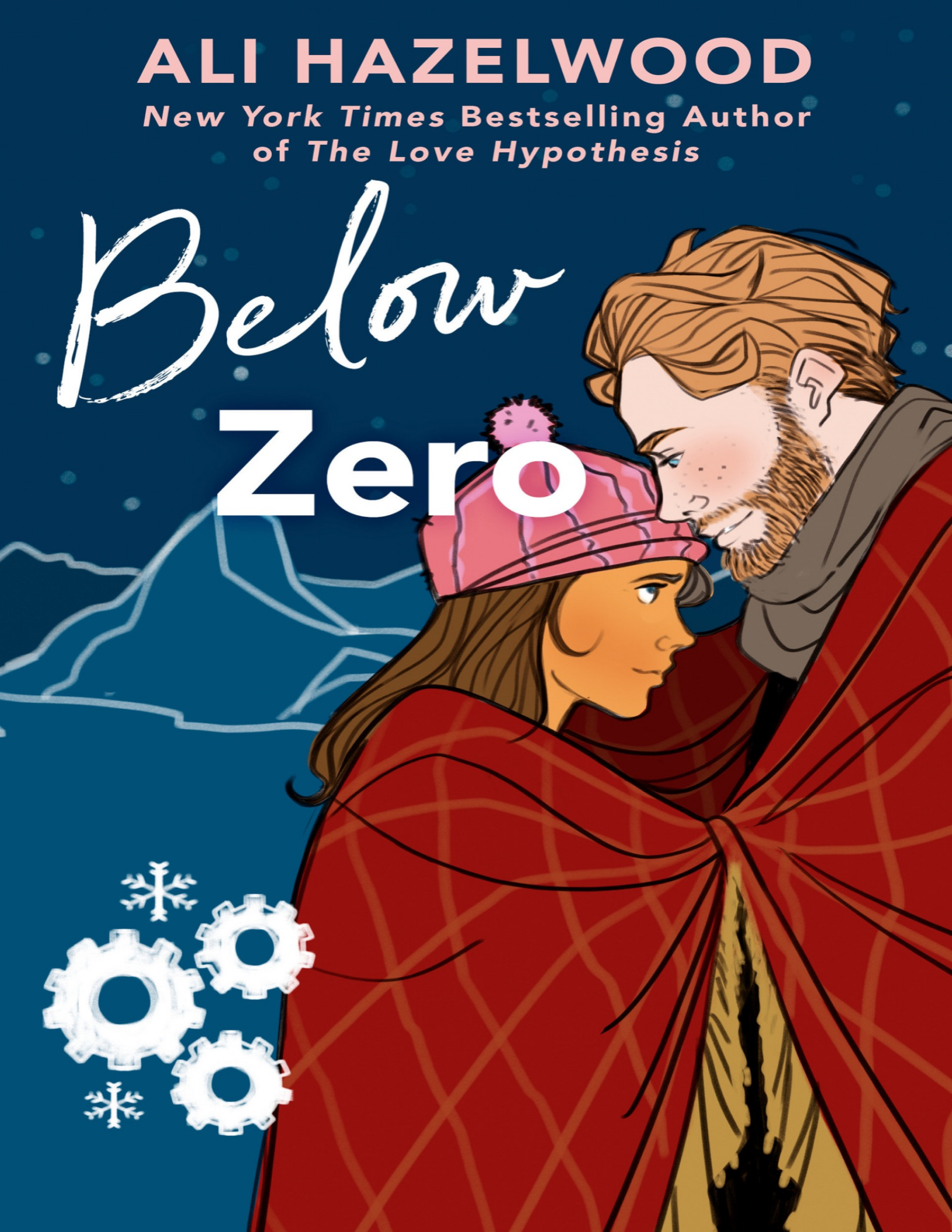
ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Love Hypothesis*

Below Zero



PRAISE FOR

The Love Hypothesis

"Contemporary romance's unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book."

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren

"Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*."

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana Zapata

"This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn't put it down. Highly recommended!"

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica Clare

"A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf."

—Elizabeth Everett, author of *A Lady's Formula for Love*

"Smart, witty dialogue and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won't be able to put down."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught

shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

BookSharekh.com

Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

BookSharekh.com

Below Zero

Ali Hazelwood

JOVE
NEW YORK
BookSharekh.com

A JOVE BOOK
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2022 by Ali Hazelwood
Excerpt from *Love on the Brain* copyright © 2021 by Ali Hazelwood
Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

A JOVE BOOK, BERKLEY, and the BERKLEY & B colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Ebook ISBN: 9780593437834

Jove audio edition: April 2022
Jove ebook edition: July 2022

Cover illustration by lilithsaur
Adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

pid_prh_6.0_140348893_c0_r0

BookSharekh.com

Contents

Cover
Praise for The Love Hypothesis
Titles by Ali Hazelwood
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Epilogue

Excerpt from Love on the Brain
About the Author

BookSharekh.com

For Shep and Celia. Still with no polar bears, but with lots of love.

BookSharekh.com

Prologue

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

I dream of an ocean.

Not the Arctic, though. Not the one right here in Norway, with its close-packed, frothy waves constantly crashing against the coasts of the Svalbard archipelago. It's perhaps a bit unfair of me: the Barents Sea is perfectly worth dreaming of. So are its floating icebergs and inhospitable permafrost shores. All around me there is nothing but stark, cerulean beauty, and if this is the place where I die, alone and shivering and bruised and pretty damn hungry . . . well, I have no reason to bitch.

After all, blue was always my favorite color.

And yet, the dreams seem to disagree. I lie here, in my half-awake, half-unconscious state. I feel my body yield precious degrees of heat. I watch the ultraviolet morning light reach inside the crevasse that trapped me hours ago, and the only ocean I can dream of is the one on Mars.

"Dr. Arroyo? Can you hear me?"

I mean, this entire thing is almost laughable. I am a NASA scientist. I have a doctorate in aerospace engineering and several publications in the field of planetary geology. At any given time, my brain is a jumbled maelstrom of stray thoughts on massive volcanism, crystal fluid dynamics, and the exact kind of anti-radiation equipment one would need to start a medium-size human colony on Kepler-452b. I promise I'm not being conceited when I say that I know pretty much all there is to know about Mars. Including the fact that there are no oceans on it, and the idea that there ever were is highly controversial among scientists.

So, yeah. My near-death dreams are ridiculous *and* scientifically inaccurate. I would laugh about it, but I have a sprained ankle and I'm approximately ten feet below the ground. It seems better to just save my energy for what's to come. I never really believed in an afterlife, but who knows? Better hedge my bets.

"Dr. Arroyo, do you copy?"

The problem is, it calls to me, this nonexistent ocean on Mars. I feel the pull of it deep inside my belly, and it warms me even here, at the icy tip of the world. Its turquoise waters and rust-tinted coastlines are approximately 200 million kilometers from the place where I'll die and rot, but I cannot shake the feeling that they want me closer. There is an ocean, a network of gullies, an entire giant planet full of iron oxide, and they're all calling to me. Asking me to give up. Lean in. Let go.

"Dr. Arroyo."

And then there are the voices. Random, improbable voices from my past. Well, okay: *a* voice. It's always the same, deep and rumbling, with no discernible accent and well-pronounced consonants. I don't really mind it, I must say. I'm not sure why my brain has decided to impose it on me just now, considering that it belongs to someone who doesn't like me much—someone I might like even less—but it's a pretty good voice. A+. Worth listening to in a death's door situation. Even though Ian Floyd was the one who never wanted me to come here to Svalbard in the first place. Even though the last time we were together he was stubborn, and unkind, and unreasonable, and now he seems to sound only . . .

"Hannah."

Close. Is this really Ian Floyd? Sounding *close*?

Impossible. My brain has frozen into stupidity. It must really be all over for me. My time has come, the end is nigh, and—

"Hannah. I'm coming for you."

My eyes spring open. I'm not dreaming anymore.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 1

Johnson Space Center, Houston, U.S.
One year ago

On my very first day at NASA, at some point between the HR intake and a tour of the Electromagnetic Compliance Studies building, some overzealous newly hired engineer turns to the rest of us and asks, “Don’t you feel like your entire life has led you to this moment? Like you were *meant* to be here?”

Aside from Eager Beaver, there are fourteen of us starting today. Fourteen of us fresh out of top-five graduate programs, and prestigious internships, and CV-beefing industry jobs accepted exclusively to look more attractive during NASA’s next round of recruitment. There’re fourteen of us, and the thirteen that aren’t me are all nodding enthusiastically.

“Always knew I’d end up at NASA, ever since I was like, five,” says a shy-looking girl. She’s been sticking by my side for the entire morning, I assume because we’re the only two non-dudes in the group. I must say, I don’t mind it too much. Perhaps it’s because she’s a computer engineer while I’m aerospace, which means there’s a good chance that I won’t see much of her after today. Her name is Alexis, and she’s wearing a NASA necklace on top of a NASA T-shirt that only barely covers the NASA tattoo on her upper arm. “I bet it’s the same for you, Hannah,” she adds, and I smile at her, because Sadie and Mara insisted that I shouldn’t be my resting-bitch self now that we live in different time zones. They are convinced that I need to make new friends, and I have reluctantly agreed to put in a solid effort just to get them to shut up. So I nod at Alexis like I know exactly what she means, while privately I think: *Not really.*

When people find out that I have a Ph.D., they tend to assume that I was always an academically driven child. That I cruised through school my entire life in a constant effort to overachieve. That I did so well as a student, I decided to remain one long after I could have booked it and freed myself from the shackles of homework and nights spent cramming for never-ending tests. People assume, and for the most part I let them believe what they want. Caring what others think is a lot of work, and—with a handful of exceptions—I'm not a huge fan of work.

The truth, though, is quite the opposite. I hated school at first sight—with the direct consequence that school hated the sullen, listless child that I was right back. In the first grade, I refused to learn how to write my name, even though *Hannah* is only three letters repeated twice. In junior high, I set a school record for the highest number of consecutive detention days—what happens when you decide to take a stand and not do homework for any of your classes because they are too boring, too difficult, too useless, or all of the above. Until the end of my sophomore year, I couldn't wait to graduate and leave all of school behind: the books, the teachers, the grades, the cliques. Everything. I didn't really have a plan for *after*, except for leaving *now* behind.

I had this feeling, my entire life, that I was never going to be *enough*. I internalized pretty early that I was never going to be as good, as smart, as lovable, as wanted as my perfect older brother and my flawless older sister, and after several failed attempts at measuring up, I just decided to stop trying. Stop caring, too. By the time I was in my teens, I just wanted . . .

Well. To this day, I'm not sure what I wanted at fifteen. For my parents to stop fretting about my inadequacies, maybe. For my peers to stop asking me how I could be the sibling of two former all-star valedictorians. I wanted to stop feeling as though I were rotting in my own aimlessness, and I wanted my head to stop spinning all the time. I was confused, contradictory, and, looking back, probably a shitty teenager to be around. Sorry, Mom and Dad and the rest of the world. No hard feelings, eh?

Anyhow, I was a pretty lost kid. Until Brian McDonald, a junior, decided that asking me to homecoming by opening with "Your eyes are as

blue as a sunset on Mars” might get me to say yes.

For the record, it’s a horrifying pickup line. Do not recommend. Use sparingly. Use not at all, especially if—like me—the person you’re trying to pick up has brown eyes and is fully aware of it. But what was an undeniable low point in the history of flirting ended up serving, if you’ll forgive a very self-indulgent metaphor, as a meteorite of sorts: it crashed into my life and changed its trajectory.

In the following years, I would find out that all of my colleagues at NASA have their own origin story. Their very own space rock that altered the course of their existence and pushed them to become engineers, physicists, biologists, astronauts. It’s usually an elementary school trip to the Kennedy Space Center. A Carl Sagan book under the Christmas tree. A particularly inspiring science teacher at summer camp. My encounter with Brian McDonald falls under that umbrella. It just happens to involve a guy who (allegedly) went on to moderate incel message boards on Reddit, which makes it just a tad lamer.

People obsessed with space are split into two distinct camps. The ones who want to *go* to space and crave the zero gravity, the space suits, drinking their own recycled urine. And there’re people like me: what we want—oftentimes what we’ve wanted since our frontal lobes were still undeveloped enough to have us thinking that toe shoes are a good fashion statement—is to *know* about space. At the beginning it’s simple stuff: What’s it made of? Where does it end? Why do the stars not fall and crash onto our heads? Then, once you’ve read enough, the big topics come in: Dark matter. Multiverse. Black holes. That’s when you realize how little we understand about this giant thing we’re part of. When you start thinking about whether you can help produce some new knowledge.

And that’s how you end up at NASA.

So, back to Brian McDonald. I didn’t go to homecoming with him. (I didn’t go to homecoming at all, because it wasn’t really my scene, and even if it had been, I was grounded for failing an English midterm, and even if I hadn’t been, fuck Brian McDonald and his poorly researched pickup lines.) However, something about the whole thing stuck with me. Why would a

sunset be blue? And on a red planet, no less? It seemed like something worth knowing. So I spent the night in my room, googling dust particles in the Martian atmosphere. By the end of the week, I'd signed up for a library card and devoured three books. By the end of the month, I was studying calculus to understand concepts like thrust over time and harmonic series. By the end of the year, I had a goal. Hazy, confused, not yet fully defined, but a goal nonetheless.

For the first time in my life.

I'll spare you most of the grueling details, but I spent the rest of high school busting ass to make up for the ass I hadn't busted for the previous decade. Just picture an '80s training montage, but instead of running in the snow and doing pull-ups with a repurposed broomstick, I was hard at work on books and YouTube lectures. And it was *hard* work: wanting to understand concepts like H-R diagrams or synodic periods or syzygy did not make them any easier to grasp. Before, I'd never really *tried*. But at the tender age of sixteen, I was confronted with the unbearable turmoil that comes with trying your best and realizing that sometimes it simply isn't enough. As much as it pains me to say it, I don't have an IQ of 130. To really understand the books I wanted to read, I had to review the same concepts over, and over, and fucking *over* again. Initially I coasted on the high of finding out! new! things!, but after a while my motivation began to wane, and I started to wonder what I was even doing. I was studying a bunch of really basic science stuff, to be able to graduate to more advanced science stuff, so that one day I'd actually know all the science stuff about Mars and . . . and what then? Go on *Jeopardy!* and pick Space for 500? Didn't really seem worth it.

Then August of 2012 happened.

When the *Curiosity* rover approached the Martian atmosphere, I stayed up until one A.M. I chugged down two bottles of Diet Coke, ate peanuts for good luck, and when the landing maneuver began, I bit into my lip until it bled. The moment it safely touched the ground I screamed, I laughed, I cried, and then got grounded for a week for waking up the entire household the night before my brother left for his Peace Corps trip, but I didn't care.

In the following months I devoured every little piece of news NASA issued on *Curiosity*'s mission, and as I wondered about who was behind the images of the Gale Crater, the interpretation of the raw data, the reports on the molecular composition of the Aeolis Palus, my hazy, undefinable goal began to solidify.

NASA.

NASA was the place to be.

The summer between junior and senior years, I found a ranking of the hundred best engineering programs in the U.S. and decided to apply to the top twenty. "You should probably extend your reach. Add a few safety schools," my guidance counselor told me. "I mean, your SATs are really good and your GPA has improved a lot, but you have a bunch of"—long pause for throat clearing—"academic red flags on your permanent record."

I thought about it for a minute. Who would have figured that being a little shit for the first one and a half decades of my life would bring lasting consequences? Not me. "Okay. Fine. Let's do the top thirty-five."

As it turns out, I didn't need to. I got accepted to a whopping (drumroll, please) . . . one top-twenty school. A real winner, huh? I don't know if they misfiled my application, misplaced half of my transcripts, or had a brain fart in which the entire admissions office temporarily forgot what a promising student is supposed to look like. I put down my deposit and approximately forty-five seconds after getting my letter told Georgia Tech that I'd be attending.

No backsies.

So I moved to Atlanta, and I gave it my all. I chose the majors and the minors I knew NASA would want to see on a CV. I got the federal internships. I studied hard enough to ace the tests, did the fieldwork, applied to grad school, wrote the thesis. When I look back at the last ten years, school and work and schoolwork are pretty much all that stand out—with the notable exception of meeting Sadie and Mara, and of begrudgingly watching them carve spots for themselves in my heart. God, they take up *so much room*.

“It’s like space is your whole personality,” the girl I casually hooked up with during most of my sophomore year of undergrad told me. It was after I explained that no, thank you, I wasn’t interested in going out for coffee to meet her friends because of a lecture on Kalpana Chawla I was planning to attend. “Do you have any other interests?” she asked. I threw her a quick “Nope,” waved good-bye, and wasn’t too surprised when, the following week, she didn’t reply to my offer to meet up. After all, I clearly couldn’t give her what she wanted.

“Is this really enough for you? Just having sex with me when you feel like it and ignoring me the rest of the time?” the guy I slept with during the last semester of my Ph.D. asked. “You just seem . . . I don’t know. *Extremely* emotionally unavailable.” I think maybe he was right, because it’s barely been a year and I can’t quite recall his face.

Exactly a decade after Brian McDonald miscolored my eyes, I applied for a NASA position. I got an interview, then a job offer, and now I’m here. But unlike the other new hires, I don’t feel like Mars and I were always meant to be. There was no guarantee, no invisible string of destiny tethering me to this job, and I’m positive that I made my way here through sheer brute force, but does it matter?

Nope. Not even a little bit.

So I turn to look at Alexis. This time, her NASA necklace, her T-shirt, her tattoo—they pull a sincere smile out of me. It’s been a long journey here. The destination was never a sure thing, but I have arrived, and I’m uncharacteristically, sincerely, satisfyingly happy. “Feels like home,” I say, and the enthusiastic way she nods reverberates deep down inside my chest.

At one point in history, every single member of the Mars Exploration Program had their first day at NASA, too. They stood in the very spot where I’m standing right now. Gave their banking information for direct deposit, had an unflattering picture taken for their badges, shook hands with the HR reps. Complained about Houston’s weather, bought terrible coffee from the cafeteria, rolled their eyes at visitors doing touristy things, let the Saturn V rocket take their breath away. Every single member of the Mars Exploration Program did this, just like I will.

I step into the conference room where some fancy NASA big shot is scheduled to talk to us, take in the window view of the Johnson Space Center and the remnants of objects that were once launched across the stars, and feel like every single inch of this place is thrilling, fascinating, electrifying, intoxicating.

Perfect.

Then I turn around. And, of course, find the very last person I wanted to see.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 2

Caltech Campus, Pasadena, California
Five years, six months ago

I'm finishing my initial semester of grad school when I first meet Ian Floyd, and it's Helena Harding's fault.

Dr. Harding is a lot of things: my friend Mara's Ph.D. mentor; one of the most celebrated environmental scientists of the twenty-first century; a generally crabby human being; and, last but not least, my Water Resources Engineering professor.

It is, quite honestly, an all-around shitty class: mandatory; irrelevant to my academic, professional, or personal interests; and highly focused on the intersection of the hydrologic cycle and the design of urban storm-sewer systems. For the most part, I spend the lectures wishing I were anywhere else: in line at the DMV, at the market buying magic beans, taking Analytical Transonic and Supersonic Aerodynamics. I do the least I can to pull a low B—which, in the unjust scam of graduate school, is the minimum passing grade—until week three or four of classes, when Dr. Harding introduces a new, cruel assignment that has fuck all to do with water.

"Find someone who has the engineering job you want at the end of your Ph.D. and do an informational interview with them," she tells us. "Then write a report about it. Due by the end of the semester. Don't come to me bitching about it during office hours, because I *will* call security to escort you out." I have a feeling that she's looking at me while saying it. It's probably just my guilty conscience.

"Honestly, I'm just going to ask Helena if I can interview *her*. But if you want, I think I have a cousin or something at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab,"

Mara says offhandedly later that day, while we're sitting on the steps outside the Beckman Auditorium having a quick lunch before heading back to our labs.

