

NATALIE SUE

Bestselling Author of *I Hope This Finds You Well*

YOU'LL LOVE IT HERE

"For someone who
needs a good laugh."

—TAYLOR JENKINS REID
on *I Hope This Finds You Well*



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You'll Love It Here

A NOVEL

Natalie Sue

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' in a dark grey color.

WILLIAM MORROW

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UNCORRECTED E-PROOF—NOT FOR SALE
HarperCollinsPublishers
.....

Also by Natalie Sue

I Hope This Finds You Well

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UNCORRECTED E-PROOF—NOT FOR SALE
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Dedication

For my grandmas: Eileen Clark & Parvin Nasser.
Thank you for everything you did that led to giving me the life that I have.

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Also by Natalie Sue

Copyright

Dedication

Incident Report

Some Ragrats

The People of Valleyview Apartments

The White Board Less Bored

Disturbing Some Animals

About Last Night

Aggressively Mediocre Internet Use

Drama, Diner, and a Deal

Email Sent from Mona Bucket to All residents

The Children in the Hall

Normal Food

Bottled Yellow Liquid

An Ernest Walk

Message Exchange Between Lana

Shit Building Mixer

Undercovers

A Norm Moment

Email From Carmen to Mona Thursday, June 10

Fanta See

Early Aughts Sick Day

Email from Lana to Mona Bucket Monday, June 14

Undercovers 2.0

Let's All Get Rec'd

Boxed Inside

Tour de Building

The Morning After

I Scream for Irene

Too Real Estate

When There's Smoke

Classic Post-Fire Malaise

A Quite Moving Day

Sami's Sammie

The Best Building Mixer of All

Acknowledgments

About the Author

About the Publisher

BookSharekh.com

Incident Report

Senior Fire Investigator Lawrence Dubini: Digital Notes (335–64)

Incident Summary: At 4:14 PM on June 21, the Calgary Fire Department responded to a major fire reported at Valleyview Apartments.

Initial Observations: Upon arrival, flames were visible from the top floor window (four stories). The fire was contained and fully extinguished by 10:44 PM. Preliminary assessments indicate the fire spread rapidly through the stairwell.

Building details: Built in 1909, Valleyview Apartments is a privately owned multifamily residential property managed by an on-site landlord. The building consists of sixteen individual units, one of which is occupied by the owner. Each unit consists of a living/kitchen area, bedroom, and bathroom. The basement of the building consists of three tenant-accessible rooms: A laundry room (two washers and two dryers); a tenant storage facility (doorway obstructed by many packages); and a “recreational room” (containing a single treadmill, pool table, and a deflated Bosu ball).

Damage: Multiple units show signs of severe fire and smoke damage. The integrity of critical support structures, including floor joists and wall assemblies, is currently under review by the Department of Buildings and city structural engineers. As of this report, the livability of the affected units remains undetermined.

Investigation: The cause of the fire is under investigation. Initial statements from tenants suggest conflict among residents may be relevant to the investigation.

Some Ragrats

Six weeks ago . . .

I wake with alarms blaring in my skull. I groan, pulling a pillow over my head—but the motion makes last night’s tequila roil in my stomach, and I’m forced to sit upright to keep the acid reflux, and everything else, down.

I squint my dry eyes against the late-morning sunlight spilling into my tiny bedroom. Even though the exterior of the windows probably hasn’t been washed since the colored television was introduced, it’s still too bright. I extract myself from the duvet I appear to have wrestled with all night and stand to close the blinds.

Something crinkles under my foot. I pull it back and discover a mess of electric orange dust. I groan again, realizing I’ve stepped on an empty Flamin’ Hot Cheetos bag—a completely reckless flavor. Exhibit A of my emotional state last night: downing snacks that I know will hurt my insides like I still had the indestructible body of my twenties.

Then I see Exhibit B: resting on my nightstand are two large teal-glazed halves of a broken vase—correction, a vase that *I didn’t buy*. Because who brings ornamental décor into a place like this? No amount of knickknacks like fluffy pillows, flowerpots, or wall hangings are capable of distracting from the laundromat-like ambiance. This isn’t home, not really. It’s a temporary situation, and there’s no point in getting comfortable.

My head continues to pound as I walk across the scraped-up wooden floor of my room to where my favorite office slacks are crumpled in a sad pile. Damn it. I have a strict hang-up rule for that pair because they tend to wrinkle in unforgiving ways. The rest of the outfit I wore to work yesterday—crisp white button-down shirt (now limp), black blazer (now smelling like tequila sweat)—is strewn about the floor just as carelessly.