I wouldn't say that we're close, but I've decided that I like her. A lot. At this point, my grad school attitude is some mild variant of *I did not come here to make friends*: I don't feel in competition with the rest of the program, but neither am I particularly invested in anything that isn't my work in the aeronautics lab, including getting acquainted with other students, or, you know . . . learning their names. I'm fairly sure that my lack of interest is strongly broadcasted, but either Mara didn't pick up the transmission, or she's gleefully ignoring it. She and Sadie found each other in the first couple of days, and then, for reasons I don't fully understand, decided to find me.

Hence Mara sitting next to me, telling me about her JPL contacts.

"A cousin or something?" I ask, curious. It seems a bit sketchy. "You *think*?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure." She shrugs and continues to make her way through a Tupperware of broccoli, an apple, and approximately two fucktons of Cheez-Its. "I don't really know much about him. His parents divorced, then people in my family had arguments and stopped talking to each other. There was a lot of prime Floyd dysfunction happening, so I haven't actually spoken to him in years. But I heard from one of my other cousins that he was working on that thing that landed on Mars back when we were in high school. It was called something like . . . *Contingency*, or *Carpentry*, or *Crudity*—"

"The *Curiosity* rover?"

"Yes! Maybe?"

I put my sandwich down. Swallow my bite. Clear my throat. "Your cousin *or something* was on the *Curiosity* rover team."

"I think so. Do the dates add up? Maybe it was some kind of summer internship? But honestly, it might just be Floyd family lore. I have an aunt who insists that we're related to the Finnish royals, and according to Wikipedia there are no Finnish royals. So." She shrugs and pops another

handful of Cheez-Its in her mouth. “Would you like me to ask around, though? For the assignment?”

I nod. And I don’t think much about it until a month or so later. By then, through means that I am still unable to divine, Mara and Sadie have managed to worm their way into my heart, causing me to amend my previous *I did not come here to make friends* stance to a slightly altered *I did not come here to make friends, but hurt my weird Cheez-It friend or my other weird soccer friend and I will beat you up with a lead pipe till you piss blood for the rest of your life.* Truculent? Perhaps. I feel little, but surprisingly deeply.

“By the way, I sent you my cousin-or-something’s contact info a while ago,” Mara tells me one night. We’re at the cheapest grad bar we’ve been able to find. She’s on her second Midori sour of the night. “Did you get it?”

I raise my eyebrow. “Is that the random string of numbers you emailed me three days ago? With no subject line, no text, no explanations? The one I figured was just you tracking your lottery dream numbers?”

“Sounds like it, yeah.”

Sadie and I exchange a long look.

“Hey, you ungrateful goblin, I had to call about fifteen people I’d sworn never to talk to again to get Ian’s number. *And*, I had to have my evil great-aunt Delphina promise to blackmail him into saying yes once you reach out to ask for a meeting. So you better use that number, and you better play the Mega Millions.”

“If you win,” Sadie added, “we split three ways.”

“Of course.” I hide my smile in my glass. “What’s he like, anyway?”

“Who?”

“The cousin-or-something. Ian, you said?”

“Yup. Ian Floyd.” Mara thinks about it for a second. “Can’t really say, because I’ve met him at like, two Thanksgivings fifteen years ago, before his parents split. Then his mom moved him to Canada and . . . I don’t even know, honestly. The only thing I remember is that he was tall. But he was also a few years older than me? So maybe he’s actually three feet. Oh, also,

his hair is more brown? Which is kind of rare for a Floyd. I know it's scientifically unsound, but our brand of ginger is *not* recessive."

Great-Aunt Delphina's emotional manipulation game is clearly on point, because when my assignment's deadline approaches and I text Ian Floyd in a panic, asking for an informational interview—whatever the hell *that* is—he replies within hours with an enthusiastic:

Ian: Sure.

Hannah: Thanks. I'm assuming you're in Houston. Should we do virtual? Skype? Zoom? FaceTime?

Ian: I'm in Pasadena at JPL for the next three days, but virtual works.

The Jet Propulsion Lab. Hmm.

I drum my fingers on my mattress, pondering. Virtual would be so much easier. And it would be shorter. But as much as I hate the idea of writing a report for Helena's class, I do want to ask this guy a million questions about *Curiosity*. Plus, he's Mara's mysterious relative, and my curiosity is piqued.

No pun intended.

Hannah: Let's meet in person. The least I can do is buy you coffee. Sound good?

No reply for a few minutes. And then, a very succinct That works. For some reason, it makes me smile.

• • •

My first thought upon entering the coffee shop is that Mara is full of shit.

To the brim.

The second: I should really double-check the text Ian sent me. Make sure that he really said I'll be wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt like I seem to remember. Of course, it would be a little redundant, especially considering that the coffee shop where he asked to meet is currently populated by only three people: a barista, busy doing a pen-and-paper sudoku like it's 2007;

me, standing in the entrance and looking around, confused; and a man, sitting at the table closest to the entrance, gazing pensively through the glass windows.

He's wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt, which would suggest: Ian. The problem . . .

His hair is the problem. Because, despite what Mara said, it's most definitely *not* brown. Maybe a fraction of a shade darker than her bright, carroty orange, but . . . really *not* brown. I'm ready to dial her number and demand to know what ridiculous ginger scale the Floyds operate on when the man slowly stands and asks, "Hannah?"

I have no idea how tall Ian is, but he's much closer to eight feet than to three. And I find it very interesting that Mara claims to barely know him, considering that they look like they could be siblings, not just because of the aggressively red hair, but also the dark-blue eyes, and the dusting of freckles over pale skin, and . . .

I blink. Then I blink again. If three seconds ago someone had asked me whether I'm the type to multiple blink at the sight of some guy, I'd have laughed in their face. *This* guy, though . . .

I guess I stand corrected.

"Ian?" I smile, recovering from the surprise. "Mara's cousin?"

He frowns, as if momentarily blanking on Mara's name. "Ah, yes." He nods. Only once. "Apparently," he adds, which makes me laugh. He waits for me to take a seat across from him before folding back in his chair. I notice that he doesn't hold out his hand, nor does he smile. Interesting. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"No problem." His voice is low-pitched but clear. Deep timbre. Confident; polite but not too friendly. I'm usually fairly good at reading people, and my guess for him is that he's not quite enthused to be here. He'd probably rather be doing whatever it is that he came to California to do, but he's a nice guy, and he's planning to make a valiant effort to avoid letting me know.

He just doesn't seem to be particularly good at faking it, which is . . . kinda cute.

“I hope I didn’t mess up your day.”

He shakes his head—an obvious lie—and I take the opportunity to study him. He seems . . . quiet. The silent type, aloof, a little stiff. Big, more lumberjack than engineer. I briefly wonder if he’s military personnel, but the day-old stubble on his face tells me it’s unlikely.

And such an intriguing, handsome face it is. His nose looks like it was broken at some point, maybe in a fight or a sports injury, and never bothered to heal back quite perfectly. His hair—*red*—is short and a little mussed, more *I’ve been up working since six A.M.* than artful styling. I watch him scratch his—*big*—neck, then cross his—*wide*—biceps on his—*broad*—chest. He gives me a patient, expectant look, like he’s fully committed to answering all my questions.

He is, physically, the opposite of me. Of my small bones and tanned complexion. My hair, eyes, sometimes even my *soul*, are black-hole dark. And here he is, Martian red and ocean blue.

“What can I get you?” a voice asks. I turn and find Sudoku Boy standing right next to our table. Right. Coffee place. Where people consume beverages.

“Iced tea, please.”

He walks away without a word and I look at Ian once again. I’m itching to text Mara. Your cousin looks like a slightly jacked version of Prince Harry. Maybe you should have kept in touch?

“So.” I cross my hands and lean my elbows on the table. “What does she have on you?”

He tilts his head. “She?”

“Great-Aunt Delphina.” He blinks twice. I smile and continue, “I mean, it’s a Thursday afternoon. You’re in California for a handful of days. I’m sure you have something better to do than meet up with your long-lost cousin’s friend.”

His eyes widen for a split second. Then his expression levels back to neutral. “It’s fine.”

“Is it an embarrassing baby pic?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t mind helping out.”

“I see. A baby *video*, then?”

He’s silent for a moment before saying, “As I said, it’s not a problem.” He looks like he isn’t used to people pushing him, which is unsurprising. There is something subtly removed about him. Vaguely distant and intimidating. Like he’s not *quite* reachable. It makes me want to get closer and poke.

“A baby video of you . . . running around in the kiddie pool? Picking your nose? Rummaging around the back of your diaper?”

“I—”

Sudoku Boy drops off my iced tea in a plastic cup. Ian’s eyes follow him for a few seconds, then return to mine with an interesting mix of stoic resignation. “It was more of a toddler video,” he says cautiously, like he’s surprising even himself.

“Ah.” I grin into my tea. It’s both too sweet and too sour. With a subtle aftertaste of gross. “Do tell.”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Oh, I’m positive I do.”

“It’s bad.”

“You’re really selling it to me.”

The left corner of his mouth curves upward, a small hint of amusement that’s not quite fully there yet. I have an odd stray thought: *I bet his smile is lopsided. Beautiful, too.* “The video was taken at a Lowe’s. With my older brother’s new camcorder, sometime in the late ’90s,” he tells me.

“At a Lowe’s? Can’t be *that* bad, then.”

He sighs, impassive. “I was around three or four. And they had one of those bathroom displays. The ones with model sinks and showers and vanities. And toilets, naturally.”

I press my lips together. This is going to be fun. “Naturally.”

“I don’t really remember what happened, but apparently I needed to use the restroom. And when I saw the display I was . . . inspired.”

“No way.”

“In my defense, I was very young.”

He scratches his nose, and I laugh. “Oh my God.”

“With no concept of sewage systems.”

“Right. Sure. Honest mistake.” I cannot stop laughing. “How did Great-Aunt Delphina get a copy of the video?”

“Officially: unclear. But I’m fairly sure my brother made CDs of it. Sent them to local TV stations and whatnot.” He gestures vaguely, and his forearm is dusted with freckles and pale-red hair. I want to grab his wrist, hold it in front of my eyes, study it at my leisure. Trace, smell, touch. “I haven’t spent a holiday with the Floyd side of the family in twenty years, but I’m told that the video is a source of great entertainment for all age groups at Thanksgiving.”

“I bet it’s the pièce de résistance. I bet they press play right after the turducken comes out.”

“Yeah. You’d probably win.” He seems quietly resigned. A big man with a put-upon-but-enduring air. In an utterly charming way.

“But how do you blackmail someone from this? How much worse can it get?”

He sighs again. His broad shoulders lift, then fall. “When my aunt called, she briefly mentioned uploading it on Facebook. Tagging the NASA official page.”

I gasp into my hand. I shouldn’t laugh. This is horrible. But. “Are you serious?”

“It’s not a healthy family.”

“No shit.”

He shrugs, like he’s past caring. “At least they’re not trying to extort money out of me yet.”

“Right.” I nod solemnly and collect my features into what hopefully passes for a compassionate, respectful expression. “The assignment I told you about is for my Water Resources class, so this is surprisingly on topic. And I am truly sorry that you got stuck with meeting your little cousin’s friend because you publicly urinated in a Lowe’s when you barely knew how to talk.”

Ian’s eyes settle on me, as if to size me up. I thought I had his full attention from the moment I sat down, but I realize that I was wrong. For

the first time, he's looking at me like he's interested in actually *seeing* me. He studies me, assesses me, and my first impression of him—*detached, distant*—instantly evaporates. There is something nearly palpable about his presence: a warm, tingling sensation climbing up my spine.

"I don't mind," he says again. I smile, because I know that this time he means it.

"Good." I push my tea to the side. "So, what would you be doing right now, if three-year-old you had known about sanitary sewers?"

This time his smile is a tad more defined. I'm winning him over, which is good, very good, because I'm rapidly developing a thing for the contrast between his eyelashes (*red!*) and his deep-set eyes (*blue!*). "I'd probably be running a bunch of tests."

"At the Jet Propulsion Lab?"

He nods.

"Tests on . . . ?"

"A rover."

"Oh." My heart skips three beats. "For space exploration?"

"Mars."

I lean closer, not even bothering to play it like I'm not avidly interested. "Is that your current project?"

"One of them, yeah."

"And what are the tests for?"

"Mostly attitude, figuring out where the ship is positioned in three-dimensional space. Pointing, too."

"You work on a gyroscope?"

"Yes. My team is perfecting the gyroscope so that once the rover is on Mars, it knows where it is, what it's looking at. Informs the other systems about its coordinates and movements, too."

My heart is now fully pitter-pattering. This sounds . . . wow. Pornographic, almost. Exactly my jam. "And you do this in Houston? At the Space Center?"

"Usually. But I come up here when there are issues. I've been struggling with the imagery, and the feed update keeps lagging even though it

shouldn't, and—" He shakes his head, as if catching himself halfway through a rant that's been playing over and over in his mind. But I finally know what he'd rather be doing.

And I sure can't blame him.

"Did they send your entire team here?" I ask.

He tilts his head, like he has no idea where I'm going with this. "Just me."

"So your team leader is not around."

"My team leader?"

"Yeah. Is your boss around?"

He is silent for a second. Two. Three. Four? What the— Ah.

"You *are* the team leader," I say.

He nods once. A little stiff. Almost apologetic.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"Twenty-five." A pause. "Next month."

Whoa. I'm twenty-two. "Isn't that early to be a team leader?"

"I'm . . . not sure," he says, even though I can tell that he *is* sure, and that he *is* exceptional, and that even though he knows it, the thought makes him more than a little uncomfortable. I picture myself saying something flirtatious and inappropriate back—*Wow, handsome* and *smart*—and wonder how he'd react. Probably not well.

Not that I'm going to hit on my informational interviewee. Even *I* know better. Plus, he's not really my type.

"Okay, what's the security like at JPL?" I've never been. I know it's loosely connected with Caltech, but that's about it.

"Depends," he says cautiously, like he still cannot follow my train of thought.

"What about your office? Is it a restricted area?"

"No. Why—"

"Awesome, then." I stand, dig into my pockets for a few dollars to leave next to my unfinished tea, and then close my fingers around Ian's wrist. His skin glows with warmth and taut muscles as I pull him up from the table, and even though he's probably twice as big and ten times stronger than me,

he lets me lead him away from the table. I let go of him the second we're out of the coffee shop, but he keeps following me.

"Hannah? What—where . . . ?"

"I don't see why we can't do this weird informational interview thing, get some work done, *and* have fun."

"What?"

With a grin, I look at him over my shoulders. "Think of it as sticking it to evil Great-Aunt Delphina."

I doubt he fully understands, but the corner of his mouth lifts again, and that's good enough for me.

• • •

"See this thread right here? It's mostly about the behavior of one of the rover's sensors, the LN-200. We combine its information with the one provided by the encoders on the wheels to figure out positioning."

"Huh. So the sensor *doesn't* run constantly?"

Ian turns to me, away from the chunk of programming code he's been showing me. We're sitting in front of his triple-monitor computer, side by side at his desk, which is a giant, pristine expanse with a stunning view of the floodplain JPL was built on. When I mentioned how clean his workspace was, he pointed out that it's only because it's a guest office. But when I asked him if his usual desk back in Houston is any messier, he glanced away before the corner of his lip twitched.

I am almost certain he's starting to think that I'm not a total waste of time.

"No, it doesn't run constantly. How can you tell?"

I gesture toward the lines of code, and the back of my hand brushes against something hard and warm: Ian's shoulder. We're sitting closer than we were at the coffee shop, but no closer than I'd feel comfortable being with one of the—always unpleasant, often offensive—guys in my Ph.D. cohort. I guess my crossed knees kind of pressed against his leg earlier, but that's it. No big deal. "It's in there, no?"

The section is in C++. Which happens to be the very first language I taught myself back in high school, when every single Google search for "Skills + Necessary + NASA" led to the sad result of "Programming." Python came after. Then SQL. Then HAL/S. For each language, I started out convinced that chewing on glass would surely be preferable. Then, at some point along the way, I began thinking in terms of functions, variables, conditional loops. A little after that, reading code became a bit like inspecting the label on the back of the conditioner bottle while showering: not particularly fun, but overall easy. I do have *some* talents, apparently.

"Yeah." He's still looking at me. Not surprised, precisely. Not impressed, either. Intrigued, maybe? "Yes, it is."

I rest my chin on my palm and chew on my lower lip, considering the code. "Is it because of the limited amount of solar power?"

"Yes."

"And I bet it prevents gyro drift errors during the stationary period?"

"Correct." He nods, and I'm momentarily distracted by his jawline. Or maybe it's the cheekbones. They're defined, angular in a way that makes me wish I had a protractor in my pocket.

"It's not all automated, right? Earth-based personnel can direct tools?"

"They can, depending on the attitude."

"Does the onboard flight software have specific requirements?"

"The pointing of the antenna relative to the Earth, and . . ." He stops. His eyes fall on my chewed-on lip, then quickly move away. "You ask a lot of questions."

I tilt my head. "*Bad* questions?"

Silence. "No." More silence as he studies me. "Remarkably good questions."

"Can I ask a few more, then?" I grin at him, aiming for cheeky, curious to see where it'll take us.

He hesitates before nodding. "Can I ask you some, too?"

I laugh. "Like what? Would you like me to list the specs of the maze-solving bot I built for my Intro to Robotics class back in college?"

"You built a maze-solving robot?"

“Yup. Four-wheel, all-terrain, Bluetooth module. Solar powered. Her name was Ruthie, and when I set her free at a corn maze somewhere near Atlanta, she got out in about three minutes. Scared the crap out of the children, too.”

He is fully smiling now. He has a heart-stopping dimple on his left cheek, and . . . Okay, fine: he’s *aggressively* hot. Despite the red hair, or because of it. “You still have her?”

“Nope. To celebrate, I got wasted at a bar that didn’t bother to check IDs and ended up leaving her at some University of Georgia frat house. I didn’t want to go back, because those places are *scary*, so I gave up on Ruthie and just built an electronic arm for my Robotics final.” I sigh and look into the mid-distance. “I’ll need a lot of therapy before I can become a mother.”

He chuckles. The sound is low, warm, maybe even shiver-inducing. I need a second to regroup.

I’ve settled—at some point on our five-minute walk here, probably when he pulled out a pretty effortless scowl to intimidate the security guard into letting me in despite my lack of ID—on the reason I can’t quite pin Ian down. He is, very simply, a never-before-experienced mix of cute and overwhelmingly masculine. With a complex, layered air about him. It spells simultaneously *Do not piss me off because I don’t fuck around* and *Ma’am, let me carry those groceries for you*.

Not my usual fare, not at all. I like flirting, and I like sex, and I like hooking up with people, but I’m really, *really* picky about my partners. It doesn’t take a lot to turn me off someone, and I almost exclusively gravitate toward the cheerful, spontaneous, fun-loving type. I’m into extraverts who love banter and are easy to talk to, the less intense the better. Ian seems to be the diametrical opposite of that, and yet . . . And yet, even *I* can see how there is something fundamentally attractive about him. Would I try to pick him up at a bar? Hm. Unclear.

Will I try to pick him up after the end of this informational interview? Hm. *Also* unclear. I know I say I wouldn’t, but . . . things change.

“Okay. My question now. Mara—Mara Floyd, your cousin or something—said that you were working directly on the *Curiosity* team?” He nods.

“But you were, what? Eighteen?”

“Around that age, yeah.”

“Were you an intern?”

He pauses before shaking his head but doesn’t elaborate.

“So you just . . . happened to be hanging out with mission control? Chilling with your space bros while they landed their remote control rover on Mars?”

His lips twitch. “I was a team member.”

“A team member at eighteen?” My eyebrow lifts, and he looks away.

“I . . . graduated early.”

“High school? Or college?”

Silence. “Both.”

“I see.”

He briefly scratches the side of his neck, and there again is this feeling that he’s not quite used to being asked questions about himself. That most people take a look at him, decide that he’s just a touch too aloof and detached, and give up on figuring him out.

I study him, more curious than ever. “So . . . were you one of those kids who was really advanced for their age and skipped half a dozen grades? And then ended up joining the workforce while still ridiculously young?” *And maybe your psychosocial development was still kind of ongoing, but you were never really sharing professional or academic settings with people in your age group, just much older ones who likely avoided you and were a little intimidated by your intelligence and success, which meant being the odd man out for the entirety of your formative years and having a 401(k) before your first date?*

His eyes widen. “I . . . Yeah. Were you one, too?”

I laugh. “Oh no. I was a total dumbass. Still am, for the most part. I just thought it might be a good guess.” It fits the persona, too. He doesn’t come across as insecure, not quite, but he’s cautious. Withdrawn.

I lean back in my chair, feeling the thrill of having puzzled him out a little better. I’m usually not this dedicated to figuring out the backstory of everyone I meet, but Ian is just interesting.

No. He's *fascinating*.

"So, how was it?"

He blinks. "How was what?"

"Being there with mission control when *Curiosity* landed. How was it?"

His expression instantly transforms. "It was . . ." He's staring down at his feet, as if remembering. He looks awestruck.

"*That* good?"

"Yeah. It was . . . Yeah." He chuckles again. God, it really does sound great.

"It looked like it. From TV, I mean."

"You watched it?"

"Yup. I was on the East Coast, so I stayed up late and all that. Looked up at the sky out of my bedroom window and cried a little bit."

He nods, and suddenly *he* is studying *me*. "Is that why you're in grad school? You want to work on future rovers?"

"That would be amazing. But anything that's space exploration will do."

"NASA can put your maze-solving skills to great use." His dimple is back, and I laugh.

"Hey, I can do other things. For instance . . ." I point at the third monitor on the desk, the one farthest away from me. It displays a piece of code Ian hasn't walked me through yet. "Want me to help you debug that?" He gives me a confused look. "What? It's code. It's always nice to have a second pair of eyes."

"You don't have to—"

"There's an error on the fifth line."

He frowns. Then he scans the code for a second. Then he turns to me, to the monitor, to me again with an even bigger frown. I brace, half expecting him to lash out defensively and deny the error. I'm familiar with the crumbling egos of men, and I'm pretty sure it's what any of the guys in my Ph.D. class would do. But Ian surprises me: he nods, fixes the mistake I pointed out, and looks nothing but grateful.

Wow. A male engineer who's *not* an asshole. The bar is pretty low, but I'm nevertheless impressed.

“Would you really be up for going through the rest of the code with me?” he asks cautiously, surprising me even more. The contrast between his gentle tone and how . . . how *big* and *guarded* he is almost has me smiling. “It’s the workaround to fix the two-second delay in the pointing issue. I was going to ask one of my engineers in Houston to debug, but . . .”

“I got you.” I roll my chair closer to Ian’s. My knee presses against his, and I nearly move it away automatically, but in a split-second decision I decide to leave it there.

An experiment of sorts. Testing the waters. Taking the temperature.

I wait for him to shift back, but instead he studies me and says, “It’s a few hundred lines. I’m supposed to be helping *you*. Are you sure—”

“It’s fine. When I write my report, I’ll just pretend I asked you a bunch of questions about your journey and make up the answers.” Just to mess with him, I add, “Don’t worry, I’ll mention how having the clap did *not* set you back on your road to NASA.” He scowls, which has me laughing, and then I’m going over the code with him for five, ten minutes. Fifteen. The light softens to late-afternoon hues, and over an hour goes by while we’re side by side, blinking at the monitors.

Honestly, it’s pretty basic rubber duck debugging: he’s explaining out loud what he’s trying to do, which helps him work through critical chunks, and also figuring out better ways to go about it. But I’m a pretty happy rubber duck. I like listening to his low, even voice. I like that he seems to consider every single thing I say and never dismisses anything outright. I like that when he’s thinking hard, he closes his eyes, and his lashes are crimson half-moons against his skin. I like that he builds meticulously pristine code with no memory leakage, and I like that when his biceps brushes against my shoulder all I feel is solid warmth. I like his short, crisp functions, and the way he smells clean and masculine and a bit dark.

Okay. So he’s *not* my type.

I do like him, though.

Would Mara mind it if I shamelessly offered myself to her kin at the informational interview she kindly set up? I would normally just go for it, but this friendship business can be a bit of a burden. That said, maybe I can

safely assume that she won't care, considering that she doesn't seem to know how exactly she and Ian are related.

Plus, she's a generous soul. She'd want her friend and her cousin-or-something to get laid.

"Did you get randomly assigned to the Attitude and Position Estimation team?" I ask him when we get to the last few lines of code.

"No." He lets out a small laugh. His profile is a work of near perfection, even with the broken nose. "Clawed my way there, actually."

"Oh?"

He saves and closes our work with a few rapid keystrokes. "For *Curiosity*, I joined the team pretty late into the development stage, and I mostly focused on launch."

"Did you like it?"

"A lot." He angles his chair to face me. Our knees, elbows, shoulders have been brushing so much, the closeness feels familiar by now. So does the liquid warmth under my belly button. "But after that I began working on *Perseverance* and I asked for a change. Something actually related to the rover being on Mars as opposed to three hours in Cape Canaveral."

"So they put you on A & PE?"

"First, I joined the NASA expedition to Norway's Mars Analog site."

I inhale audibly. "AMASE?" The Arctic Mars Analog Svalbard Expedition (AMASE, for friends) is what happens when a bunch of nerds travel to Norway, in the Bockfjorden area of Svalbard. One might think that the North Pole has nothing to do with space, but because of all the volcanic activity and glaciers it's actually the place on Earth most similar to Mars. It even has one-of-a-kind carbonate spherules that are almost identical to the ones we found on meteorites of Martian origin. NASA researchers like to use it as a location to test the functionality of equipment they plan to send on space exploration missions, collect samples, examine fun science questions that can prepare astronauts for future space missions.

I want to be part of it so bad, a shiver runs down my spine.

"Yup. When I came back I asked for an A & PE placement, which apparently *everyone* wanted. To the point that the mission leader sent out a

NASA-wide email asking whether we thought we'd get double pay and free beer."

"Did you?"

I laugh at the look he gives me. He is just so hilariously, deliciously *teasable*. "Why did everyone want to be part of that team, anyway?"

He shrugs. "I'm not sure why everyone else did. I assume because it's challenging. Lots of high-risk, high-reward projects. But for me it was . . ." He glances out of the window, at a maple tree in the JPL campus. Actually, no: I think he might be looking up. At the sky. "It just felt like . . ." He trails off, as though not sure how to continue.

"Like it was as close as possible to actually being on Mars? With the rover?" I ask him.

His eyes return to me. "Yeah." He seems surprised. Like I managed to put something elusive into words. "Yeah, that's exactly it."

I nod, because I get it. The idea of helping build something that will explore Mars, the idea of being able to control where it goes and what it does . . . that does it for me, too.

Ian and I study each other for a few seconds in silence, both of us smiling faintly. Long enough for the idea that's been bouncing in my head to solidify once and for all.

Yeah. I'm gonna go for it. *Sorry, Mara. I like your cousin-or-something a little too much to pass this up.*

"Okay, I do have a career question for you. To save our informational interview appearances."

"Shoot."

"So, I graduate with my Ph.D. Which should take me about four more years."

"That's a while," he says, his tone a bit unreadable.

Yes, it feels like forever. "Not *that* long. So, I graduate, and I decide that I want to work at NASA and not for some weirdo billionaire who treats space exploration like it's his own homemade penis-enlargement remedy."

Ian's nod is pained. "Wise."

“What would make me look like a strong candidate? What does a great application package look like?”

He mulls it over. “I’m not sure. For my team, I would usually hire internally. But I’m almost certain I still have my application materials on my old laptop. I could send them to you.”

Okay. Perfect. Great.

The opening I was waiting for.

My heart rate picks up. Warmth twists in my lower stomach. I lean forward with a smile, feeling like I’m finally in my element. This, *this*, is what I know best. Depending on how busy I am with school, or work, or binge-watching K-dramas, I do this about once a week. Which amounts to quite a bit of practice. “Maybe I could come to your place?” I say, finding the sweet spot between comically suggestive and *Let’s get together to play Cards Against Humanity*. “And you could show me?”

“I meant—in Houston. My laptop’s in Houston.”

“So you *didn’t* bring your 2010 laptop to Pasadena?”

He smiles. “Knew I’d forgotten something.”

“Sure did.” I meet his eyes squarely. Lean half an inch closer. “Then maybe I can still come to your place, and we could do something else?”

He gives me a half-puzzled look. “Do what?”

I press my lips together. *Okay. Maybe I overestimated my flirting skills. Have I, though? I don’t think so.* “Really?” I ask, amused. “Am I *that* bad?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.” Ian’s expression is all arrested confusion, like I just suddenly started talking in an Australian accent. “Bad at what?”

“At hitting on you, Ian.”

I can pinpoint the precise, exact moment the meaning of my words sinks into the language part of his brain. He blinks a few times. Then his big body goes still in a tight, impossible, *vibrating* way, like his internal software is buffering through an unpredictable set of updates.

He looks absolutely, almost *charmingly* mystified, and something occurs to me: I’ve struck up flirtatious conversations with dozens of guys and girls at parties, bars, laundromats, gyms, bookstores, seminars, muddy obstacle races, greenhouses—even, on one memorable occasion, in the waiting room

of a Planned Parenthood, and . . . *no one* has ever been this clueless. No one. So maybe he was just *pretending* not to get it. Maybe he was hoping I'd back off.

Shit.

"I'm sorry." I straighten and roll my chair back, giving him a few inches of space. "I'm making you uncomfortable."

"No. No, I—" He's finally rebooting. Shaking his head. "No, you aren't, I'm just—"

"A bit freaked out?" I smile reassuringly, trying to signal that it's okay. I can take a no. I'm a big girl. "It's fine. Let's forget I said anything. But do email me your application package once you're back home, please. I promise I won't reply with unsolicited nudes."

"No, it's not that . . ." He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. His cheekbones look rosier than before. His lips move, trying to form words for a few seconds, until he settles on: "It's just . . . unexpected."

Oh. I tilt my head. "Why?" I thought I'd been laying it on pretty thick.

"Because." His large hand gestures in my direction. He swallows, and I watch his throat work. "Just . . . look at you."

I actually do it. I look down at myself, taking in my crossed legs, my khaki shorts, my plain black tee. My body is in its usual condition: tall. Wiry. A bit scrawny. Olive-skinned. I even shaved this morning. Maybe. I can't remember. Point is, I look okay.

So I say it—"I look okay"—which should sound confident but comes out a bit petulant. It's not that I think I'm hot shit, but I refuse to be insecure about my appearance. I like myself. Historically, the people I've wanted to sleep with have liked me, too. My body does its job as a means to an end. It manages to let me kayak around California lakes without muscle aches the following day, and it digests lactose like it's an Olympic discipline. That's all that matters.

But his reply is: "You don't look okay," and . . . no.

"Really." My tone is icy. Is Ian Floyd trying to imply that he's out of my reach? Because if so, I *will* slap him. "How do I look, then?"

"Just . . ." He swallows again. "I . . . Women like you don't usually . . ."

“Women *like me*.” Wow. Sounds like I’ll actually have to slap him. “What’s that? Because—”

“Beautiful. You are very, *very* beautiful. Probably the most . . . And you’re obviously smart and funny, so . . .” He gives me a helpless look, suddenly looking less like a genius NASA team leader built like a cedar tree and more . . . boyish. Young. “Is this some kind of joke?”

I study him through squinting eyes, revising my earlier assessment. Perhaps my conclusions were premature, and it’s not quite correct that no one can be this clueless. Perhaps *someone* can.

Ian, for instance. Ian, who could probably make good money as a stock-photo model, tags: Hot Guy, Ginger, Massive. I saw about four people check him out on our way here, but he apparently has no idea that he could be fancast to play the hot Weasley brother. Absolutely zero awareness of how glorious he is.

I grin, suddenly charmed. “Can I ask you a question?” I roll myself closer, and I’m not sure when that happened, but he angled his chair so that my knees end up slotted between his. Nice. “It’s a bit forward.”

He looks down at our touching legs and nods. As usual, only once.

“Can I kiss you? Like, right now?”

“I . . .” He stares. Then blinks. Then mouths something that’s not a word.

My grin widens. “That’s not no, is it?”

“No.” He shakes his head. His eyes are fixed on my lips, the black of his pupils swallowing the blue. “It’s not.”

“Okay, then.”

It’s pretty simple, standing from my chair and leaning forward on his. My palms find the armrests and press against them, and for a long moment I stay right there, caging this bear-size man who could flick me away with his little finger but doesn’t. Instead he looks up at me like I’m wondrous and beautiful and awe-inspiring, like I’m a gift, like he’s a bit dumbstruck.

Like he *really* wants me to kiss him. So I close that last inch and I do. And it’s . . .

Kind of awkward, to be honest. Not bad. Just a little hesitant. His lips part in a gasp when they touch mine, and for a split second, a terrifying thought occurs to me.

It's his first kiss. Is it? Oh my God, it's his first kiss. Am I really giving someone their first—

Ian angles his head, pushes his mouth against mine, and it destroys my train of thought. I'm not sure how he manages, but whatever he's doing with his lips and teeth feels massively, aggressively right. I whimper when his tongue meets mine. He growls in response, something rumbly and deep in his throat.

Okay. This is no first kiss. This is a fucking *masterpiece*.

He's probably two hundred pounds of muscles and I have no clue whether the chair can hold us both, but I decide to live dangerously: I straddle Ian's lap, feeling his sharp inhale vibrate through my body. For a suspended second our lips part and his eyes hold mine, like we're both waiting for every piece of furniture in the room to collapse. But JPL must be investing in sturdy decor.

"*That* was high-risk, high-reward," I say, and I'm surprised at how short my breath is already. The room is silent, bathed in warm light. I let out a single, shaky laugh, and I realize where Ian's hand is: hovering half an inch above my waist. Warm. Eager. Ready to snap.

"Can I—?" he asks.

"Yes." I laugh into his mouth. "You *can* touch me. It's the whole point of—"

I don't get to finish, because the second he has permission his hands are everywhere, one on my nape, pulling my lips into his, the other on the small of my back. The moment my chest presses against his, he does another of those low, rough sounds—but ten times deeper, like it comes from his very core. He's all scratchy stubble, warm unwieldy flesh, and in the corner of my eyes I see only red, red, *so much red*.

"I'm *in love* with your freckles," I say, right before nipping at one on his jaw. "I thought about licking them the moment I saw you." I make my way to the hollow of his ear. He exhales, sharp.

“When I saw you, I—” I suck on the skin of his throat, and he stutters. “I thought you were a little too beautiful,” he finishes, breathless. His hands are traveling under my shirt, up my spine, cautiously tracing the edges of my bra. He smells magnificent, clean and serious and warm.

“Too beautiful for what?”

“For everything. Too beautiful to look at, even.” His grip on my waist tightens. “Hannah, you—”

I am grinding my groin against his. Which is probably the reason we both sound like we’re running a marathon. And in my defense, I really only meant for this to be a kiss, but yeah. No. I’m not stopping, and judging from the way his fingers dip into the back of my shorts to cup my ass cheek and press me tighter into his hard cock, he’s not planning to, either.

“Does anyone else use this office?” I ask. I’m not shy, but this is . . . good. No-interruptions-please good. I-don’t-want-to-wait-till-we-get-home good. I’m-going-to-come-in-about-two-minutes good.

He shakes his head, and I could cry of happiness, but I don’t have time. It’s like we were playing before, and now we’re in earnest. We’re barely kissing, uncoordinated, unfocused, just grinding against each other, and I chase the feeling of his body against mine, the high of being so close, his erection between my legs as we both make hushed, grunting, obscene noises, as we both try to get closer, to get more contact, skin, heat, friction, friction, friction, I need *more friction*—

“*Shit*.” I cannot get *enough*. It’s not a good position, and I hate this stupid chair, and this is driving me *insane*. I let out a loud, infuriated groan and sink my teeth deep into his neck, like I am made of heat and frustration, and—

Somehow, Ian knows exactly what I need. Because he stands from the cursed chair with a muted, “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’ve got you.” He takes me right with him and does something that could technically qualify as destroying NASA property to make enough room for us. A moment later I’m sitting on the desk, and all of a sudden we can both move like we want to. He opens my legs with his palms and slots his own right between them, and—

Finally. The friction is—this is precisely what I asked for, precisely what I *needed*—

"Yes," I breathe out.

"Yeah?" I don't even need to move my hips. His hand slides down to grip my ass, and he somehow knows exactly how to angle me, how the hem of my shorts can brush against my clit. "Like this?" I feel his cock iron-hard on my hip and I make mewling, embarrassing, pleading sounds into the hollow of his throat, murmuring incomprehensibly about how good this is, how grateful I am, how I'm going to do the same for him when we finally fuck, how I'm going to do *whatever he wants*—

"Stop," he pants into my mouth, urgent, a little desperate. "You need to be quiet, or I'm going to—I just want to—"

I laugh against his cheek, reedy, hushed. My thighs are starting to shake. There is a liquid, pressing heat swelling in my abdomen. "Want to—*ah*—want to what?"

"I just want to make you come."

It sends me right over the edge. Into something that's nothing like my usual, run-of-the-mill orgasm. Those tend to start like small fractures and then slowly, gradually deepen into something lovely and relaxing. Those are fun, good fun, but this . . . This pleasure is sudden and violent. It splinters into me like a wonderful, terrible explosion, new and frightening and fantastic, and it goes on and on, as though every heart-stopping, delicious second of it is being squeezed out of me. I screw my eyes shut, clutch Ian's shoulders, and whimper into his throat, listening to the hushed "Fuck. *Fuck*," he mouths into my collarbone. I was so sure I knew what my body was capable of, but this feels somewhere well beyond it.

And somehow, on top of knowing exactly how to get me there, Ian also knows when to stop. The very moment it all becomes unbearable, his arms tighten around me, and his thigh becomes a solid, still weight between mine. I twine my arms around his neck, hide my face in his throat, and wait for my body to recover.

"Well," I say. My voice is raspier than I ever remember hearing it. There's a wireless keyboard on the floor, cables dangling by my thigh, and

if I move even half an inch back, I'll destroy one, maybe two monitors. "Well," I repeat. I let out a peal of winded laughter against his skin.

"You okay?" he asks, pulling back to meet my eyes. His hands are trembling slightly against my back. Because, I assume, I came. And he didn't. Which is very unfair. I just had a life-defining orgasm and can't really remember my own name, but even in this state I can grasp the injustice of it all.

"I'm . . . great." I laugh again. "You?"

He smiles. "I'm pretty great, to be—" I drag my hand down between us, palm flush against the front of his jeans, and his mouth snaps shut.

Okay. So he has a big cock. To exactly no one's surprise. This man is going to be fantastic in bed. Phenomenal. The best sex I've ever had with a dude. And I've had *a lot*.

"What do you want?" I ask. His eyes are dark, unseeing. I cup my hand around the outline of his erection, rub the heel of my palm against the length, arch up to whisper in the curve of his ear, "Can I go down on you?"

The noise Ian makes is rough and guttural, and it takes me about three seconds to realize that he's already coming, groaning into my skin, trapping my hand between our bodies. I feel him shudder, and this big man coming apart against me, utterly lost and helpless in front of his own pleasure, is by far the most erotic experience of my entire life.

I want to get him into a bed. I want hours, *days* with him. I want to make him feel the way he's feeling right now, but a hundredfold stronger, a hundred million more times.

"I'm sorry," he slurs.

"What?" I lean back to look at his face. "Why?"

"That was . . . pitiful." He pulls me back to bury his face in my throat. It's followed by a lick, and a bite, and oh my God, the sex is going to be off the charts. Earth-shattering.

"It was amazing. Let's do it again. Let's go to my place. Or let's just lock the door."

He laughs and kisses me, different from before, deep but gentle and meandering, and . . . it's not really, in my experience, the type of kiss people

share *after* sex. In my experience, after sex people wash up, put their clothes back on, then wave good-bye and go to the nearest Starbucks to get a cake pop. But this is nice, because Ian is an excellent kisser, and he *smells* good, he *tastes* good, he *feels* good, and—

"Can I buy you dinner?" he asks against my lips. "Before we . . ."