Dread coils inside me as my sluggish brain recalls flashes of memories: Me, ordering a second round of drinks for my work friends, even though the giant ball-shaped ice cubes from the bar were a red flag as far as pricing goes. Me, sloppily clinking glasses with everyone while droplets sprayed across the table. Me, ordering a third round—or was it fourth? After that, it's foggy.

The ringing in my head is only getting worse. Everything inside and outside of me is all wrong. I've not had a hangover in years, maybe since a decade ago when I was still an undergrad. Am I dying?

I rub my temple, hoping to snuff the sound that's rattling inside my brain, that's piercing straight through to my teeth. It's so loud and—wait, it's not inside my head. There is an actual alarm.

I grab my crumpled trousers and slide them on, a strange complement to my ratty sleep tee and the itchy G-string lace panties that only emerge from the back of the drawer when I'm down to the wire. I hardly wear them because they sometimes shift away from the areas that I'd entrusted them to cover. Another blow: I'd been working so much these past few weeks that I didn't have time for laundry.

I almost trip over the hem of my pants as I stumble into the living room—they're too long because they're meant to be worn with heels. In the hallway, I can hear panicked steps echoing. Shit. People are really treating this as a real fire alarm. But the state of me. I'm not in any condition to be viewed publicly at all. And if I leave the apartment like this, I'm not going to have enough time to get ready for work.

Only, another dreadful memory lands, this one curdling my stomach worse than any Cheeto: I can't go to work today. That's the actual reason why I broke my strict three-drink *absolute maximum* rule last night.

Because much like the mystery vase in my room, my entire life is cracking open.

A pointed knock sounds from the hallway as an authoritative voice yells, "Everybody needs to get out immediately."

I spot the housecoat on my bathroom door hook. Its original belt was lost during an unfortunate toilet dipping too many. I drape it on and glance around. What does one rescue during a fire? My nutrition powders? My color-coded to-do whiteboard?

Alice!

My black goldfish is hovering in her bowl on the coffee table, staring without looking at anything. A couple of months ago, she found a spot that requires the least amount of swimming effort and now she just stays there and stares, barely moving. It's debatable if what she's up to is even considered being alive.

Would it be irresponsible to leave Alice? She's literally surrounded by water, which is pretty fireproof. And trying not to slosh her heavy bowl walking down the stairs would be a logistical nightmare.

As if reading my thoughts, Alice turns just slightly away, her permanently frowning mouth blowing bubbles joylessly. With the amount of time I spend at the office, it wouldn't have been fair to get a real pet like I wanted . . . one I could cuddle. But my mom had insisted on getting me something to bring some life into this place. Somehow, that led to me getting this fish. And I fear it's had the opposite effect; this apartment sucked all the life out of Alice instead.

Until yesterday, she was probably the only one who had seen me with a single hair out of place. But I either have to appear like this in front of my neighbors or risk dying a painful and/or terrifying death. I turn around and head for my door. If I hadn't messed up my life, I'd be at work right now and Alice would still be here.

A rush of shame pulls through me like it's happening all over again. I'm back in the boardroom with our client, Bob Wolch. A deeply unpleasant man. He got rich via his oil company decades ago, and it shows. Now he's *determined* to get his new distillery to take off, and that's where my firm comes in. For some reason, he always shoves half a dozen of those ancient mint balls from the reception dish into his cheek. Between mouthfuls, he tends to ramble about how "fun" Vegas is. Normally I can feign enthusiasm enough to get through the Bob meetings.

I adore working at a marketing firm. I love the cutthroat pace, the fact that's there's always something new to work on, and the race to make it to the top. I love the spectacle of a big campaign—the show we put on to woo clients, the thrill of pulling brilliant ideas out of thin air. I love the feeling I

get walking into my (admittedly tiny) office and closing my door, because I finally have one after years in the cubicle farm. I love when new hires come to me for questions, or the managers tag me for important duties, because I'm really a part of things and on track to keep moving up the ladder.

And I *was* on track. If little-girl me had seen what I turned out to be after everything she'd gone through, I truly think she'd go through it all again—every hard moment. And that's why dread lives in me now.