I shake my head. The tips of our noses brush against each other. "No need."

"I . . . I'd like to, Hannah."

"Nah." I kiss him again. Once. Deep. Glorious. "I don't do that."

"You don't do"—another kiss—"what?"

"Dinner." Kiss. Again. "Well," I amend, "I do eat. But I don't do dinner dates."

Ian pulls back, his expression curious. "Why no dinner dates?"

"I just . . ." I shrug, wishing we were still kissing. "I don't date, in general."

"You don't date . . . at all?"

"Nope." His expression is suddenly withdrawn again, so I smile and add, "But I'm very happy to come to your place anyway. No need to be dating for that, right?"

He takes a step back—a large one, like he wants to put some physical space between us. The front of his jeans is . . . a mess. I want to clean him up. "Why . . . why don't you date?"

"Really?" I laugh. "You want to hear about my socio-emotional trauma after we did"—I gesture between us—"*this*?"

He nods, serious and a little stiff, and I sober up.

Seriously? He really wants that? He wants me to explain to him that I don't really have the time or the emotional availability for any kind of romantic entanglement? That I can't really imagine anyone sticking around for something that's not sex once they really get to know me? That I've long since realized that the longer people are with me, the more likely they are to find out that I'm not as smart as they think, as pretty, as funny? Honestly, I *know* that my best bet is to keep people at arm's length, so that they never find out what I'm actually like. Which is, incidentally: a bit of a

bitch. I'm just not good at *caring* about . . . anything, really. It took me about one and a half decades to find something I was truly passionate about. This friendship experiment I'm doing with Mara and Sadie is still very much that, an experiment, and . . .

Oh God. Does Ian want to *date*? He doesn't even *live* here. "So you're saying . . ." I scratch my temples, coming down fast from my post-orgasm high. "You're saying you're not interested in having sex?"

He closes his eyes in something that *really* doesn't look like a no. *Definitely* doesn't look like a lack of interest. But what he says is, "I like you."

I laugh. "I noticed."

"It's . . . uncommon. For me. To like someone this much."

"I like you, too." I shrug. "Shouldn't we hang out, then? Isn't that good enough?"

He looks away. Down, to his shoes. "If I spend more time with you, I'm only going to like you more."

"Nah." I snort. "That's not the way it usually works."

"It does. It will, for me." He sounds so solidly, irrefutably sure, I cannot do anything but stare at him. His lips are bee-stung, and everything about him is beautiful, and he looks so quietly, stoically devastated at the idea of fucking me with no strings attached that I should probably find this comical, but the truth is that I can't remember ever being this attracted to someone else, and my body is *vibrating* for his, and . . .

Maybe you could go out with him. Just this once. An exception. Maybe you could try it out. Maybe it could work. Maybe you two will—

What? No. *No*. What the fuck? Just the fact that I'm contemplating it scares the shit out of me. No. I don't—I'm not like that. These things are a waste of time and energy. I'm busy. I'm not cut out for this stuff.

"I'm sorry," I force myself to say. It's not even a lie. I'm pretty fucking sorry right now. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Okay," he says after a long moment. Accepting. A bit sad. "Okay. If . . . if you change your mind. About dinner, that is. Let me know."

“Okay.” I nod. “When are you leaving? What’s my deadline?” I add, attempting some lightheartedness.

“It doesn’t matter. I can . . . I travel here a lot, and . . .” He shakes his head. “You can change your mind whenever. No deadline.”

Oh. “Well, if *you* change your mind about fucking . . .”

He exhales a laugh, which sounds a little like a pained groan, and for a moment I feel the compulsion to explain myself. I want to tell him, *It’s not you. It’s me*. But I know how that would sound, and I know better than to put the words out there. So we regard each other for a few seconds, and then . . . then there’s nothing left to say, is there? My body goes through the motions automatically. I slide off the desk, take a moment to straighten the monitors behind me, the mouse, the keyboards, the cable, and when I walk past Ian through the door he follows me with his solemn, sad eyes, running his palm over his jaw.

The last words I hear from him are, “It was really good to meet you, Hannah.” I think I should say it back, but there’s an unfamiliar weight in my chest, and I can’t quite bring myself to do it. So I make do with a small smile and a halfhearted wave. I stuff my hands in my pockets while my body is still thrumming with what I left behind, and wander slowly back to the Caltech campus, thinking about red hair and missed opportunities.

That night, when I get an email from IanFloyd@nasa.gov, my heart stumbles all over itself. But it’s just an empty email, no text, not even an automatic signature. Just an attachment with his NASA application from a few years ago, together with a handful of other people’s. More recent ones that he must have gotten from his friends and colleagues, a few more examples to send me.

Well.

He’ll make for a great boyfriend, I tell myself, leaning back in my bed and staring up at the ceiling. There is a weird green thing in one corner that I suspect might be mold. Mara keeps telling me I should just move out of this shithole and find a place with her and Sadie, but I don’t know. Seems like we’d get *too* close. A big commitment. It might get messy. *He’ll make for a great boyfriend. For someone who deserves to have one.*

The following day, when Mara asks me about my meeting with her cousin-or-something, I say only “Uneventful,” and I don’t even know why. I don’t like lying, and I like lying to someone who’s rapidly becoming a friend even less, but I can’t make myself say any more than that. Two weeks later, I turn in a reflection paper as part of my Water Resources class requirements.

> *I must admit, Dr. Harding, that I initially thought this assignment would be a total waste of time. I’ve known I wanted to end up at NASA for years, and I’ve known that I wanted to work with robotics and space exploration for just as long. However, after meeting with Ian Floyd, I have realized that I’d love to work, specifically, on Attitude and Position Estimation of Mars rovers. In conclusion: not a waste of time, or at least not a total one.*

I get an A- for the class. And in the following years, I don’t let myself think about Ian too much. But whenever I rewatch video recordings of mission control celebrating *Curiosity*’s landing, I cannot help but look for the tall, red-haired man in the back of the room. And whenever I find him, I feel the ghost of something squeeze tight inside my chest.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 3

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

“They said they couldn’t send first responders!”

My breath, dry and white, fogs the black shell of my satellite phone. Because Svalbard in February is well into the negative Celsius. Disturbingly close to the negative Fahrenheit, too, and this morning is no exception.

“They said it was too dangerous,” I continue, “that the winds are too extreme.” As if to prove my point, a half-hissing, half-howling sound weaves through what I’ve begun to think of as *my crevasse*.

And as far as crevasses go, it’s a good one to get stuck in. Relatively shallow. The western wall is nicely angled, just enough to allow the sunlight to filter in, which is probably the only reason I have yet to freeze to death or get horrible frostbite. The downside, though, is that at this time of the year there are only about five hours of light per day. And they’re just about to run out.

“Avalanche danger is set at the highest level, and it’s not safe for anyone to come out to get me,” I add, speaking right into the satphone’s mic. Repeating what Dr. Merel, my team leader, told me a few hours ago, during my last communication with AMASE, NASA’s home base here in Norway. It was right before he reminded me that I’d been the one to choose this. That I’d known what the risks of my mission were, and I still decided to undertake it. That the path to space exploration is full of pain and self-sacrifice. That it was my fault for falling in an icy hole in the ground and spraining my fucking ankle.

Well, he did not say that. *Fucking*, or *fault*. He did, however, make sure that I was aware that no one would be able to come help me until tomorrow, and that I needed to be strong. Even though, of course, we both knew what the results of a match between me and an overnight snowstorm would be.

Storm: 100. Hannah Arroyo: dead.

“The weather’s not that bad.” A wave of static almost drains the voice on the other side of the line.

Ian Floyd’s voice.

Because, for some reason, he’s here. Coming. For me.

“It’s a—it’s a storm, Ian. Are you—please, tell me you’re not just strolling outdoors when the worst storm of the year is just hours from starting.”

“I’m not.” A pause. “It’s more of a brisk walk.”

I close my eyes. “In a *storm*. A blizzard. Winds of at least thirty-five miles per hour. Heavy snowfall and no visibility.”

“You might be wasted in engineering.”

“What?”

“You’re really good at meteorology stuff.”

I cannot feel my legs; my teeth are chattering; every time I breathe, my skin feels like it’s been chewed on by a horde of piranhas. And yet, I find the strength to roll my eyes. At least the cranky bitch inside my heart is holding strong. “You’d love it, wouldn’t you? If I were busy giving the weather on local news instead of at NASA with you.”

The winds are blowing holes through my eardrums. I honestly have no idea how I can hear a smile in his “Nah.”

He’s insane. He cannot be here in Norway. He isn’t even supposed to be in Europe. “Did AMASE change their mind on sending help?” I ask. “Have the storm forecasts changed?”

“They haven’t.” Whenever the static dips, I hear a low, oddly familiar noise through the satphone. Ian’s breathing, I suspect, heavy and loud and faster than normal. Like he’s grunting his way through hazardous ground. “You’re approximately thirty minutes from my current location. Once I get

to you, we'll have a sixty-minute trek to safety. Which means that we should be able to just barely avoid the storm."

The second he says the word *trek*, my stupid brain decides to attempt to rotate my ankle. Which leads to me biting my chapped, frozen lips to swallow a whimper. A *terrible* idea, as it turns out. "Ian, nothing of what you just said makes sense."

"Really?" He sounds amused. How? *Why?* "Nothing?"

"How do you even know where I am?"

"GPS tracker. On your Iridium phone."

"It's impossible. AMASE said they couldn't activate the tracker. The sensors aren't working."

"AMASE isn't within range, and the coming storm was probably interfering." A strong gust of wind lifts, and for a painfully gelid moment it's everywhere: whooshing around me, piercing inside my lungs, making its way into my ears. I try to curl my body away, but it does nothing to stop the freezing air. I dig myself only deeper into the snow and jostle my stupid ankle.

Fuck.

"AMASE is over three hours from my creva—location. If you really *do* get here in thirty minutes, we're not going to make it there in time to avoid the storm. *You* are not going to make it back in time, and I'm not going to let something terrible happen to you just because I—"

"I'm not coming from AMASE," he says. "And that's not where we're going."

"But how did you even access my GPS tracker if you're not at AMASE?"

A pause. "I'm good with computers."

"You're— Are you saying you *hacked* your way into—"

"They mentioned you're injured. How bad is it?"

I glance at my boots. Ice crystals have begun to crust around the soles. "Just a few scrapes. And a sprain. I think I could *maybe* walk, but—I don't know about sixty minutes." I don't know about sixty seconds. "And on this terrain—"

“You won’t have to walk at all.”

I frown, even though my brow is almost frozen. “How will I get to wherever we’re going if—”

“Do you have ascenders?”

“Yes. But again, I don’t know if I can climb . . .”

“No problem. I’ll just haul you out.”

“You . . . It’s too dangerous. The terrain around the edge might collapse and you’d fall in, too.” I let out a choppy breath. “Ian, I *cannot* let you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not in the habit of falling inside crevasses.”

“Neither am I.”

“You sure about that?”

Okay. Fine. I walked right into this one. “Ian, I cannot let you do this. If it’s . . .” I take a shuddering, frigid breath. “If it’s because you feel responsible for this. If you’re risking your life because you think it’s somehow your fault I ended up here, then you really shouldn’t. You know that I have no one to blame but me, and—”

“I am about to start climbing,” he interrupts distractedly, like I wasn’t in the dead middle of an impassioned speech.

“Climbing? What are you climbing?”

“I’ll put away my phone, but get in touch if anything happens.”

“Ian, I *really* don’t think you should—”

“Hannah.”

The shock of hearing my name—in Ian’s voice, cocooned by the whistle of the wind, and through the metallic line of my satphone, no less—has me instantly shutting up. Until he continues.

“Just relax and think of Mars, okay? I’ll be there soon.”

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 4

Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas
One year ago

It's not that I'm shocked to see him.

That would be, honestly, pretty idiotic. Too idiotic even for me: a well-known occasional idiot. I might not have seen Ian Floyd in over four years—yup, since the day I had the best sex-and-it-wasn't-even-really-sex-God-what-a-waste-of-my-life and then barely forced myself to wave good-bye at him while the mahogany of his office door closed in my face. It might have been a while, but I've kept up with his whereabouts through the use of highly sophisticated technology and cutting-edge research tools.

I.e., Google.

As it turns out, when you're one of NASA's top engineers, people write shit about you. I swear I don't look up "Ian + Floyd" twice a week or anything like that, but I do get curious every once in a while, and the Internet offers so much information in exchange for so little effort. That's how I found out that when the former chief resigned for health reasons, Ian was chosen as head of engineering for *Tenacity*, the rover that landed safely in the de Vaucouleurs Crater just last year. He even gave *60 Minutes* an interview, in which he mostly came across as serious, competent, handsome, humble, reserved.

For some reason, it made me think of the way he'd groaned into my skin. His viselike grip on my hips, his thigh moving between my legs. It made me remember that he'd wanted to take me to dinner, and that I'd actually—appallingly, unfathomably—been tempted to say yes. I watched the entire thing on YouTube. Then I scrolled down to read the comments

and realized that a good two thirds were from users who'd noticed exactly how serious, competent, handsome, humble, reserved, and likely well-endowed Ian was. I hastened to click out, feeling caught with my entire torso in the cookie jar.

Whatever.

I think I expected my Google search to lead to more personal stuff, too. Maybe a Facebook account with pictures of adorable ginger toddlers. Or one of those wedding websites with overproduced pictures and the story of how the couple met. But no. The closest was a triathlon he did about two years ago near Houston. He didn't place particularly well, but he did finish it. As far as Google is concerned, that's the only non-work-related activity Ian has partaken in during the last four years.

But that's really beside the point, which is: I know quite a bit about Ian Floyd's career accomplishments, and I am well aware that he's still at NASA. Therefore, it makes no sense for me to be shocked to see him. And I'm not. I'm really not.

It's just that with over three thousand people working at the Johnson Space Center, I figured I'd run into him around my third week on the job. Maybe even during my third month. I definitely did *not* expect to see him on my first day, in the middle of the freaking new-employee orientation. And I definitely didn't anticipate that he'd spot me immediately and stare for a long, long time, as though remembering exactly who I am, as though not wondering why I look familiar or struggling to place me.

Which . . . he isn't. He clearly isn't. Ian appears at the entrance of the conference room where the new hires have been parked to wait for the next speaker; with a slightly aggravated expression he looks around for someone, notices *me*, chatting with Alexis, about a millisecond after I notice *him*.

He pauses for a moment, wide-eyed. Then weaves through the clusters of people chatting around the table, marching toward me with long strides. His eyes stay fixed on mine and he looks confident and pleasantly surprised, like a guy picking up his girlfriend at the airport after she spent

four months abroad studying the courtship habits of the humpback whale. But it has nothing to do with me. It's not because of me.

It *cannot* be because of me, right?

But Ian stops just a couple of feet away from Alexis, studies me with a small smile for a couple of seconds longer than is customary, and then says: "Hannah."

That's it. That's all he says. My name. And I *really* didn't want to see him. I *really* figured it would be weird to be with him again, after our not-quite-orgasmless first and only meeting. But . . .

It's not. Not at all. It just feels natural, nearly irresistible to smile at him, push away from the table and up on my toes for a hug, fill my nostrils with his clean scent, and say against his shoulder, "Hey, you."

His hands press briefly into my spine, and we fit together just like four years ago. Then, a second later, we both pull back. I don't do blushing, not ever, but my heart is beating fast and there's a curious heat creeping up my chest.

Maybe it's because this *should* be weird. Right? Four years ago, I came on to him. Then I came *on* him. Then I turned him down when he asked me to spend orgasmless, space-explorationless time with him. That's what I wanted to avoid: the male, awkward, ego-wounded reaction I was sure Ian would have.

But now he's here, disarmingly pleased to see me, and I just feel happy to be in his presence, like I did back when we coded our afternoon away. He looks a bit older; the day-old stubble is about one week old now, and maybe he's gotten even bigger. For the rest, though, he's just *himself*. Hair is red, eyes are blue, freckles are everywhere. I'm being forcibly reminded of his uniform initialization in C++—and of his teeth on my skin.

"You made it," he says, like I really did just get off a jet plane. "You're here."

He's smiling. I smile, too, and furrow my brow. "What? You didn't think I'd actually graduate?"

"Wasn't sure you'd ever pass your Water Resources class."

I burst out laughing. “What? Just because you saw me, with your own eyes, put zero effort into my assignment?”

“That *did* play a role, yeah.”

“You should read the stuff I BS’d about you in that report.”

“Ah, yes. What STDs did I have to battle to get to where I am today?”

“What STDs did you *not*?”

He sighs. A throat clears and we both turn— Oh, right. Alexis is *also* here. Looking between us, for some reason with saucer eyes.

“Oh, Ian, this is Alexis. She’s starting today, too. Alexis, this is—”

“Ian Floyd,” she says, sounding vaguely breathless. “I’m a fan.”

Ian seems vaguely alarmed, as though the idea of having “fans” befuddles him. Alexis doesn’t seem to notice and asks me, “You two know each other?”

“Ah . . . yeah, we do. We had a . . .” I gesture vaguely. “A thing. Years ago.”

“A *thing*?” Alexis’s eyes widen even more.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean *that* kind of thing. We did some kind of—one of those—what are they called . . . ?”

“An informational interview,” Ian patiently provides.

“An informational interview?” Alexis sounds skeptical. She stares at Ian, who is still staring at me.

“Yeah. Kind of. It devolved into a . . .” *Into what? Us almost fucking on NASA property? You wish, Hannah.*

“A debugging session,” Ian says. Then clears his throat.

I let out a laugh. “Right. That.”

“Debugging session?” Alexis sounds even *more* skeptical. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“Oh, it was,” Ian says. He’s still staring at me. Like he’s found his long-missing house keys and is afraid he’ll lose them again if he looks away.

“Yeah.” I cannot help making my smile just a tad suggestive. An experiment. I seem to do lots of those when he’s around. “Lots of fun.”

“Right.” Ian finally looks away, smiling the same way. “Lots.”

“How did you guys meet?” Alexis asks, more suspicious by the second.

“Oh, my best friend is Ian’s cousin-or-something.”

Ian nods. “How is . . .” He briefly stumbles on the name. “I want to say Melissa?”

“Mara. Your cousin’s name is *Mara*. Keep up, will you?” I fail to sound stern. “Have you not talked to her since she put us in touch?”

“I don’t believe we talked back then, either. Everything happened through—”

“—Great-Aunt Delphina, right. How’s the Home Depot video?”

“Lowe’s. I hear it’s making a resurgence since Uncle Mitch started hosting Thanksgiving.”

I laugh. “Well, Mara is great. She also graduated with her Ph.D. and recently moved to D.C. to work for the EPA. No interest in space stuff. Just, you know . . . saving the Earth.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t seem too impressed. “It’s a good fight.”

“But you’re glad someone else is shouldering it while you and I spend our days launching cool gadgets into space?”

He chuckles. “More or less.”

“Okay, this is very . . .” Alexis, again. We both turn to her: her eyes are narrow, and she sounds shrill. Honestly, I keep forgetting she’s here. “I’ve never seen two people . . .” She gestures between us. “You guys are *clearly* . . .” Ian and I exchange a baffled glance. “I’m going to leave you to it,” she says inscrutably. Then she turns on her heel, and Ian and I are alone.

Kind of. We’re in a room full of people, but . . . alone.

“Well . . . hi,” I say.

“Hey.” The pitch is lower. More intimate.

“I kind of expected this would be unpleasant.”

“This?”

“This.” I point back and forth between us. “Seeing you again. After the way we left off.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“Just . . .” I’m not sure how to articulate it, that my experience is that men who have been rejected by women can often be scary in a million different ways. It doesn’t matter anyway. It sounds like he put what

happened between us behind him the second I stepped out of his office. “Doesn’t matter. Since it’s not. Unpleasant, that is.”

Ian nods once. Like I remember from years ago. “What team have you been assigned to?”

“A & PE.”