Because it's not always roses in marketing. We don't get to choose all our clients, and sometimes when I think too deeply about the products I'm promoting, I get a burning feeling in the pit of my stomach that won't go away no matter how many Tums I pop. So much of the job is finely executed deception—plans, pitches, hypotheticals—that I've learned to compartmentalize certain tasks as “not real.”

Bob was in yesterday to go over his company's new limited-edition “Moonlit Barrel” series (the name was my idea, of course) and the bold campaign we were putting together for it: glossy ads, influencer partnerships, store tastings, and a full-blown launch event this summer.

I'd sacrificed many long nights and weekends preparing for this meeting. This was the biggest campaign I'd ever organized, and if Bob approved it, I'd almost certainly be in line for a promotion. I watched my boss, Carolyne, talk through the bullets I'd written for her as if she were inventing them on the spot, and silently waited for my turn to chime in about the logistics and ad spend.

When I proffered a packet with the cost analysis to Bob, he barely glanced at the projections before muttering, “All this money just to get people talking about whiskey. I'm already paying a fortune to make them *stop* talking about what it does to their bodies.”

He was referring to the quiet but aggressive lobbying his company was funding to block a nearby university's research on the link between high alcohol consumption and neuron damage. Sometimes marketing wasn't just about getting attention, but what you're keeping quiet.

“It's not the whiskey's fault if people screw up their lives by drinking too much of it,” he added with a shrug. “Some folks just can't handle their own mess.”

Bob's friendly chuckle was something I was meant to join in on. Carolyne did. But I couldn't shake the memories flooding my mind—empty

bottles under the sink, broken glass on the kitchen floor, doors slamming in the middle of the night. The beep of a heart monitor.

Bob continued, “Now there’s a marketing idea for you! Free samples at AA meetings. Those would be some loyal customers.”

As his second chuckle grated through the boardroom—and through me—I saw a man going home to his family. I saw myself watching him open the door. I looked down at my own hands on the papers that were trembling like I was a child again.

When Bob tried to grab another file from my hands, I gripped it tighter and said, “Maybe if you pretended you cared about people, they wouldn’t be boycotting your brand.”

Bob’s expression shifted in a flash. He looked like a bear that was about to eat me. Carlyne forced a laugh to smooth things over. That would’ve been bad enough.

Then it happened. A giant glob of a tear fell from my eye and landed on Bob’s freaking gold pen. He saw it. Carlyne saw it. And I knew that letting my body release that drop onto that man’s pen was a form of career suicide far worse and longer lasting than any of the sexual harassment allegations thrown at Bob (in addition to great marketers, he had excellent lawyers).

I saw Bob’s jowls shake uncomfortably. Carlyne looked at me with thinly veiled distaste, and worse . . . pity. I knew then that I was a tad fucked.

Bob, for his part, didn’t say a word; he just puffed out his cheeks and signed the documents with cold efficiency.

I stood frozen. I was the lowest person in the room, and the walls were slowly closing in on me.

When Bob finished, he rushed out, but not before giving Carlyne a pointed look. She followed directly behind him.

On my way out after them, I caught my reflection in the hall mirror. My brond hair (at least that’s what my colorist called it) was still perfectly smooth, my makeup was maybe in need of a touch-up on the lips, but my skin had gone sickly pale. I went back to my desk and mindlessly read through emails until, expectedly, I received a summons to Carlyne’s office.

I felt numb as I walked down the hallway. When I pushed the door to her office open and she told me to close it behind me, I assumed I was about to be fired.

Carolynne took a measured breath. “That moment with Bob—wasn’t great.”

“I know,” I said, curling into myself, staring at my lap.

“He said he’s going to think about the campaign. But he doesn’t want you working on it.”

I hung my head, waiting for the inevitable next shoe.

“I was surprised, Mona. You put so much work into that campaign. I was hoping it would be a meaningful opportunity to you.”

“I know. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I noticed you didn’t take any bereavement leave after attending your father’s funeral. That was just about three months ago now, right?”

I looked up sharply, jaw tight. “I wanted to stay focused.”

“Sure,” Carolynne said. “And maybe that worked for a while. But today”—she gave a soft shrug—“Felt like something slipped. And I don’t want that to become a pattern.”

I looked down at my hands, unsure of what we were doing.

Carolynne continued, her voice even. “This isn’t disciplinary, Mona. But I think it might be smart—for everyone—if you took some time off. Reset, get your footing back. It gives us all a little breathing room, so you can come back stronger.”