“You don’t say.” He sounds pleased. Which is . . . new, mostly. My parents reacted to the news that I was hired by NASA in their usual way: showing disappointment that I did not go into medicine like my siblings. Sadie and Mara were always supportive and happy for me when I got my dream job, but they don’t care enough about space exploration to fully grasp the significance of where I ended up. Ian, though, Ian knows. And even though he’s now a big shot, and A & PE is not his team anymore, it still makes me feel warm and tingly.

“Yeah—this random guy I once met told me it was the best team.”

“Wise words.”

“But I’m not going to start with the team right away, because . . . I’ve managed to get them to pick me for AMASE.”

His smile is so unabashedly, genuinely happy for me, my heart leaps in my throat. “AMASE.”

“Yup.”

“Hannah, that’s fantastic.”

It is. AMASE is the shit, and the selection process to take part in an expedition was brutal, to the point that I’m not quite sure how I made it in. Probably sheer luck: Dr. Merel, one of the expedition leaders, was looking for someone with experience in gas chromatograph-mass spectrometry. Which I happen to have, due to some side projects my Ph.D. advisor foisted upon me. At the time, I aggressively bitched and moaned my way through them. In hindsight, I feel a bit guilty.

“Have you been there?” I ask Ian, even though I already know the answer, because he mentioned AMASE when we met. Plus, I’ve seen his CV, and some pictures from past expeditions. In one, taken over the summer of 2019, he’s wearing a dark thermal shirt and kneeling in front of a rover, squinting at its robotic arm. There is a young, pretty woman

standing right behind him, elbows propped on his shoulders, smiling in the direction of the camera.

I've thought about that picture more than just a couple of times. Imagined Ian asking the woman for dinner. Wondered if, unlike me, she was able to say yes.

"I've been there twice, winter and summer. Both great. Winter was considerably more miserable, but—" He stops. "Wait, isn't the next expedition leaving . . ."

"In three days. For five months." I watch him nod and digest the information. He still looks happy for me, but it's a little . . . subdued. A split second of disappointment, maybe? "What?" I ask.

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "It would have been nice to catch up."

"We still can," I say, maybe a bit too fast. "I'm not leaving till Thursday. Want to go out and—"

"Not get dinner, surely?" His smile is teasing. "I remember you don't . . . eat with other people."

"Right." The truth is that things have changed. Not that now I go out for dates—I very much still don't. And not that I've magically become an emotionally available person—I'm still very much *not*. But somewhere in the last couple of years, the whole Tinder game got . . . first a bit old; then a bit tiresome; then, eventually, a bit lonely. These days, I either focus on work or on Mara and Sadie. "I do drink coffee, though," I say on impulse. Even though I find coffee disgusting.

"Iced tea," Ian says, somehow remembering my four-year-old order. "I can't, though."

My heart sinks. "You can't?" Is he seeing someone? Not interested? "It doesn't have to—" *be a date*, I hasten to say, but we're interrupted.

"Ian, you're here." The HR rep who's been showing the new hires around appears at his side. "Thank you for making time— I know you need to be at JPL by tonight. Everyone." She claps her hands. "Please, take a seat. Ian Floyd, the current chief of engineering on the Mars Exploration Program, is going to tell you about some of NASA's ongoing projects."

Oh. *Oh*.

Ian and I exchange one long glance. For just a moment, he looks like he wants to tell me one last thing. But the HR rep leads him to the head of the conference table, and there's either not enough time or it's not something that's important enough to be said.

Half a minute later, I sit and listen to his clear, calm voice as he talks about the many projects he's overseeing, heart tight and heavy in my chest for reasons I cannot figure out.

Twenty minutes later, I lock eyes with him for the last time just as someone knocks to remind him that his plane will board in less than two hours.

And a little over six months later, when I finally meet him again, I hate him.

I hate him, I hate him, I hate him, and I don't hesitate to let him know.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 5

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

The next time my satphone vibrates, the winds have picked up even more. It's snowing, too. I've somehow managed to nestle myself in a small nook in the wall of my crevasse, but large flurries are starting to happily stick to the mini-rover I brought with me.

Which is, I must admit, ironic in a cosmic kind of way. The very reason I ventured out here was to test how the mini-rover I designed would work in highly stressful, low-sunlight, low-command-input situations. Of course, it was not supposed to storm. I was going to drop off the gear and then immediately return to the headquarters, which . . . well. It didn't quite work out like that, obviously.

But the gear *is* being covered by a layer of snow. And the sun *is* going to set soon. The mini-rover *is* in a highly stressful, low-sunlight, low-command-input situation, and from a scientific standpoint, this mission wasn't a total clusterfuck. At some point in the next few days, someone at AMASE (likely Dr. Merel, that *asshole*) will try to activate it, and then we'll know whether my work was actually solid. Well, *they* will know. By then, I'll probably just be a Popsicle with a very pissed-off expression, like Jack Torrance at the end of *The Shining*.

"Are you still doing okay?"

Ian's voice jostles me from my preapocalyptic whining. My heart flutters like a hummingbird—a sickly, freezing one who forgot to migrate south with her buddies. I don't bother answering, instead instantly ask: "Why are you here?" I know I sound like an ungrateful bitch, and while

I've never concerned myself with coming across as the latter, I do not mean to be the former. The problem is his presence makes no damn sense. I've had twenty minutes to think about it, and it just *doesn't*. And if this is the place and time where I finally croak . . . well, I don't want to die confused.

"Just out on a promenade." He sounds a little out of breath, which means that the climb must have been a tough one. Ian is lots of things, but out of shape is not one of them. "Taking in the scenery. What about you? What brings you here?"

"I'm serious. Why are you in Norway?"

"You know"—the sound briefly cuts, then bounces back with a generous helping of white noise—"not everyone vacations in South Padre. Some of us enjoy cooler destinations." The huffing and puffing through the tenuous satellite line is almost . . . intimate. We're exposed to the same elements, on the same heavily glaciated terrain, while the rest of the world has taken shelter. We're out here, alone.

And it doesn't make any sense.

"When did you fly into Svalbard?" It couldn't have been any time in the last three days, because there were no incoming fights. Svalbard is well connected to Oslo and Tromsø in the peak season, but that won't start until mid-March.

So . . . Ian must have been here for a handful of days. But why? He is chief of engineering on several rover projects, and the *Serendipity* team is approaching crunch time. It makes no sense for one of their key personnel to be in another country right now. Plus, the engineering component of this AMASE is minimal. Only Dr. Merel and me, really. All other members are geologists and astrobiologists, and—

Why the hell is Ian here? Why the hell would NASA send a senior engineer on a rescue mission that wasn't even supposed to happen?

"Are you still doing okay?" he asks again. When I don't reply, he continues: "I'm close. A few minutes away."

I brush snowflakes from my eyelashes. "When did AMASE change its mind on sending relief efforts?"

A brief hesitation. “Actually, it might be more than a few minutes. The storm’s intensifying and I can’t see very well—”

“Ian, why did they send *you*?”

A deep breath. Or a sigh. Or a puff, louder than the others. “You ask a lot of questions,” he says. Not for the first time.

“Yeah. But they’re pretty good questions, so I’m going to keep on asking more. For instance, how the—”

“As long as I can ask some, too.”

I nearly groan. “What do you want to know? Best concert? Favorite concert? An overview of the amenities of the crevasse? It offers very little in terms of nightlife—”

“I need to know, Hannah, if you are doing okay.”

I close my eyes. The bite of the cold is like a million needles wedged under my skin. “Yes. I . . . I’m fine.”

Suddenly, the call drops. The static, the noise, they all disappear, and I can’t hear Ian anymore. I glance at my satphone and find it still on. *Shit*. The problem is on his end. The snow’s getting thicker, it’ll be pitch-black in minutes, and on top of that I’m almost sure that Ian has been attacked by a polar bear. If something happens to him, I’ll never be able to forgive myse—

I hear steps cracking the snow and look up to the rim of the crevasse. The light is dimming by the second, but I make out the tall, broad outline of a man in a ski mask. He is looking down at me.

Oh God. Is he really . . . ?

“See?” Ian’s deep voice says, just a little out of breath. He lowers his neck warmer before adding, “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 6

Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas
Six months ago

I am surprised by how much the email hurts, because it's *a lot*.

Not that I expected to be happy about it. It's a well-established fact that hearing that your project has been denied funding is as pleasant as plunging a toilet. But rejections are the bread and butter of all academic journeys, and since starting my Ph.D. I've had approximately twelve hundred fantabillions of them. In the past five years, I've been denied publications, conference presentations, fellowships, scholarships, memberships. I even failed at getting into Bruegger's unlimited-drinks program—a devastating setback, considering my love for iced teas.

The good thing is, the more rejections you get, the easier they are to swallow. What had me punching pillows and plotting murder in the first year of my Ph.D. barely fazed me in the last. *Progress in Aerospace Sciences* saying that my dissertation wasn't worthy of gracing their pages? Fine. National Science Foundation declining to sponsor my postdoctoral studies? Okay. Mara insisting that the Rice Krispies Treats I made for her birthday tasted like toilet paper? Eh. I'll live.

This specific rejection, though, cuts deep. Because I really, really need the grant money for what I'm planning to do.

Most of NASA funding is tied to specific projects, but every year there is a discretionary pot that's up for grabs, usually for junior scientists who come up with research ideas that seem worth exploring. And mine, I think, is pretty worthy. I've been at NASA for over six months. I spent nearly all of them in Norway, at the best Mars analogue on Earth, knee-deep in

intense fieldwork, equipment testing, sampling exercises. For the past couple of weeks, ever since returning to Houston, I've taken my place with the A & PE team, and it's been really, really cool. Ian was right: best team ever.

But. Every break. Every free second. Every weekend. Every scrap of time I could find, I focused on finalizing the proposal for my project, believing that it was a fucking *great* idea. And now that proposal has been rejected. Which feels like being stabbed with a santoku knife.

"Did something happen?" Karl, my office mate, asks from across the desk. "You look like you're about to cry. Or maybe throw something out of the window, I can't tell."

I don't bother to glance at him. "Haven't made up my mind, but I'll keep you updated." I stare at the monitor of my computer, skimming the feedback letters from the internal reviewers.

> As we all know, in early 2010, the rover *Spirit* became stuck in a sand trap, was unable to reorient its solar panels toward the sun, and froze to death as a consequence of its lack of power. Something very similar happened eight years later to *Opportunity*, which went into hibernation when a maelstrom blocked sunlight and prevented it from recharging its batteries. Obviously, the risk of losing control of rovers because of extreme weather events is high. To address this, Dr. Arroyo has designed a promising internal system that is less likely to fail in the case of unpredictable meteorological situations. She proposes to build a model and test its efficacy on the next expedition at the Arctic Mars Analog in Svalbard (AMASE)—
>
> Dr. Arroyo's project is a brilliant addition to NASA's current roster, and it should be approved for further study. Dr. Arroyo's vitae is impressive, and she has accumulated enough experience to carry out the proposed work—
>
> If successful, this proposal will do something critical for NASA's space exploration program: decrease the experience of low-power faults, mission clock faults, and up-loss timer faults in future Mars Exploration missions—

Here is the issue: the reviews are . . . positive. Overwhelmingly positive. Even from a crowd of scientists that, I am well aware, feeds on being mean and scathing. The science doesn't seem to be a problem, the relevance to NASA's mission is there, my CV is good enough, and . . . it doesn't add up. Which is why I'm not going to sit here and take this bullshit.

I slam my laptop closed, aggressively stand from my desk, and march right out of my office.

"Hannah? Where are you—"

I ignore Karl and make my way through the hallways till I find the office I'm looking for.

"Come in," a voice says after my knock.

I met Dr. Merel because he was my direct superior during AMASE, and he is . . . an odd duck, honestly. Very stiff. Very hard-core. NASA is full of ambitious people, but he seems to be almost obsessed with results, publications, the kind of sexy science that makes big splashy news. Initially I wasn't a fan, but I must admit that as a supervisor he's been nothing but supportive. He's the one who selected me for the expedition to begin with, and he encouraged me to apply for funding once I went to him with my project idea.

"Hannah. How nice to see you."

"Do you have a minute to talk?" He's probably in his forties, but there is something old-school about him. Maybe the sweater-vests, or the fact that he's literally the only person I've met at NASA who doesn't go by his first name. He takes off his metal-rimmed glasses, sets them on his desk, then he steeples his fingers to give me a long look. "It's about your proposal, isn't it?"

He doesn't offer me a seat, and I don't take one. But I do close the door behind me. I lean my shoulder against the doorframe and cross my arms on my chest, hoping I won't sound the way I feel, i.e., homicidal. "I just got the rejection email, and I was wondering if you have any . . . insight. The reviews didn't highlight areas needing improvement, so—"

"I wouldn't worry about it," he says dismissively.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

“It’s inconsequential.”

“I . . . Is it?”

“Yes. Of course it would have been convenient if you’d had those funds at your disposal, but I’ve already discussed it with two of my colleagues who agree that your work is meritorious. They are in control of other funds that Floyd won’t be able to veto, so—”

“Floyd?” I raise my finger. I must have misheard. “Hold up, did you say Floyd? Ian Floyd?” I try to recall if I’ve heard of other Floyds working here. It’s a common last name, but . . .

Merel’s face doesn’t hide much. It’s obvious that he was referring to Ian, and it’s obvious that he wasn’t supposed to bring him up, fucked up by doing it anyway, and now has no choice but to explain to me what he hinted at.

I have exactly zero intention of letting him off the hook.

“This is, of course, confidential,” he says after a brief hesitation.

“Okay,” I agree hurriedly.

“The review process should remain anonymous. Floyd cannot know.”

“He won’t,” I lie. I have no plan at the moment, but part of me already knows that I’m lying. I’m not exactly the nonconfrontational type.

“Very well.” Merel nods. “Floyd was part of the committee that screened your application, and he was the one who decided to veto your project.”

He . . . what?

He what?

No way.

“This doesn’t sound right. Ian isn’t even here in Houston.” I know this because a couple of days after coming back from Norway, I went looking for him. Looked him up on the NASA directory, bought a cup of coffee and one of tea from the cafeteria, then went to his office with only vague ideas of what I’d say, feeling *almost* nervous, and . . .

I found it locked. “He’s at JPL,” someone with a South African accent told me when they noticed me idling in the hallway.

“Oh. Okay.” I turned around. Took two steps away. Then turned back to ask, “When will he be back?”

“Hard to tell. He’s been there for a month or so to work on the sampling tool for *Serendipity*.”

“I see.” I thanked the woman, and this time I left for real.

It’s been a little over a week since then, and I’ve been to his office . . . in a number of instances. I’m not even sure why. And it doesn’t really matter, because the door was closed every single time. Which is how I know that: “Ian is at JPL. He’s not here.”

“You are mistaken,” Merel says. “He’s back.”

I stiffen. “As of when?”

“That, I could not tell you, but he was present when the committee met to discuss your proposal. And like I said, he was the one who vetoed it.”

This is impossible. Nonsensical. “Are you sure it was him?”

Merel gives me an annoyed look and I swallow, feeling oddly . . . exposed, standing the way I am in this office while being told that Ian—Ian? *Really?*—is the reason I didn’t get my funding. It seems like a lie. But would Merel lie? He’s way too straitlaced for that. I doubt he has the imagination.

“Can he do that? Veto a project that’s otherwise well received?”

“Considering his position and seniority, yes.”

“Why, though?”

He sighs. “It could be anything. Perhaps he is jealous of a brilliant proposal, or he’d rather the funding go to someone else. Some of his close collaborators have applied, I hear.” A pause. “Something he said made me suspect that . . .”

“What?”

“That he didn’t believe you capable of doing the work.”

I stiffen. “Excuse me?”

“He didn’t seem to find faults in the proposal. But he did talk about *your* role in it in less-than-flattering tones. Of course, I tried to push back.”

I close my eyes, suddenly nauseous. I cannot believe Ian would do this. I cannot believe he’d be such a backstabbing, miserable dick. Maybe we’re not close friends, but after our last meeting, I thought he . . . I don’t know. I

have no idea. I think maybe I had expectations of *something*, but this puts a swift end to them. “I’m going to appeal.”

“There is no reason to do that, Hannah.”

“There are plenty of reasons. If Ian thinks that I’m not good enough *despite* my CV, I—”

“Do you know him?” Merel interrupts me.

“What?”

“I was wondering if you two know each other?”

“No. No, I . . .” *Once humped his leg. It was fantastic*. “Barely. Just in passing.”

“I see. I was just curious. It would explain why he was so determined about denying your project. I’d never seen him quite so . . . adamant that a proposal not get accepted.” He waves his hand, like this is not important. “But you shouldn’t concern yourself with this, because I have already secured alternative funding for your project.”

Oh. Now *this* I did not expect. “Alternative funding?”

“I reached out to a few team leaders who owed me favors. I asked them if they had any budget surplus they might want to dedicate to your project, and I was able to put together enough to send you back to Norway.”

I half gasp, half laugh. “Really?”

“Indeed.”

“On the next AMASE?”

“The one that leaves in February of next year, yes.”

“What about the help I asked for? I will need one other person to help me build the mini-rover and to be in the field. And I’ll have to travel quite a way from home base, which might be dangerous on my own.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to finance another expedition member.”

I press my lips together and think about it. I can probably do most of the prep work on my own. If I don’t sleep for the next few months, which . . . I’ve done it before. I’ll be fine. The problem would be when I get to Svalbard. It’s too risky to—

“I’ll be there, out in the field with you, of course,” Dr. Merel says. I’m a little surprised. In the months we were in Norway, I saw him do very little

sample collecting and snow plodding. I've always thought of him as more of a coordinator. But if he offered, he must mean it, and . . . I smile. "Perfect, then. Thank you."

I slip out of the room, and for about two weeks I'm high enough on the knowledge that my project will be happening that I manage to do just that: not let anyone know. I don't even tell Mara and Sadie when we FaceTime, because . . . because to explain the degree of Ian's betrayal, I'd have to admit to the lie I told them years ago. Because I feel like a total idiot for trusting someone who deserves nothing from me. Because being honest with them would first require me to be honest with myself, and I'm too angry, tired, disappointed for that. In my rants, Ian becomes a faceless, anonymous figure, and there is something freeing in that. In not letting myself remember that I used to think of him fondly, and by name.

Then, exactly seventeen days later, I meet Ian Floyd in the stairwell. And that's when everything goes to shit.

• • •

I spot him before he sees me—because of the red, and the general largeness, and the fact that he's climbing up while I'm going down. There are about five elevators here, and I'm not sure why anyone would willingly choose to subject their bodies to the stress of upward stairs, but I'm too shocked that Ian is the one doing it. It's the kind of glory-less overachieving I've come to expect from him.

My first instinct is to push him and watch him fall to his death. Except I'm almost sure it's a felony. Plus, Ian is considerably stronger than me, which means it might not be feasible. *Abort mission,* I tell myself. *Just squeeze by. Ignore him. Not worth your time.*

The problems start when he looks up and notices me. He stops exactly two steps below, which should put him at a disadvantage but, depressingly, unfairly, *tragically*, doesn't. We are at eye level when his eyes widen and his lips curve in a pleased smile. He says, "Hannah," a touch of something

in his voice that I recognize but instantly reject, and I have no choice but to acknowledge him.

The staircase is deserted, and sound carries far. His “I came looking for you” is deep and low and vibrates right through me. “Last week. Some guy in your office said you don’t work there much, but—”

“Fuck off.”

The words crash out of me. My temper has always been reckless, one hundred miles per hour, and . . . well. Still is, I guess.

Ian’s reaction is too baffled to be confused. He stares at me like he’s not sure what he just heard, and it’s the perfect chance for me to walk away before I say something I regret. But seeing his face makes me remember Merel’s words, and that . . . that is really not good.

He didn’t believe you capable of doing the work.

The worst part, the one that actually *hurts*, is how thoroughly I misjudged Ian. I actually thought he was a good guy. I liked him a *lot*, when I never let myself like anyone, and . . . how *dare* he? How dare he stab me in the back and then address me as though he’s my friend?

“What exactly is it that you have a problem with, Ian?” I square my shoulders to make myself bigger. I want him to look at me and think of a cruiser tank. I want him to be scared I’m going to pillage him. “Is it that you hate good science? Or is it purely personal?”