Officially, the firm believes work-life balance is very important. But to make it in my world, you need to go the extra mile. The old-timers often flex their long hours and ability to repress their humanity because there’s a certain gravitas that comes with devoting your life to this job. PTO exists on paper, but until you’ve put in your time and made it past associate level, you should probably only use it for lifesaving surgery (so long as you keep your phone on and stick with local anesthesia so you can answer emails while on the table). Because who else is going to wake at four a.m. to set up an influencer event? When is one supposed to make a gorgeous, curated slideshow before a last-minute pitch meeting? Our clients expect more than just creative ideas—they pay for us to be there whenever they need us. To make their lives feel easier. And you don’t climb the ladder by sleeping through your weekends.

But I recognized what I was being offered—and what it was protecting me from. At that moment, all I could think about was not being fired, so I agreed to take the leave and to pair it with some of my overly accumulated vacation time that nobody with any real career goals is meant to use. Since I

had offended a big client, I needed to show I was taking her recommendation seriously. Carolyn said I could finish out the day, and she'd handle the rest with HR.

Afterward, I decided to still show up for drinks with my usual crew at the usual time. They say to surround yourself with people who inspire you, who are going places you want to be. And I didn't really want to go back to my shitty apartment and face the reality that I wouldn't have anywhere else to be for a long while. So when Corbin (manager), Lisa (manager), Olivia (associate on her way to being manager), and me (manager days away from director until four hours ago) finished our cocktails, I kept it going and ordered another round.

As we had our next drinks, I realized I'd eventually need to provide some excuse why I wouldn't be at work tomorrow. These were my friends, and we got together weekly to commiserate about our work woes, but they were also my competition. There was only one director-level position opening up, and if they realized my much-anticipated promotion was suddenly on unsteady ground, it wouldn't be long before they swooped in to take on my clients, friends or not. After all, I'd do the same for them.

Another round of overpriced drinks in, I finally mustered the courage to tell them I'd be taking some time off. As soon as the words left my lips, their gazes instantly found each other. Their expressions communicated what they'd never say aloud: One didn't just take several weeks of R&R in our field. We'd all seen the signs in former colleagues who hadn't made it. First it was a vacation day, then it was quitting to be a wellness coach. You either lived the grind, or you burned out and failed.

The pay at the firm is decent, but like most creative industries, you don't start making real money until you hit the higher levels. After years of scraping by on an assistant's salary, I only started to feel some financial breathing room when I made manager. Unlike my friends who didn't have student loans and could afford to live blocks from the office, I carried not just my own debt but my parents' too. For years, a chunk of my paychecks had gone to help my mother out of her many binds. Which means that even though I turned thirty-one last September, the only nest egg I have worth bragging about are the three phone chargers I've accumulated through the years. Still, I was so close to breaking through—close to affording an apartment free of water stains, to replacing my contact lenses as frequently

as recommended instead of waiting until they felt like sandpaper. Yet, despite all of it, here I was: a freshly minted dud.

“It’s just to help my mom,” I lied. “But I’ll still be checking in. Keeping things moving, you know . . .”

“Wow, that’s so selfless of you,” Olivia said.

Selfless. After all my hard work—all the sacrifices, the moments I’d missed, in service to my career . . . My throat was thick as I knocked back the remnants of my third-slash-maybe-fourth drink and excused myself to get another.

At some point after that, I’d clearly managed to go somewhere to buy Cheetos. And I found a mysterious broken vase to put on my nightstand. As I rack my brain to fill in the many voids, it feels like something is . . . wrong—like something really bad happened last night. I push that thought away. It must be some lingering shame from the hangover. I’m not used to it.

“Everyone make your way to the nearest exit!” a voice yells, bringing me back to the present—to my apartment building hallway that I’ve been tentatively making my way through. My slippers sink into the squishy carpet that’s overly patterned to hide the years of dirt particles we tenants have trampled into it. I reach the stairwell door and make eye contact with my reflection in the finger-scuffed glass. My hair is in a giant nest of a bun on top of my head, mascara is smudged under my eyes, and this worn-out housecoat should never see daylight. But I brace myself and push onward.

The noise from the alarm is even louder in the stairwell. As I descend the creaking stairs toward the lobby, clutching the railing and trying not to puke with every step, a burning plasticky tinge infuses the air. Notable, since the lobby normally rotates between three odors: cabbage; weed; and fake-cinnamon cleaning product.