He frowns. He has the audacity to *frown*. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You can cut it. I know about the proposal.”

For a second he is absolutely still. Then his gaze hardens, and he asks, “Who told you?”

At least he’s not pretending not to know what I’m referring to. “Really?” I snort. “Who told me? That’s what seems relevant?”

His expression is stony. “Proceedings regarding the disbursement of internal funding are not public. An anonymous internal peer review is necessary to guarantee—”

“—to guarantee your ability to allocate funding to your close collaborators and fuck up the careers of the ones you have no use for.

Right?” He jerks back. Not the reaction I expected, but it fills me with joy nonetheless. “Unless the reason *was* personal. And you vetoed my proposal because I didn’t sleep with you, what, five years ago.”

He doesn’t deny it, doesn’t defend himself, doesn’t scream that I’m insane. His eyes narrow to blue slits and he asks, “It was Merel, wasn’t it?”

“Why do you care? You *did* veto my project, so—”

“Did he also tell you *why* I vetoed it?”

“I never said that it was Merel who—”

“Because he was there when I explained my objections, at length and in detail. Did he omit that?” I press my lips together. Which he seems to interpret as an opening. “Hannah.” He leans closer. We’re nose to nose, I smell his skin and his aftershave, and I hate every second of this. “Your project is too dangerous. It specifically asks that you travel to a remote location to drop off equipment at a time of the year in which the weather is volatile and often totally unpredictable. I’ve been in Longyearbyen in February, and avalanches develop out of the blue. It’s only gotten worse in the last few—”

“How many times?”

He blinks at me. “What?”

“How many times have you been to Longyearbyen?”

“I’ve been on two expeditions—”

“Then you’ll understand why I take the opinion of someone who has been on a dozen missions over yours. Plus, we both know what the *real* reason of the veto was.”

Ian opens, then closes his mouth. His jaw hardens, and I’m finally sure of it: he’s mad. Pissed. I see it in the way he clenches his fist. The flare of his nostrils. His big body is just inches from mine, glowing with anger. “Hannah, Merel is not always trustworthy. There have been incidents under his watch that—”

“What incidents?”

A pause. “It’s not my information to disclose. But you shouldn’t trust him with your—”

“Right.” I scoff. “Of course I should take the word of the guy who went behind my back over the word of the guy who went to bat for me and made sure my project was funded anyway. *Very* hard choice to make.”

His hand lifts to close around my upper arm, at once gentle and urgent. I refuse to care enough to pull away from his touch. “What did you just say?”

I roll my eyes. “I said a bunch of things, Ian, but the gist of it was *fuck off*. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“What do you mean, Merel made sure that your project was funded anyway?” His grip tightens.

“I mean exactly what I said.” I lean in, eyes locked with his, and for a split second the familiar feeling of being *close, here, near* him crashes over me like a wave. But it washes away just as quickly, and all that is left is an odd combination of vengeful sadness. I have my project, which means that I won. But I also . . . Yeah. I *did* like him. And while he was always just in the periphery of my life, I think maybe I’d hoped . . .

Well. No matter now. “He found an alternative, Ian,” I tell him. “Me and my *inability to carry out the project* are going to Norway, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

He closes his eyes. Then he opens them and mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like *fuck*, followed by my name and other hurried explanations that I don’t care to listen to. I free my arm from his fingers, meet his eyes one last time, and walk away swearing to myself that this is it.

I will never think of Ian Floyd again.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 7

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

He's not wearing NASA gear.

By now it's nearly dark, the snow falls steadily, and whenever I look up to the edge of the crevasse, huge snowflakes hurl straight into my eyes. But even then, I can tell: Ian is *not* wearing the gear NASA usually issues to AMASE scientists.

His hat and coat are The North Face, a dull black dusted with white, interrupted only by the red of his goggles and ski mask. His phone, when he takes it out to communicate with me from the edge of the crevasse, is not the standard-issue Iridium one, but a model I don't recognize. He stares down for a long moment, as if assessing the shitfuck of a situation I managed to put myself in. Flurries circle around him, but never quite touch. His shoulders rise and fall. One, two, several times. Then, finally, he lifts his goggles and brings the phone to his mouth.

"I'll send down the rope," he says, in lieu of a greeting.

To say that I'm in a bit of a predicament at the moment, or that I have a few problems on my hands, would be a *vast* understatement. And yet, staring up from the place where I was positive I'd bite it until about five minutes ago, all I can think about is that the last time I talked with this man, I . . .

I told him to fuck off.

Repeatedly.

And he did deserve it, at least for saying that I wasn't good enough to carry out the project. But at the time he also mentioned that my mission was

going to be too dangerous. And now he's shown up to the Arctic Circle, with his deep-set blue eyes and even deeper voice, to pull me away from certain death.

I always knew I was an asshole, but I'd never quite realized the extent of it.

"Is this the most massive *I told you so* in history?" I ask, attempting a joke.

Ian ignores me. "Once you have the rope, I'll build an anchor," he says, tone calm and matter-of-fact, not a trace of panic. It's like he's teaching a kid how to tie their shoelaces. No urgency here, no doubt that this will go as planned and we'll both be fine. "I'll prepare the lip and haul you up over my shoulder. Make sure everything is clipped to your belay loop. Can you pull on the fixed side?"

I just stare up at him. I feel . . . I'm not sure what. Confused. Scared. Hungry. Guilty. Cold. After what's probably way too long, I manage to nod.

He smiles a little before throwing down the rope. I watch it uncoil, slither down toward me, and come to rest a couple of inches from where I'm huddled. Then I reach out and close my gloved hand around its end.

I'm still confused, scared, hungry, and guilty. But when I glance up at Ian, maybe I feel a little less cold.

• • •

It's just a sprain, I'm pretty sure. But as far as sprains go, this is a bad one.

Ian is true to his promises and manages to get me out of the crevasse in barely a couple of minutes, but the instant I'm on the surface, I try to limp around, and . . . it's not looking good. My foot touches the ground and pain spears through my entire body like lightning.

"*Fu*—" I press a hand against my lips, trying to hide my gasp in the fabric of my gloves, struggling to keep upright. I'm pretty sure that the loud swishing of the wind swallows my whimper, but there isn't much I can do to help the tears flooding my eyes.

Thankfully, Ian is too busy collecting the rope to notice. “I’ll just need a second,” he says, and I welcome the reprieve. He might have just rescued me from becoming a polar bear’s dessert, but for some reason I hate the idea of him seeing me all weepy and weak. Okay, fine: I needed saving, and maybe I don’t look like much at the moment. But my pain threshold is usually pretty high, and I’ve never been a whiner. I don’t want to give Ian any reason to believe otherwise.

Except.

Except that those two lonely tears have opened the floodgates. Behind me, Ian loads his climbing gear into his backpack, his movements practiced and economical, and I . . . I cannot bring myself to offer any help. I just stand awkwardly, trying to spare my throbbing ankle, on one foot, like a flamingo. My cheeks are hot and wet in the falling snow, and I look down at my stupid crevasse thinking that until a minute ago—until Ian Fucking Floyd—it was going to be the last place I saw. The last slice of sky.

And just like that, a rushing terror punches through me. It knocks out the fabricated quiet of my Martian ocean, and the sheer magnitude of what nearly happened, of all the things I love that I would have missed out on if Ian hadn’t come for me, sweeps through my brain like a rake.

Dogs. Three A.M. in the summer. Sadie and Mara being absolute idiots, and me laughing at them. Hiking trips, kiwi iced tea, that Greek restaurant I never got around to trying, elegant code, the next season of *Stranger Things*, really good sex, a *Nature* publication, seeing humans on Mars, the ending of *A Song of Ice and Fire*—

“We need to be on our way before the storm gets worse,” Ian says. “Are you—”

Ian looks at me, and I don’t even try to hide my face. I’m well past that. When he comes closer, a dark frown on his face, I let him hold my eyes, lift my chin with his fingers, inspect my cheeks. His expression shifts from urgent, to worried, to understanding. I draw in a breath that turns into a gulp. The gulp, to my horror, morphs into a sob. Two. Three. Five. And then . . .

Then I'm just a fucking mess. Blubbering pitifully, like a child, and when a warm, heavy body wraps around me and grips me tightly, I offer no resistance.

"I'm sorry," I murmur into the nylon of Ian's jacket. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I— I have no clue what's wrong with me, I—" It's just that I hadn't known. Down in the crevasse, I was able to pretend it wasn't happening. But now that I'm out, and I don't feel numb anymore, it's all flooding back, and I cannot stop seeing them, all the things, *all the things* that I almost—

"Shh." Ian's hands feel impossibly large as they move up and down my back, cupping my head, stroking my snow-damp hair where it spills from under the hat. We are in the icy middle of a storm, but this close to him, I feel almost peaceful. "Shh. It's okay."

I cling to him. He lets me sob for long moments we cannot afford, pressing me against him with no air between us, until I can feel his heartbeat through the thick layers of our clothes. Then he mumbles "Fucking Merel" with barely restrained fury, and I think that it would be so easy to blame things on Merel, but the truth is, it's all my fault.

When I lean back to tell him, he cups my face. "We really need to go. I'll carry you to the coast. I have a light brace for your ankle, just to avoid messing it up even more."

"The coast?"

"My boat is less than an hour away."

"*Your* boat?"

"Come on. We have to get going before more snow falls."

"I—maybe I can walk. I can at least try—"

He smiles, and the thought that I could have died—I could have *died*—without being smiled at like this, by *this man*, has my lips trembling. "I don't mind carrying you." A dimple appears. "Do try to contain your love for crevasses, please."

I glare at him through the tears. As it turns out, it's exactly what he wants from me.

• • •

Ian carries me almost all the way.

To say that he does it without breaking a sweat, in the whiteout of a thickening snowstorm, in negative-ten-degree-Celsius weather, would probably be a bit of an exaggeration. He smells salty and warm as he deposits me on one of the bunks on the lower deck of the boat, a small expedition ship named M/S *Sjøveien*. I do spot little droplets of perspiration here and there, and they make his forehead and upper lip shine before he wipes them with the sleeves of his coat.

Still, I can't quite get over the relative ease with which he made his way through glaciated plateaus for over an hour, wading through old and fresh snow, sidestepping rocky formations and ice algae, never once complaining about my arms coiled tight around his neck.

He almost slipped twice. Both times, I felt the steel of his muscles as they tensed to avoid the fall, his large body solid and reliable as it balanced and reoriented before picking up the pace again. Both times, I felt bizarrely, incomprehensibly safe.

"I need you to let AMASE know that you're safe," he tells me the second we're on the boat. I look around, noticing for the first time that there are no other passengers on board. "And that you don't need responders to come out once the storm lets up."

I frown. "Wouldn't they know that you already—"

"Right now. Please." He stares pointedly until I compose and send a message to the entire AMASE group, in a way that reminds me that he is very much a leader. Used to people doing as he says. "We have a space heater, but it's not going to do a whole lot in this temperature." He takes off his jacket, revealing a black thermal underneath. His hair is messy, and bright, and beautiful. Not nearly as disgustingly hat-squished as mine, an inexplicable phenomenon which should be the object of several research studies. Maybe I'll apply for a grant to investigate it. Then Ian will veto me, and we'll be back to Mutual Hate square one. "The winds are more severe than I'd like, but on board is still a safer option than ashore. We're

anchored, but the waves might get nasty. There's anti-seasickness meds next to your bunk, and—"

"Ian."

He falls quiet.

"Why are you not wearing a NASA survival suit?"

He doesn't look at me. Instead he drops on his knees in front of me and begins to work on my brace. His large hands are firm but delicate on my calf. "Are you sure it's not broken? Is it painful?"

"Yes. And yes, but getting better." The heat, or at least the lack of freezing winds, is helping. Ian's grip, comforting and warm around my swollen ankle, doesn't hurt, either. "This isn't a NASA boat, either." Not that I expected it to be. I think I know what's going on here.

"It's what we had at our disposal."

"We?"

He still doesn't meet my eyes. Instead he tightens the brace and pulls a thick woolen sock over my foot. I think I feel the ghosts of fingertips trailing briefly across my toe, but maybe it's my impression. It must be.

"You should drink. And eat." He straightens. "I'll get you—"

"Ian," I interrupt softly. He pauses, and we both seem simultaneously taken aback at my tone. It's just . . . pleading. Tired. I'm usually not one for displays of vulnerability, but . . . Ian has come for me, in a small rocking boat, across the fjords. We are alone in the Arctic Basin, surrounded by twenty-thousand-year-old glaciers and shrieking winds. There is *nothing* usual about this. "Why are you here?"

He lifts one eyebrow. "What? You miss your crevasse? I can take you back if—"

"No, really—why are you here? On this boat? You're not part of this year's AMASE. You shouldn't even be in Norway. Don't they need you at JPL?"

"They'll be fine. Plus, sailing is a passion of mine." He's obviously being evasive, but the cold must have frozen my brain cells, because all I want right now is to find out more about Ian Floyd's passions. True or made up.

“Is it really?”

He shrugs, noncommittal. “We used to sail a lot when I was a kid.”

“We?”

“My dad and I.” He stands and turns away from me, starting to rummage in the little compartments in the hull. “He’d bring me along when he had to work.”

“Oh. Was he a fisherman?”

I hear a fond snort. “He smuggled drugs.”

“He *what*?”

“He smuggled drugs. Weed, for the most—”

“No, I heard you the first time, but . . . seriously?”

“Yup.”

I frown. “Are you . . . Are you okay? Is that even . . . Is that a thing, smuggling weed on boats?”

He’s tinkering with something, giving me his back, but he turns just enough for me to catch the curve of his smile. “Yeah. Illegal, but a thing.”

“And your father would take you?”

“Sometimes.” He turns around, holding a small tray. He always looks big, but hunched in the too-low deck he feels like the Great Barrier Reef. “It would drive my mom crazy.”

I laugh. “She didn’t like her son being part of the family criminal enterprise?”

“Go figure.” His dimple disappears. “They’d yell about it for hours. No wonder Mars began sounding so attractive.”

I cock my head and study his expression. “Is that why you grew up not knowing Mara?”

“Who is M— Oh. Yeah. For the most part. Mom isn’t very fond of the Floyd side of the family. Though I’m sure he’s the black sheep by their standards, too. I wasn’t really allowed to spend time with him, so . . .” He shakes his head, as if to change the topic. “Here. It’s not much, but you should eat.”

I have to force myself to look away from his face, but when I notice the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches he made, my stomach cramps with

happiness. I wiggle in the bunk until I'm sitting straighter, take off my jacket, and then immediately attack the food. My relationship with eating is much less complicated than the one with Ian Floyd, after all, and I lose myself in the straightforward, soothing act of chewing for . . . for a long time, probably.

When I swallow the last bite, I remember that I'm not alone and notice him staring at me with an amused expression.

"Sorry." My cheeks warm. I brush the crumbs from my thermal shirt and lick some jam off the corner of my mouth. "I'm a fan of peanut butter."

"I know."

He does? "You do?"

"Wasn't your graduation cake just a giant Reese's cup?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, taken aback. It was the one Mara and Sadie got me after I defended my thesis. They got tired of me licking frosting and peanut butter filling off the Costco sheet cakes they usually bought and just ordered me a giant cup. But I have no recollection of ever telling Ian. I barely think of it, honestly. I remember about it only when I log into my barely used Instagram, because the picture of the three of us digging in is the last thing I ever posted—

"You should rest while you can," Ian tells me. "The storm should ease up by early tomorrow morning and we'll sail out. I'll need your help in this shit visibility."

"Okay," I agree. "Yeah. But I still don't understand how you can be here alone if—"

"I'll go check that everything is all right. I'll be back in a minute." He disappears before I can ask exactly what he needs to check on. And he's not back in a minute—or even before I lean back in the bunk, decide to rest my eyes for just a couple of minutes, and fall asleep, dead to the world.

• • •

The bark of the wind and the rhythmic rocking of the boat rouse me, but what keeps me awake is the chill.

I look around in the blue glow of the emergency lamp and find Ian a few feet away from me, sleeping on the other bunk. It's too short, and barely wide enough to accommodate him, but he seems to make do. His hands are folded neatly on his stomach, and the covers are kicked to his feet, which tells me that the cabin is probably not as cold as I currently feel.

Not that it matters: it's as if the hours spent outside have seeped into my bones to keep on icing me from the inside. I try to huddle under the covers for a few minutes, but the shivering only gets worse. Perhaps strong enough to dislodge some kind of important cerebral pathway, because without really knowing why, I get out of my bunk, wrap the blanket around myself, and limp across the rolling floor in Ian's direction.

When I lie down next to him, he blinks, groggy and mildly startled. And yet his first reaction is not to throw me in the sea but to push toward the bulkhead to make room for me.

He's a way better person than I'll ever be.

"Hannah?"

"I just . . ." My teeth are chattering. Again. "I can't get warm."

He doesn't hesitate. Or maybe he does, but just a fraction of a second. He opens his arms and pulls me to his chest, and . . . I fit inside them so perfectly, it's as though there were a spot ready for me all along. A five-year-old spot, familiar and cozy. A delicious, warm nook that smells of soap and sleep, freckles and pale, sweaty skin.

It makes me want to cry again. Or laugh. I cannot remember the last time I felt this fragile and confused.

"Ian?"

"Hm?" His voice is rough, all chest. This is what he sounds like when he wakes up. What he would have sounded like the morning after if I'd agreed to go to dinner with him.

"How long have you been in Svalbard?"

He sighs, a warm chuff on the crown of my hair. I must be catching him off guard, because this time he answers the question. "Six days."

Six days. That's one day before *I* arrived. "Why?"

"Vacation." He nuzzles my head with his chin.

“Vacation,” I repeat. His thermal is soft under my lips.

“Yeah. I had”—he yawns against my scalp—“lots of time left over.”

“And you decided to spend it in Norway?”

“Why do you sound incredulous? Norway’s a good place. It has fjords and ski resorts and museums.”

Except that’s not where he is. Not at a ski resort, and most definitely not at a museum. “Ian.” It feels so intimate, to say his name so close to him. To press it into his chest as my fingers curve into his shirt. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That my project was going to be such a shitshow. That I . . . That I wasn’t going to be able to finish my project.” I am going to start crying again. Possibly. Likely. “Was it—was it that obvious? Am I just this total, giant, incompetent asshole who decided to do whatever the fuck she wanted despite everyone else telling her that she was going to—”

“No, no, shh.” His arms tighten around me, and I realize that I am, in fact, crying. “You are not an asshole, Hannah. And you are *the opposite* of incompetent.”

“But you vetoed me because I—”

“Because of the intrinsic danger of a project like yours. For the past few months, I tried to get this project stopped in about ten different ways. Personal meetings, emails, appeals—I tried it all. And even the people who agreed with me that it was too dangerous would not step in to prevent it. So no, you’re not the asshole, Hannah. They are.”

“What?” I shift on my elbow to hold his eyes. The blue is pitch-black in the night. “Why?”

“Because it’s a great project. It’s absolutely brilliant, and it has the potential to revolutionize future space exploration missions. High risk, high reward.” His fingers push a strand behind my ear, then run down my hair. “*Too* high risk.”

“But Merel said that—”

“Merel is a fucking idiot.”

My eyes widen. Ian's tone is exasperated and furious and not at all what I'd expect from his usually calm, aloof self. "Well, Dr. Merel has a doctorate from Oxford and I believe is a MENSA member, so—"

"He's a moron." I shouldn't laugh, or burrow even closer to Ian, but I cannot help myself. "He was at AMASE when I was here, too. There were two serious injuries during my second expedition, and both of them happened because he pushed scientists to finish fieldwork when conditions weren't optimal."

"Wait, seriously?" He nods curtly. "Why is he still at NASA?"

"Because his negligence was hard to prove, and because AMASE members sign waivers. Like you did." He takes a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Why were you out there alone?"

"I needed to drop off the equipment. The storm wasn't forecasted. But then there was an avalanche nearby, I got scared that my mini-rover would get damaged, started running away without looking, and—"

"No—why were you *alone*, Hannah? You were supposed to have someone else with you. That's what the proposal said."