Someone else comes pounding down the stairs behind me and pushes around me, thrusting open the door to the lobby.

It’s funny how our guts can sense danger before our brains even realize. That odd, unsettled feeling I’ve had steps into overdrive.

Before I even see it, I know, somewhere deep in my soul. The lobby is completely disheveled. The dark wood end table is knocked over, the massive old lamp that usually sits on it now shattered on the floor. Wilted flowers are scattered everywhere; the vase they came from has mysteriously vanished. There’s an ancient armchair of unknown origin next to it (a chair

that somebody likely has, or may soon, jerk off in, given its age). Flyers and stacks of books pour out of the cabinet that one might call our building's little library. The remnants of those papers and books are now littered across the room like a small tornado swept them up and ripped them into shreds. What kind of monster would do such a thing?

I catch the neighbor (Divorced Dad in 4B) who'd so hurriedly pushed past me moments ago now paused, surveying the wreckage. A flash of memory sweeps into my head: myself last night, stumbling into the lobby and bumping over the end table, causing the lamp to fall and break.

But all this other mess . . . No, that's not possible. Someone else must've come in after me and made it worse. That's not me, I would never . . .

My breath halts in my chest. I know exactly who I sound like, and my throat threatens to close before I force myself to swallow those thoughts down. Of course it was me; I need at least to face the truth. This is why I never get drunk—I know very well it's not something I can handle.

The broken vase I woke up to came from the table, and that's why all the flowers were scattered. It was next to the lamp. I remember being upset with this place, upset I'd be stuck here for the foreseeable future, even though I deserved to be in a better apartment by now. I can't believe I took my grief out like this.

Then I see what the neighbor's eyes are caught on: the whiteboard attached to the wall, which the landlady occasionally posts notices on about routine pest control visits and reminders to *please sort recyclable materials correctly or the building will be fined*. Now I see a new phrase has been scribbled across it, and the few words I catch on it are: *vagina in the kitchen sink* . . .

No! I hugely fucked up last night. And there's a whole building of people who've just witnessed it.

In the upper corner on the room, a red light blinks steadily. The lobby camera. Fuck. Not only have I tanked my career, now I've made myself a prime candidate for eviction.

Or worse. Vandalism could be classified as criminal. Arrest isn't off the table.

A cold wave of panic floods through me, locking up my limbs. I have to get to that camera before Irene, the landlady, notices. Does it record footage somewhere? Is it live-streamed? I veer toward the camera, desperate for answers, but a firefighter with an impressively classic mustache charges

toward me and blocks the space in front of me. “Everyone needs to get out immediately.”

“I forgot something important,” I whine. I try for a pleading expression, but he just heaves out a sigh like he’s used to this specific challenge. I need to think fast. “It’s . . . I have a pet I forgot!”

“We can get someone on it once you’re outside.” He doesn’t move.

“I really would rather help her to safety myself. She only trusts me.” I lock eyes with him, hoping to channel my desperation into something convincing, but I can tell there’s not going to be any budging. You don’t grow a mustache that serious just for shits.

The stairwell door behind us opens again, and another one of my neighbors (the one I creatively call Weird Girl Beside Me in 4D) emerges holding a struggling cat. Yet another firefighter with a loud radio crackling on his belt is standing behind her, hustling her out. Man, they really go hard getting people out of alarmed buildings.

“Ma’am?” The mustache is looking at me expectantly: “What type of pet and what unit?”

“Right.” I smile. “She’s black. Pretty small.” The firefighter ticks his jaw expectantly. I practically choke the words out. “Her name is Alice. She’s a Black Moor, and I’d really rather save her myself.”

I try one last attempt to make my way past, and this guy actually yells, “Ma’am you’re not allowed to go into a building during an active alarm to save a goldfish.”

I didn’t expect him to know what a Black Moor was.

I nod meekly and suppress the urge to cry. He notices and offers a conciliatory, “Your life’s the one that matters most right now.”

Given everything that’s happened to me in the last twenty-four hours, it feels more like a philosophical lecture than he realizes. I look at the ruined lobby once more, then the camera, before I turn toward the door.

Is this my life? I guess, like everything else, it’s going up in flames.

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The People of Valleyview Apartments

Outside, my neighbors, most of whom I only vaguely recognize, are scattered across the front lawn. Our building has sixteen units spread out on four stories. Because it's a weekday, I assume the assembled crowd is made up of remote workers, night-shift workers, and the ones who don't work—I suppose that's me, now.

Most tenants only stay in this building for a year or two before moving on; it's not the kind of place you want to lay down roots in. At five years, I'm one of the old-timers. I pass the most recent addition to the building, Fighting Couple, as I make my way down the cracked front path. I recently saw them at the supermarket bickering about a cucumber (apparently, they had one that went bad, and they were both accusing the other of not using it fast enough). Also, the stairwell below their suite always smells like hot dogs, which seems like A Very Notable Thing. Right now, they're silent as they stare bitterly at their phone screens, though that probably won't last long.

Neither of them looks up as I walk by, gravel crunching under my slides. I cross my arms and tuck my elbows into my palms, avoiding eye contact as I try to listen to the small crowd that's gathering just past them.

Of course, I normally avoid my neighbors. I'm not about to engage in small talk with the people stuck living here alongside me. It's not that I think they're all bad (some seem to be a tad fucked up, but nothing too wild); it's that there's no reason to create permanence in our relationship. We're simply passing through one another's lives (in as distant a ship as possible!). If I'm about to leave and I hear another person in the hallway, I always do the right thing and spy out of my peephole, waiting for the coast to clear.

Most of what I know about my neighbors has been gleaned via the sights, smells, and sounds that come from their units; the TV shows and arguments they choose to blare; the marathoners who stomp up or down the stairwells at ungodly hours. Oh, and the worst offender: the never-improving-but-always-practicing pianist. They just love to taunt me.

Now, dread sets in as I overhear: "Bet it was teenagers." The sentiment comes from Divorced Dad. He lives across the hall from me and always wears a cell-phone holster. He recently purchased a brand-new Hyundai Santa Fe, which seems to vaguely indicate that he's completely lost the plot in life.

"There ain't no teenagers coming into our lobby at night." That's the man I think of as Old White Perve (OWP)—for obvious reasons. Given my upbringing, I'm very familiar with his type. He's always red-faced and sweaty, and often sports a free-with-purchase Molson Canadian shirt tucked behind a giant belt buckle. His jeans are worn well past what would be considered fair, and the years of pressing his junk against the crotch area have stamped a heartbreakingly detailed shape into the denim. He taped up a poster of some girl in a bikini from 2004 on the wall behind his parking space, as though the parkade is his personal garage. Currently, he's wearing a worn, open bathrobe paired with greige boxers, his pale, knobby knees exposed. "The vandal had to be someone who lives here," he continues, eyeing Fighting Couple with suspicion.

A *vandal*. That's what I am. A criminal, technically. I curl a little further into my bathrobe as sweat pools below it.

Fancy Widow is leaning against the trunk of a tree that's been strung with Christmas lights for over a year, blowing smoke from a slim cigarette. She scares me the most of all my neighbors. Last week she took out my laundry and left it wet on top of the machine the instant my cycle was done. I don't dare confront her about it. Her apartment always emits the odor of stale

smoke, which I actually don't mind because it's slightly more pleasant than the smell of whatever Old White Perve is burning for his dinner. She shakes her head at the men as she exhales yet another plume of smoke. But she doesn't add to the conversation. Neither does Uniform Family (I've never seen them in anything but their specific work attire: there's Medical Scrub mom, Calgary Transit dad, and Tim Horton's son). I notice a few absences: Never Here Guy (a hiker-type young man who must have a partner with a better apartment since he's . . . never here); and the constantly rotating cast of recent college grads on the second floor—so featureless and interchangeable I'm never quite sure if I've seen them before or if they just look vaguely familiar.

"Don't worry," Weird Girl Beside Me starts as she struggles to shift her squirming orange cat from one shoulder to the other. She moved in about a year ago and seems to be about my age, but that's where the similarities end. She's always wearing these ridiculously bright outfits that are practically screaming for help, and she changes her hair color every month. Right now, it's a shade of crimson red. She's never tried to talk to me, which is a point in her favor—but our walls are criminally thin, and she's always blasting true-crime podcasts. It's hard to drift off to sleep when words like "severed head," "semen sample," and "decomposing" are whispering through the drywall. Also, one time in the shower I heard sobbing coming through the walls. Very awkward because I'd been in the middle of singing to myself and didn't need the feedback.

"It's going to be on camera anyway," she continues, staring pointedly toward the lobby doors, replenishing my dread.