"Oh." I swallow. "Merel was supposed to come for backup. But he wasn't feeling well. I offered to wait for him, but he said we'd be losing valuable days of data and that I should just go alone, and I . . ." I squeeze my fingers around the material of Ian's shirt. "I went. And then, when I called in for help, he told me that the weather was turning, and . . ."

"Fuck," he mutters. His arms tighten around me, nearly painful. "Fuck."

I wince. "I know you're mad at me. And you have every right—"

"I'm not mad at *you*," he says, sounding mad at me. "I'm mad at fucking—" I study him, skeptical, as he inhales deeply. Exhales. Inhales again. He seems to cycle through a few emotions that I'm not sure I understand, and ends with: "I'm sorry. I apologize. I usually don't . . ."

"Get mad?"

He nods. "I'm usually better at . . ."

"Caring less?" I finish for him, and he closes his eyes and nods again.

Okay. This is starting to make sense.

“AMASE didn’t send you,” I say. It’s not a question. Ian won’t admit it to me, but in this bunk, next to him, it’s so obvious what happened. He came to Norway to keep me safe. Every step of the way, all he did was to keep me safe. “How did you know that I was going to need you?”

“I didn’t, Hannah.” His chest rises and falls in a deep sigh. Another man would be gloating by now. Ian . . . I think he just wishes he could have spared me this. “I was just afraid that something might happen to you. And I don’t trust Merel. Not with you.” He says it—*you*—like I am a remarkable and important thing. The most precious data point; his favorite town; the loveliest, starkest Martian landscape. Even though I pushed him away, over and over, he still came in a rocking boat in the middle of the coldest ocean on planet Earth, just to get me warm.

I try to lift my head and look up at him, but he presses on it gently and keeps stroking my hair. “You really should rest.”

He’s right. We both should. So I push a leg between his, and he lets me. Like his body is a thing of mine. “I am sorry. About what I said to you back in Houston.”

“Shh.”

“And that I’ve put you in danger—”

“Shh, it’s okay.” He kisses my temple. It’s wet from the slide of my tears. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. You could be working with your team, or asleep in your own bed, but you’re here because of me, and—”

“Hannah, there is nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I laugh, watery. “Not even—not even literally *anywhere* else?”

I hear him chuckle just before I fall asleep.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 8

Before we can leave for Houston, we spend one night in a hotel in Longyearbyen, Svalbard's main settlement. It offers a bottomless breakfast buffet and keeps the rooms' temperature about ten degrees higher than needed for comfortable inside dwelling—truly the stuff of post-crevasse-Hannah's dreams. I'm not sure whether Ian shares my bliss, as he disappears as soon as I'm settled in. It's fine, though, because I have stuff to do. Mostly writing a detailed report updating NASA on what happened, which doesn't mention Ian (at his request) but ends in a formal complaint against Merel. After that, I stumble upon a rare moment of grace: I manage to connect to the mini-rover out in the field. I let out a squeal of delight when I realize that it's collecting the precise type of data I needed. I stare at the incoming feed, remember what Ian said on the boat about how valuable my project would be for future missions, and nearly tear up.

I don't know. I must be still shaken up.

We leave the following day. I've done what I came to AMASE for (surprisingly successfully), and Ian needs to be at JPL in three days. The first plane ride is from Svalbard to Oslo, on one of those minuscule aircraft that take off from minuscule airports with their minuscule seats and minuscule complimentary snacks. Ian and I don't get to sit next to each other, nor do we from Oslo to Frankfurt. I pass the time staring out of the window and watching *JAG* reruns with Norwegian subtitles. By the end of the third episode, I strongly suspect *skyldig* means "guilty."

"I guess *ikke* means 'not,' then," Ian tells me as he wheels my still-injured self through the Frankfurt airport. I turn back to look up at him, puzzled. "What? I was watching *JAG*, too. It's a good show. Reminds me of my childhood."

“Really? You used to watch a show about military lawyers with your weird smuggler dad?”

He gives me a sheepish look, and I burst into laughter.

“Do Harm and Mac end up together in the end?” I ask him.

He half smiles. “No spoilers.”

“Oh, come on.”

“You’ll have to watch to find out.”

“Or I could look it up on Wikipedia.”

He keeps on smiling, like he thinks that I won’t. He’s right.

We are together for the last leg of the trip. Ian lets me have the window seat without me having to ask, and settles by my side after putting away our bags and wedging a pillow under my brace. He is broad and solid, his legs cramped and too long for the little space he has, and once we’re both buckled in, it feels like he’s blocking away the rest of the world. A wall, keeping me safe from the noise and the action. I’ve been restless ever since the boat and haven’t managed more than very brief naps, but a few minutes after we take off, I feel myself starting to doze, exhausted. The last thing I do before falling asleep is lean my head against Ian’s shoulder. The last thing I remember him doing is shifting a little lower, to make sure that I’m as comfortable as I can be.

I wake up somewhere over the Atlantic and stay exactly where I am for several minutes, my temple against his arm, the clean smell of his clothes and his skin in my nostrils. He’s looking at his tablet, reading an article on plasma propulsion. I skim a few lines in the methods section before saying: “I’m usually not like this.”

He doesn’t seem surprised that I’m awake. “Like how?”

I think about it. “Needy.” I think some more. “Clingy.”

“I know.” I can’t see his face, but his voice is low and kind.

“How do you know?”

“I know you.”

My first instinct is to bristle and push back. Something within me rejects being known, because being known means being rejected. Doesn’t it? “You don’t, though. Really know me. I mean, we never even fucked.”

“True.” He nods, and his jaw brushes against my hair. “Would you have let me get to know you if we had fucked?”

“Nah.” I yawn and straighten, arching to stretch my sore back. “Do you ever think about it?”

“About what?”

“Five years ago. That afternoon.”

“I think about it a lot,” he says immediately, without hesitating. His expression is undecipherable to me. Utterly unreadable.

“Is that why you came to rescue me?” I tease. “Because you were thinking about it? Because you have been secretly pining for years?”

He meets my eyes squarely. “I don’t know that there was anything secret about that.”

He goes back to his tablet, still calm, still relaxed. Then, after several minutes and a couple of yawns, he closes his eyes and tips his head back against the seat. This time he’s the one to fall asleep, and I’m left awake, staring at the strong line of his throat, unable to stop my head from spinning in a million different directions.

• • •

When we step out of the TSA area of the Houston airport, there is a sign in the crowd, similar to the ones limo drivers hold up in movies when they’re picking up important clients they’re afraid they won’t recognize.

HANNAH ARROYO, it says. And underneath: WHO ALMOST DIED AND DIDN’T EVEN TELL US. ALSO, SHE ALWAYS FORGETS TO REPLACE THE TOILET PAPER ROLL. WHAT A LITTLE SHIT.

It’s a pretty big sign. All the more because it’s held by two not-very-tall girls, a redhead and a brunette, who are very obviously glaring at me.

I turn around to Ian. He slept on and off for the past four hours and still looks groggy, his face soft and relaxed. *Cute*, I think. And immediately after: *Delicious*. *Handsome*. *Want*. I say none of it and instead ask, “What are my idiot friends doing here?”

He shrugs. “I figured you might want to talk through your near-death experience with someone, so I decided to tell Mara what happened. I did not expect her to come in person.”

“Bold of you to assume I didn’t tell her myself.”

His eyebrow lifts. “Did you?”

“I was *going to*. Once I felt less *whiny*. And—whatever.” I roll my eyes. Wow, I’m mature. “How did you go from not remembering Mara’s name to having her number?”

“I had to do unspeakable things.”

I gasp. “Not Great-Aunt Delphina.”

He presses his lips together and nods, slowly, wretchedly.

“Ian, I am so sor—”

I cannot finish the sentence, because I’m being tackled by two small but surprisingly strong goblins. I wobble on my one functioning ankle, nearly choking when their arms squeeze tight around my neck.

“Why are you guys here?”

“Because,” Mara says against my shoulder. They are both full-on crying—so weak, so tenderhearted. God, I love them.

“Guys. Get it together. I didn’t even *die*.”

“What about frostbite?” Sadie murmurs into my armpit. I’d forgotten how fantastically short she is.

“Not much.”

“How many toes amputated?”

“Three.”

“That’s not bad,” Mara says with a sniffle. “Cheaper pedis.”

I laugh and inhale deeply. They smell wonderful, a mix of mundane and familiar, like airport terminals and their favorite shampoos I used to steal and our cramped Pasadena apartment. “Seriously, guys, what are you doing here? Don’t you have, like, work to do?”

“We took two days off, and my neighbor is watching Ozzy, you *ingrate hag*,” Sadie tells me before starting to cry harder. I pull her even closer and pat her on the back.

A few feet from us, two tall men are talking quietly to each other. I recognize Liam and Erik from their guest appearances on our late-night FaceTime hangouts, and wave at them with my best *These two, amirite?* expression. They wave back and answer with fond nods that tell me they 500 percent agree.

"Oh—Ian? You're Ian, right?" Mara detaches from our hug-lump. "Thank you so much for calling us, this moron would have never told us the extent of what happened. And, um, I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for the past . . . fifteen years?"

"Don't apologize," I tell her. "He thought your name was Melissa till twenty minutes ago."

She frowns. "What? For real?"

Ian blinks from my side, looking slightly abashed.

"Well, still." She shrugs. "I promise I don't have anything against you personally. I'm just not generally a fan of the Floyd family."

"Neither am I."

Mara's eyes lit up. "They're horrible people, right?"

"The worst."

"*Thank you.* Hey, we should secede! Form our own official branch of the family. That video of you peeing in a Lowe's that they forced me to watch over and over? I'd never mention it again."

Ian smiles. "Sounds great."

Mara smiles back, but then she leans back in to hug me once again and whisper in my ear, "I'm not even sure he's really a Floyd. His hair is *barely* red."

I burst into laughter. I think I'm home for real.

• • •

I want to stay awake and bask in the joy of having Sadie and Mara in my living space again, but I fail and conk out the second we get to my place. I wake up in the middle of the night, Sadie and Mara on either side of me in my queen-size bed, and my heart is so full, I'm afraid it'll overflow.

Apparently this is what I am now, a unicorn rainbow marshmallow kitten creature. *Bah.* I wonder groggily where their boyfriends went, promptly fall back asleep, and find out the answer only several hours later, when the sun shines bright into my kitchen and we're sitting at my cluttered table.

"They were going to stay in a hotel," Mara says. She is having Cheez-Its for breakfast without even bothering to look ashamed. "But Ian told them they could bunk with him."

"He did?" My fridge is full, even though I unplugged it before leaving for Norway. There are several new boxes of cereal on top of it, and fresh fruit in a basket that I didn't know I owned. I wonder which one of the dependable adults in my life is responsible for this. "Does he have the space?"

"He said he has a big place."

"Hmm." I can't believe Sadie's Viking boyfriend gets to see Ian's apartment before I do. Oh well.

"So," she says, "this seems like the perfect opening to grill you and find out whether you're boinking Mara's relative. But it's obvious that you are. Plus, you just almost Popsicled yourself at the North Pole. So we'll go easy on you."

"That is very considerate." I pluck a grape from the mysterious bowl. "I'm not, though."

"Bullshit."

"No, really. We fooled around five years ago, when we met up for Helena's interview. Then we had a huge argument six months ago, when I told him to fuck off after he vetoed my expedition because it was too dangerous—not because he thought I was an idiot, like someone told me. *Then* he came to save my life when I almost died on said expedition." I don't mention our night together on the boat, because . . . there's nothing to say, really. Technically, nothing happened.

"As far as Told You Sos go, this is an excellent one," Mara says.

"Right? That's what I thought!"

"Hang on," Sadie interjects. "Did we know that he was the one who vetoed your proposal? And did we know about the fooling-around-five-

years-ago bit? Did we *forget*?”

“We did not,” Mara says. “We would *not* have forgotten. Thank you for keeping us updated on your life, Hannah.”

“Would you have cared to know?”

Their *Hell, yeah*s are simultaneous.

Right. Of course. “Okay, let’s see. We kind of made out at JPL. Then he asked me out for dinner. I said that I didn’t date, but I’d fuck him anyway. He wasn’t interested and we went our separate ways.” I shrug. “Now you know.”

Mara glares at me. “Wow. So timely.”

I blow her a kiss.

“But things have changed, right?” Sadie asks. “I mean . . . last night he carried you upstairs for seven floors because the elevator was broken. It’s obvious that he has a thing for you.”

“Yes,” Mara agrees. “Are you going to break my blood relative’s heart? Don’t get me wrong, I’d still side with you. Hos before bros.”

“He’s not your bro in any sense of the word,” I point out.

“Hey, he’s my cousin-or-something.”

Sadie pats her on the shoulder. “It’s the *or something* that gets me every time. You can really feel the unbreakable family ties.”

“We seceded last night. We’re the founders of the Floyds 2.0. And you”—she points at me—“could be one of us.”

“Could I?”

“Yes. If you gave Ian a chance.”

“I . . . I don’t know.” I think about how he squeezed my hand while the plane landed. About the way he asked for cookies instead of pretzels, because I told him that they’re my favorite. About his arm around my shoulders back in Norway while the concierge checked us into our rooms. About him falling asleep next to me, and me realizing how taxing, how physically demanding it must have been to come extract me from the idiotic situation I put myself into—no matter that he didn’t so much as roll his eyes at the burden of it.

I don’t like the word *dating*. I don’t like the *idea* of it. But with Ian . . . I don’t know. It seems different with him.

“I guess we’ll see. I’m not sure *he* would want to date,” I say, staring at Sadie’s Froot Loops. The ensuing silence drags on so long, I’m forced to look up. She and Mara are staring at me like I just announced that I’m quitting my job to take up macramé full-time. “What?”

“Did she really just use the world *date*?” Mara asks Sadie, pretending I’m not sitting *right here*.

“I think so. And *without* referring to the disgusting fruit?”

Mara frowns. “Dude, dates are amazing.”

“No, they’re not.”

“Yes. Try wrapping them in bacon.”

“Okay,” Sadie acknowledges, “*anything* is amazing if you wrap it in bacon, but—”

I clear my throat. They turn to me.

“So, you’re gonna go out with him?”

I shrug. Think about it. The idea is so foreign, my brain catches on it for a moment. But remembering the way Ian smiled at me back in Svalbard helps me push right through it. “I think I’ll ask. If he wants to.”

“Considering that he saved your life, contacted Great-Aunt Delphina, and put up two dudes he’s never seen before so their girlfriends could hang out with you . . . I think maybe he does.”

I nod, my eyes fixed into the mid-distance. “You know, when I fell, my expedition leader said that no one was coming to rescue me. But . . . he came. Ian came. Even though he wasn’t even supposed to be there.”

Sadie frowns. “Are you saying that you feel like you *have to* date him because of that?”

“Nah.” I grin at her. “As you know, it’s pretty impossible to get me to do something I don’t want to.”

Sadie bats her eyes at me. “I always manage.”

“Not true.”

“Yes, I do. For instance, in ten minutes I’m going to take you to the NASA doctor Ian wrote down the address for, and we’re going to get your

foot checked out.”

I scowl. “No way.”

“I am.”

“Sadie, I’m fine.”

“You really think you’re going to win this?”

“Fuck yeah.”

She leans forward over her bowl of cereal with a small smile. “It’s *on*, baby. Let the best bitch win.”

• • •

Sadie, naturally, wins.

After the doctor tells me stuff I already knew—high sprain, yada yada—and gives me a better brace I can walk on, I take Sadie and Mara to my favorite coffee shop. Their planes are leaving late tonight, and we squeeze as much as we possibly can out of the day. When we get to Ian’s apartment, I expect . . .

I don’t know, actually. Based on what I know of the guys’ personalities, I figured we’d find them brooding in silence, checking their work emails. Occasionally clearing their throats, maybe. But Ian buzzes us into his place, and when we walk into the wide living room, we discover all three of them sprawled on the huge sectional, each holding a PlayStation controller as they yell in the direction of the TV. Further inspection reveals that Liam’s and Ian’s avatars are shooting at some gelatinous monster, while Erik’s huddles in the far corner of the screen. He’s yelling something that could be Danish. Or Klingon.

None of them look like they’ve bothered to shower or change out of their pajamas. There are two empty pizza boxes on the wooden coffee table, beer cans scattered all over the floor, and I’m pretty sure I just stepped on a Cheeto. We stop in our tracks at the entrance, but if the guys notice our arrival, they don’t show it. They keep on playing until Liam gets hit by a stray bullet and grunts like a wounded animal.

“I hate that I love him,” Mara mutters under her breath.

Sadie sighs. “At least yours isn’t running against the wall because he can’t use the controller?”

“Guys,” I tell them, shaking my head, “maybe I was wrong in approving of your relationships. Maybe you can do better.”

Mara snorts. “Excuse me? Is that a slice of pepperoni on Ian’s shirt?”

Sure is. “Touché.”

Sadie clears her throat. “Hey, guys, it’s great that you’re having fun, but we should really get going if we want to make our flights—”

They groan in a chorus. Like ten-year-olds asked to clean their rooms.

“I just . . . can’t believe they actually *like* each other,” Mara says, befuddled.

Sadie nods. “I don’t know how I feel about this. Seems . . . dangerous?”

I cover my mouth to muffle my laughter.

BookSharekh.com

Chapter 9

Ian drives me home after we drop everybody off at the airport, following a disturbing phone number exchange among the guys and a few tears from Mara and Sadie. I'm definitely feeling more like myself, because I send them through TSA with a stern "Stop whining" and gentle slaps on their butts.

"Try not to fall into a glacier for at least six months, okay?" Sadie yells at me from within the roped area.

I flip her off and limp back to Ian's car.

"I see why you love them so much," he tells me while driving back to my place.

"I don't. Love them, that is. I just pretend to avoid hurting their feelings."

He smiles like he knows how full of bullshit I am to the very milligram, and we're quiet for the rest of the ride. The oldies radio station plays pop songs that I remember from the early 2000s, and I stare at the yellow glow of the streetlights, wondering if I, too, am an oldie. Then Ian slows down to park at my place, and that relaxed, happy feeling wanes as my heart picks up speed.

I told Sadie and Mara that I'd see if he's interested in going out with me, but it's easier said than done. I've propositioned plenty of people, but this . . . it feels different. I'm not going to be good at it. I'm going to be total, utter shit. And Ian will realize it immediately.

"You could . . ." I start. Then stop. My knees suddenly look incredibly interesting. Works of art that require my most dedicated inspection. "I was thinking that . . ."

“Don’t worry, I’ll carry you upstairs,” he says. He’s wearing jeans and an ocean-blue shirt that matches his eyes and contrasts with his hair and—

It’s scary, how attractive I find him. The depth of this crush of mine. I liked him since the very start, but my feelings for him have been growing steadily, then exponentially, and . . . what do I even *do* with them? It’s like being handed an instrument I never learned how to play. Being asked to step onstage at a concert hall utterly unprepared.

I take a deep breath.

“Actually, they fixed the elevator. And this new cast is easy to walk on. So, no need. But you . . .” *You can do this, Hannah. Come on. You just survived polar bears thanks to this guy. You can say the words.* “You could come up anyway.”

A long silence follows, in which I feel my heartbeat in every inch of my body. It draws out till it gets unbearable, and when I cannot help but glance up, I find Ian looking at me with an expression that can be described only as . . . sorry. Like he knows very well that he’s going to have to let me down.

Shit.

“Hannah,” he says, apologetic. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Right.” I swallow and nod. Push the weight in my chest to the side for an unspecified *later*. God, that later is going to be *bad*. “Okay.”

He nods, too, relieved at my understanding. My heart breaks a little. “But if you need anything, anything at all—”

“—you’ll be there. Right.” I smile, and . . . maybe I’m not 100 percent yet, because I’m starting to feel teary all over again. “Thank you, Ian. For everything. Absolutely everything. I still cannot believe you came for me.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I just . . .” I could bullshit an answer for him. But it seems unfair. He’s earned more from me. “I just can’t believe that *anyone* would do that for me.”