Is there any way I can destroy the footage before someone uncovers it?

Fancy Widow stomps out her cigarette on the sidewalk like it's the nineties and then she starts marching across the alley to Corner Coffee & Food. An odd feeling I can't quite understand creeps into me at the sight of the diner. I've popped in there on my rare work-from-home days when I need a coffee (always to go). It's a mom-and-pop shop managed by the owners' grown son. He's overly chatty and friendly with his customers in a way that always makes me feel weird for *not* being like that. I usually don't linger.

Just then, another fire truck rounds the corner at the end of our block, near the city's second official sketchy McDonald's. The firefighter that muscled me out of my building hustles over to where the truck is pulling

up, chanting some numbers into his radio. The siren hits a piercing decibel this close by. A new batch of firemen spring from the truck with concerning urgency.

My gaze crawls back to the old brick cube that is Valleyview Apartments (the *valley* in its namesake must be the giant construction pit next to it, and the *view* must be all the goose poop that speckles the front lawn).

But during this entire endeavor, I never seriously considered that this building might actually . . . burn. The redbrick and sandstone cornerstones mark it as belonging to a time long before anyone alive today can remember. Something that's survived this long against the odds can't just burn down, can it?

Practically half the plots on this street are construction sites with signs out front showing off concept art for new, luxury high-rises. When I found this building five years ago, I was hunting for a place in my budget that could keep me close to my office and the nicer parts of the city where my colleagues hung out. I'd toured several brand-new units, with their marble countertops, heated bathroom floor tiles, and spacious balconies. But while my colleagues could afford to splurge on that kind of abode, I did the math and realized my hefty student loan payments and the bills I was helping my mom pay off left my disposable income in a tragic state. Every time I pass by those cheery drawings of the kind of lives other people get to live, I get depressed.

It's always seemed inevitable that one day this duct-taped shit show of a building would get mowed down too, but I never imagined it would be in a blaze of fire. I figured I could cling to the lease just a little longer, until my promotion, when I could *actually* afford to move on.

But even if this place *doesn't* burn down, once the footage of me vandalizing the lobby gets viewed . . . Bile burns in my empty stomach. What if Irene kicks me out? This is the exact opposite of the trajectory I'd planned for myself when I moved in and made my most recent Five-Year Plan. I'm contemplating the logistics of having to move somewhere else, probably even worse than here. With my job in limbo, could I even afford to hire movers?

My breath catches. The box in my closet. The irreplaceable one.

I hadn't thought about it since I shoved it in the back of the top shelf, just over three months ago. It was a simple, benign-looking box. The size of a hatbox and wrapped in brown paper with the words scrawled on top: *For*

Mona. With love, Dad. His writing was so neat, such a contrast to his rumpled shirts and grease-stained knuckles. It always seemed to me as if it couldn't have come from his hands. I swallow over the intrusive lump in my throat as I stare at the building, smelling for signs of smoke beyond the usual aroma of alley piss and garbage. If the place burns, then . . . Well. I should know there's never enough time.

I make out my friend with the stache calling into his radio, "An elderly lady on the stairwell . . ." There's a staticky response in return.

My landlady, Irene.

My head swims as I search the crowd even though I already know she's not here. I would've heard her saying something sassy by now if she was. I watch the front door like a hawk and almost collapse in relief when, through the window, the silhouette of a firefighter guiding someone into the front vestibule appears.

The front door opens swiftly after, but it's not Irene. The firefighter is guiding a guy with extremely pale skin, hunched shoulders, and stringy beige hair. His uncertain walk, the way his eyes are two wide-open beacons . . . Oh my god, it's the Incel in 1A! I'd almost forgotten he existed. I've seen him leave exactly two times in the five years we've both lived here. Once, because his grocery delivery guy couldn't get our finicky buzzer to work; the other, I caught him running out of the laundry room—he left the smell of musty hair sebum in his wake (and I had to stare at the floor for a bit to cope with this violation). I'm sure he's left his unit more than that, but I can't be positive . . .

He and the firefighter make their way out the door, and all our gazes crawl their way. "Well, I'll be," grunts Old White Perve. 1A brushes his stringy hair back and glances our way, a panicked look seeping into his widening eyes. His gait is awkward and he's shaking a bit. He has an anxious, depressing aura—in fact, he seems to be doing exactly the opposite of whatever "lighting up a room" would be. He glares toward Weird Girl Beside Me . . . very Incel. If this were the '90s, he'd channel his energy into taking a ferret or lizard out in public, and we'd all be better off.