“Right.” He sighs and bites into his lower lip. “Hannah, if that changes. If you ever find yourself able to believe that someone could care about you that much. And if you wanted to actually . . . *have dinner* with that

someone.” He lets out a laugh. “Well . . . Please, consider me. You know where to find me.”

“Oh. Oh, I . . .” I feel heat creep up my face. Am I blushing? I didn’t even know my body was capable of it. “I actually wasn’t asking you to come up just for . . . I mean, maybe that, too, but mostly . . .” I screw my eyes shut. “I expressed myself poorly. I was inviting you up because I would love to *have dinner*. With *you*,” I blurt out.

When I find the guts to open my eyes, Ian’s expression is stunned.

“Are you . . .” I think he forgot how to breathe. He clears his throat, coughs once, swallows, coughs again. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I mean,” I hurry to add, “I still think you won’t like it. I’m just . . . really *not* that kind of person.”

“What kind of person?”

“The kind that people enjoy being with for anything that isn’t . . . well, sex. Or sex related. Or directly leading up to sex.”

“Hannah.” He gives me a skeptical look. “You have two friends who dropped everything to be with you. And I assume sex wasn’t involved.”

“It wasn’t. And I—I would drop everything for them, but they’re different. They’re my people, and—” Shit, I really *am* about to tear up. What the hell, you almost die once and your mental stability gets all fucked up? “There are plenty of people who would disagree. Like my family. And you . . . You’ll probably end up not liking me.”

He smiles. “Seems improbable, since I already like you.”

“Then you’ll stop. You—” I run a hand through my hair, wishing he understood. “You’ll change your mind.”

He looks at me like I’m just a bit crazy. “In the span of one dinner?”

“Yes. You’ll think I’m a waste of your time. Boring.”

He’s starting to just look . . . amused. Like I’m ridiculous. Which . . . I don’t know. Maybe I am. “If that happens, I’ll just put you to work. Have you debug some of my code.”

I laugh a little and look out of the window. There are no cars at this time of night, no one walking their dog or taking a stroll. It’s just Ian and me on

the street. I love it and hate it. “I still think you’d get the most out of this if we fucked,” I mutter.

“I agree.”

I turn to him, surprised. “You do?”

“Of course. You think I *don’t* want to fuck you?”

“I . . . Kind of?”

“Hannah.” He unbuckles his seat belt and angles himself toward me, so that I have no choice but to look him in the eyes. He looks earnest and nearly offended. “I have thought about what happened in my office every day for the past five years. You offered to go down on me, and I just . . . embarrassed myself, and it should be the most mortifying memory I have, but for some reason it’s turned into the axis every fantasy of mine spins around, and”—he reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose—“I want to fuck you. Obviously. Always have. I just don’t want to fuck you *once*. I want to do it a lot. For a long time. I want you to come to me for sex, but also want you to come to me when you need help with your taxes and moving your furniture. I want fucking to be only one of the million things I do for you, and I want to be—” He stops. Seems to collect himself and straightens, as if to give me space. To give *us* space. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to crowd you. You can . . .”

He pulls back a few inches, and all I can do is look at him openmouthed. Shocked. Speechless. Absolutely . . . yeah. Did this really happen? Is it really happening? And the worst part is, I’m almost positive that his words have dislodged something in my brain, because the only thing I can think of saying in response to all he said is: “Is that a yes on dinner?”

He laughs, low and beautiful and a little rueful. And after looking at me like no one else ever has before, what he says is, “Yes, Hannah. It is a yes on dinner.”

• • •

“Um, I could make us a . . .” I scratch my head, studying the contents of my open fridge. Okay, so it’s full. The problem is, it’s full exclusively of stuff

that needs to be cooked, chopped, baked, prepared. Stuff that's healthy and doesn't taste particularly good. I am now 93 percent sure that Mara was the one who went shopping, because no one else would dare to impose broccoli on me. "How does one even . . . I could boil the broccoli, I guess? In a pot? With water?"

Ian is standing behind me, his chin on top of my head, chest hovering right behind my back. "Boil them in a pot with water," he repeats.

"I would *salt* them afterward, of course."

"You want to eat broccoli?" He sounds skeptical. Should I be offended?

No, Ian. I don't want to eat broccoli. I'm not even hungry, to be honest. But I have committed to this. I am a person who is capable of having dinner with another human. And I will prove it to you. "I could make a sandwich, then. There's lunch meat over there."

"I think those are tortilla wraps."

"No, they're— Shit. You're right."

I sigh, slam the door shut, and turn around. Ian does *not* take a step back. I have to lean against the fridge to be able to look up at him. "How do you feel about Froot Loops?"

"The cereal?"

"Yeah. Breakfast for dinner. *If* I still have milk. Let me check—"

He does not. Let me check, that is. Instead he envelops my face with his hands and leans over to me.

Our first kiss, five years ago, was all me. Me reaching out. Me initiating. Me guiding him. This one, though . . . Ian sets everything. The rhythm, the tempo, the way his tongue licks into my mouth—*everything*. It lasts for a minute, then two, then an uncountable length of time that blurs into a mess of liquid heat and trembling hands and soft, filthy noises. My arms loop around his neck. One of his legs slides between mine. I realize that this is going to end exactly like our afternoon at JPL. Both of us completely out of control, and . . .

"Stop," I say, barely breathing.

He pulls back. "Stop?" He's not breathing *at all*.

"Dinner first."

He exhales. “Really? *Now* you want dinner?”

“I promised.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I’m trying to—to show you that—”

“Hannah.” His forehead touches mine. He laughs against my mouth. “Dinner is . . . it’s symbolic. A metaphor. If you tell me that you’re willing to see where things go, I believe you, and we can—”

“No,” I say stubbornly. The urge to touch him is nearly painful. I can’t remember the last time I was this turned on. “We’re having our symbolic dinner. I’m going to show you that—what are you doing?”

He is, I believe, turning around to pluck two grapes from the same cluster I half ate this morning. He presses one against my lips till I bite into it, pops the other in his mouth. We both chew for a while, eyes locked. Though he finishes before I do, starts kissing me again, and—a mess.

We’re a *mess*.

“Done eating your dinner?” he asks against my lips. I nod. “You still hungry?” I shake my head and he picks me up and carries me to the—

“Wrong door!” I say when he tries to enter the bathroom, then the closet where I keep the vacuum cleaner I never use and the one pair of spare sheets I own, and by the time we’re on my bed we’re both laughing. Our teeth clack together when we try and fail to keep kissing as we undress each other, and I don’t think that anything has ever been like this before, intimate and sweet and so much fun at the same time.

“Just—let me—” I finish taking off his shirt and stare at his torso, mesmerized. It’s pale and broad, full of freckles and large muscles. I want to bite him and lick all over. “You’re so . . .”

He has undone my cast. He sets it aside, next to the pajama bottoms that I threw on the floor this morning, then helps me wiggle out of my jeans. “Red? And spotty?”

I laugh a little harder. “Yup.”

“That’s what I—”

I press him down till he’s lying on the bed. Then I straddle him and peel off my top, ignoring the slight sting in my ankle. This should be familiar

ground to me: bodies against bodies, flesh against flesh. Just seeing what feels good and then doing more of it. It should be familiar, but I'm not sure it is. Being here with Ian is more like hearing a song I've listened to millions of times, this time with a new arrangement.

"*God*, you look so— What works best for you?" he asks between breaths. "For your ankle?"

"Don't worry, it doesn't really hu—" I stop myself as something occurs to me. "You're right. I *am* injured."

His eyes widen. "We don't have to—"

"Which means that I should probably be in charge."

He nods. "But we don't have to—"

He shuts up the moment my hand reaches the zipper of his jeans. And he stays silent, breathing sharply, staring mesmerized at the way I undo it, slow, methodical, determined. His boxers are tented. He is hard, big. I remember touching him for the first time and thinking how good the sex was going to be.

I just didn't think it would take us five years to get there.

"Hannah," he says.

I reach inside the slit of his boxers to cup him. The second my fingers close around him, his nostrils flare. "Yes?"

"I don't think you understand how— Fuck."

He is hot and huge. Closing his eyes, arching his neck before looking at me again with a half-warning, half-pleading expression. He finds me sitting on his knees, his cock spasming in my grip as I lean over. "Hannah," he says, even deeper than usual. "What are you . . ."

I start by licking the head, thoroughly, delicately. But he feels smooth and warm against my tongue, and I immediately get impatient. I flip my hair so it's not in the way and seal my lips around him, suck gently once, twice, and then . . .

I hear a growl. Then the sound of something ripping. With the corner of my eye, I notice Ian's large hand fisting the sheet. Did he just tear my—

"Stop," he says, pleads, orders me.

My brow furrows. "You don't like it?"

“It’s not—” I tighten my grip around his length, and I can almost hear his teeth grind. His cheeks are bright red. Mars Red. “We can’t. Not the first time. We need to do it in a way that won’t make me . . .”

I press a soft, lingering kiss at the base. He inhales once, audibly, from his nose. “So what you’re saying is . . . you don’t want to come?”

“It’s more—*shit*—about keeping my dignity,” he rushes out.

“Dignity is overrated,” I say before running my teeth up his length to take the head in my mouth again. This time, he seems to just give in. His hand slides through my hair, cups the back of my skull, and for a second he keeps me there. Pulls me closer. Presses me against him until I feel the tip of his cock hitting the back of my throat. I yield to Ian, enjoying the feeling of him losing control, the salty flavor, his trembling thighs, the helpless way he tugs at my hair to get me to take more, deeper, better—

Suddenly, it’s all upside down. I’m being dragged up his body, flipped on my back, pinned to the bed. One of his hands can hold both my wrists above my head, and when I look up I find him caging me. I first notice the panic in his eyes, then how close he was to coming, then the sheer relief that he managed to stave it off.

“Hannah,” he says. His tone is laced with command.

“What?”

His cock twitches against my abdomen. “I think I’ll be in charge now.”

I pout. “But I—”

“I’m sorry, but—it’s happening. I’m going to fuck you. I’m not going to come in your—” He doesn’t finish the sentence. Just leans forward to kiss me, and by the time he’s done, I’m nodding, breathless.

“Do you have condoms?”

“No. But I’m on the pill. We can do it without anything if you’re not giving me gross STDs. But I trust that you wouldn’t save me from the walruses just to have me die of chlamydia, so—”

I think he likes the idea of us doing it without anything. I think he loves the idea, because first he kisses me breathless, then he gets to work on taking everything—every last layer—off both of us.

The truth is, I can't remember the last time I was fully naked with someone. When I'm having sex—the type of sex I usually go for—there always tends to be the odd irremovable layer. A bra, a tank top. Not-quite-all-the-way-off panties. My partners have been the same, with boxers twisted at their ankles, skirts pulled up, still-cuffed open shirts.

I've never dwelled too much on the thought, but the lack of intimacy behind the encounters is crystal clear now. Now that Ian is draped over me, sucking at my breasts as if they are ripe fruits, his tongue sweet and rough against the pliant underside, alternating between too much and not enough.

He spreads my legs open with his knee, positions himself right between them, and I expect him to slide in in one smooth move. I'm certainly wet enough, and the way he grips my waist betrays his eagerness. But for long moments he just seems satisfied to nibble on my tits. Even though I can feel his erection, hot and a little wet, rubbing against the inside of my thigh whenever he shifts. It leads to me gasping and him groaning, something deep and rich rising from the pit of his chest.

"I thought you said you wanted to fuck?" I breathe out.

"I do," he rumbles. "But this . . . this is good, too."

"You can't"—a sharp intake of breath—"you can't like my tits this much, Ian."

A soft bite, right around the hard point of my nipple. My spine shoots up from the bed. "Why?"

"Because—they're . . . No one ever has." I don't want to mention that my breasts are nothing to write home about—he probably already knows, since they have been in his mouth for the better part of the last ten minutes. He seems to get it, anyway.

"You have the most perfect little tits. I always thought so. Since the first time I met you. Especially the first time I met you." He sucks on one while pinching the other. He is—precise. Good. Enthusiastic. Filthy. "They're as pretty as the Columbia Hills."

A choked laugh bubbles out of me. It's stupidly nice to have someone compare my body to a topographical feature of Mars. Or maybe it's just nice to have someone who knows the Columbia Hills tugging at my nipples

and staring at them like they're the eighth and ninth wonders of the universe.

"This," he murmurs into the skin trailing up to my sternum, "this is the Medusae Fossae. It even has these pretty little freckles." His teeth close around my right collarbone. It would be hot even if the head of his cock weren't starting to brush against my pussy. It's wetness meeting wetness, a lot of mutual eagerness, a mess waiting to happen. I band my arms around Ian's neck and pull his huge shoulders into myself, like he's the sun of my very own star system.

"Hannah. I didn't think I could want you more, but last year, when I saw you at NASA, I . . ." He is slurring his words. Ian Floyd, always calm, levelheaded, articulate. "I thought I'd die if I couldn't fuck you."

"You can fuck me now," I whine, impatient, pulling his hair as he moves lower. "You can fuck me however and wherever you want."

"I know. I know, you're going to let me do it all." He exhales a ticklish trail along my rib cage. "But maybe I want to play with the Herschel Crater first." His tongue dips inside my belly button, tasting and probing; but when I begin to squirm and pull him up, he follows meekly, as if aware that I can't take much more. Maybe he can't take much more, either: his finger parts my swollen labia to slip around my clit, a slow circle with a little too much pressure. Except that it might be just the right amount. I'm dissolving now, in a pool of coiled muscles and sticky pleasure.

Okay. So sex can be . . . this. Good to know.

"This one," Ian pants against my mouth, no pretense of kissing now. My mouth is slack with pleasure and he's just stealing air from me, sucking bee stings into my lips and groaning his approval into my cheekbone. "This one right here is the Solis Lacus. The Eye of Mars. Getting all worked up during dust storms."

He has perfect hands. Perfect touch. I will explode and scatter everywhere, a meteorite shower all over the bed.

"And the Olympus Mons." It's his palm massaging my clit now. His fingers slip into me wherever they find an opening, until the tension inside me is so sweet, I'll go insane. "I really want to come inside you. Can I?"

I shut my eyes and moan. It's a yes, and he must be able to tell. Because he grunts just as soon as the head of his cock begins to nudge inside me, a little too large for comfort, but very determined to make space for itself. I order myself to relax. And then, when he hits a perfect spot inside me, I order myself not to come immediately.

"Or maybe it's the Vastitas Borealis." He's barely intelligible. Doing those little thrusts that are designed more to open me up than to fuck me properly, and yet we're both this close to orgasm. It's a little scary. "The oceans that used to fill it, Hannah."

"There is no—" I try to ground myself. To find a place inside of me that is safe from the pleasure. I end up only digging my good heel into his thigh, trying to comprehend how such spectacular friction can exist. "We don't know that there ever really was an ocean. On Mars."

Ian's eyes lose focus. They widen and hold mine, unseeing. And then he smiles and begins to move for real, with a little whisper in my ear.

"I bet there was."

The pleasure crashes over me like a tidal wave. I close my eyes, hold on to him as tight as I can, and let the ocean wash over me.

BookSharekh.com

Epilogue

Jet Propulsion Lab, Pasadena, California
Nine months later

The control room is silent. Unmoving. A sea of people in dark-blue polo shirts and red JPL lanyards who somehow manage to breathe in unison. Until about five minutes ago, the handful of journalists invited to document this historical event were clearing their throats, shuffling their equipment, asking the occasional whispered question. But that, too, has stopped.

Now we all wait. Silent.

". . . expect only intermittent contact at this time. A dropout as the vehicle switches antennas . . ."

I glance at Ian, who sits in the chair next to mine. He hasn't bothered to turn on his monitor. Instead, he's been watching the progress of the rover on mine, his frown deep and worried. This morning, when I straightened the collar of his shirt and told him how good he looked in blue, he didn't reply. Honestly, I don't think he even heard me. He's been very, *very* preoccupied for the past week. Which I happen to find . . . kind of cute.

"Heading directly for the target. The rover is about fifteen meters off the surface, and . . . we're getting some signals from MRO. The UHF looks good."

I reach out to brush my fingers against his under the table. It's meant to be just a fleeting, reassuring touch, but his hand closes around mine, and I decide to stay.

With Ian, I always decide to stay.

"Touchdown confirmed! Serendipity *has safely landed on the surface of Mars!"*

The room erupts into cheers. Everyone explodes out of their seats, cheering, clapping, laughing, jumping, hugging. And within the delightful, triumphant, radiant chaos of mission control, I turn to Ian, and he turns to me with the widest, most brilliant of smiles.

The following day, our kiss is on the front page of the *New York Times*.

BookSharekh.com

Don't miss

Love on the Brain

coming soon from Berkley Jove!

"By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos."

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. "Really?"

"Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they're giving it back to us." She shrugs. "Revenge and cold dishes and all that."

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she's lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. "Is this for real?"

"Would I ever lie to you?"

"Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off." And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she'll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn't. And I slept significantly better.

"Don't believe me, then." She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. "Go pet the leper armadillos and die."

She’s such a weirdo. I adore her.

“Hey, you sure you’re going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?” I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I’d have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins’s neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won’t hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I’m sure she deeply regrets.

“Fine? Are you kidding?” She looks at me like I’m insane. “Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I’ll get to see La Llorona?”

“La . . . what?”

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. “You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts.”

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I’m bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she’s not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I’m not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I’ve never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don’t get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she’s been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd’s cousin is a closeted men’s rights activist who sends me

a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was "ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick." (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her).* I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?
>
> @198888 She would shorten his half-life.
>
> @annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

> @emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.
>
> @bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM
>
> @lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

> @BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

> Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

> @DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

> @AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

> @TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

> @SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER 🤦🏻‍♂️

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

> @Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.
>
> @Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.
>
> @WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.
>
> @SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.
>
> @WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.
>
> @Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired

Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.

Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

Shmac: Weird.

Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?

Shmac: Nothing, really.

Marie: Oh, come on!

Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?

Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!

Shmac: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Marie: Shmac.

Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

Marie: I bet. Tell me!

Shmac: It's a girl.

Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Shmac: There isn't much to tell.

Marie: Did you just meet her?

Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

Shmac: And she is married.

Marie: To you?

Shmac: Depressingly, no.

Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman

Shmac: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

• • •

We're put up in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No*.) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses*.).

She's so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open

spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It's wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can't quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. " . . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. "I love your work! I've read all your articles—you'll be such an asset to the project."

"Likewise. I can't wait to collaborate."

If I weren't dehydrated from the flight, I'd probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn't have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

"Why don't I show you around? You can come in as my guest." He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

"I wouldn't want to take you away from . . . astronauting?"

"I'm between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day." He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We'll get along great, I already know it.

"Have you lived in Houston long?" I ask as we step into the elevator.

"About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission." I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. "The past two or so, I worked on BLINK's precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. "That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?"

"No, thanks."

"You sure? It's on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad."

"I don't really eat eggs."

"Let me guess, a vegan?"

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word "vegan" in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance,

but if they're the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

"I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won't eat animal products anymore." He sighs. "Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn't know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch."

"How old is she?"

"Just turned six."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn't nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that "Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them," she just nodded thoughtfully and said, "What you're saying is, we should eat the whole family?" I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life's goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person's carbon footprint.

"The engineering labs are down this hallway," Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. "A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we're shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We've got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case ("Nature's Engineer") and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

"Meow."

I glance back at Guy. He's busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

"Meow."

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

"And who might you be?" I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. "You're such a sweet girl." I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. "Aren't you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you."

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

"Come on, I was just *kitten*." Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. "Where are you going?"

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that's when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it's falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain's commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a

jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill "meow" somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven’t seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA’s Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

“Levi!” someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. “Are you okay?”

Levi doesn’t move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It’s so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it’s only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It’s a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I’m all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi’s eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it’s some kind of prayer?

“Levi? Levi, is she—”

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

BookSharekh.com

Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

Connect Online

AliHazelwood.com
AliHazelwood
EverSoAli
AliHazelwood

BookSharekh.com

Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

What's next on your reading list?

Discover your next great read!

Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this author.

Sign up now.