Weird Girl Beside Me's cat lets out a loud and distressed meow, and she shifts the fur ball from one shoulder to the other while the cat mews again. "She hasn't eaten yet this morning and probably hates me for taking her out of my place," she says to nobody in particular. A few red scratch lines from her cat have gathered on her neck.

Old White Perve saunters over (there's no better way to describe his walk even though it makes me feel like shit). He weaves past 1A Incel and kneels close to Weird Girl Beside Me. Then OWP's smile twists all creepy as he reaches his hand out to her. I brace myself for unknown reasons as he opens his mouth to speak. "Want me to hold your cat while you take a minute?"

Weird Girl Beside Me must be desperate, because she nods stiffly and hands the cat over. OWP pets the cat gently on the forehead, and the cat nuzzles in return. Trust a guy named Old White Perve to make the rest of us look less than considerate.

Then he blurts, "Such a cute little pussycat."

And I take it all back.

1A Incel wipes his palms over his arms like the gentle breeze is disturbing him. He scans the crowd, and his eyes narrow on Weird Girl Beside Me . . . again.

These people. This isn't a normal fire alarm for a normal building.

Another set of sirens joins the foray. This time it's a medic, and the inside of my mouth goes dry. I hold my breath as they pull out a gurney, systematically set it up, and wheel it inside as if they're done it a thousand times. Which, yeah, I'm sure they have. I stare at the door, willing it to reopen with a still-alive Irene.

"Hey guys, hope you're all okay. Please help yourselves to coffee." I turn to see where this upbeat intrusion is coming from. Diner Loudmouth has appeared behind us with a tray of paper coffee cups and a bag of pastries. He's got dark, shiny hair spilling out of his backward baseball cap that he's always wearing with the Diner's name written on it. He's in a navy apron and fitted T-shirt, and, if I'm being honest, he's *really* wearing it. He might be too chatty for my liking, but he does have good arms. The guy makes his way through our disjointed groups on the lawn, smiling and nodding at Fighting Couple before walking over to Divorced Dad, who plucks one of the coffees from his tray.

"Norm! How are you, buddy?" Diner Loudmouth continues toward 1A Incel. "You doing okay?" He holds up a paper bag. "My mom made some fresh banana muffins this morning." He slaps the muffin bag into Incel's limp hand. "So, is there a fire?"

"I don't know about that, but somebody destroyed the lobby." This comes from Weird Girl Beside Me.

"Seriously?" His brows weave together. "Why would someone do that?"

An excellent question, really. I avert my eyes just as the front door pushes open. At once we all direct our gazes to the entrance. The pit in my stomach solidifies as the stretcher appears in the doorway again, guided by a medic on each end of it.

Irene's sitting up high rather than lying down. Her grey hair isn't as fluffed as usual, but she otherwise appears alert and normal.

Diner Loudmouth rushes toward them. "Irene! Are you okay?"

"I'm in a stretcher," she replies, voice weak as they wheel her down the concrete path.

He turns to a medic with a shiny bob. "What happened?"

She angles her bob his way and says, "She had a fall in the stairwell while evacuating. Looks like a simple ankle injury. Her vitals are looking good." Her face softens. "She'll be okay."

Relieved exhales and hums pull through our small group as they load Irene into the back of the ambulance. Everyone waves her off, some offering promises to visit. The ambulance lights turn on, but no sirens play as it pulls around the corner and out of sight.

A moment later the mustached firefighter comes out of the building and calls, "Good morning, folks. I'm Greg Mathers. I thank you for your cooperation and patience as we responded to the alarm. Your homes will be cleared to return to once my colleagues finish resetting the detection devices."

"So, was there a fire?" Old White Perve asks.

Mathers shakes his head. "Not exactly. It appears that an outlet in the lobby got some water in it and started to smoke. The breaker *should* have tripped, but luckily the fire alarm caught it before anything worse happened. Pretty common in these old buildings that haven't had their electrical systems updated."

"Water in an outlet? You mean from the vandal?" This comes from Divorced Dad.

This is bad.

Mathers nods. "It looks like quite a bit of water was spilled in the area near the lobby table where all the mess was."

Holy shit. The vase I broke, it caused all this?

I take a deep breath through my stale mouth. I not only trashed the lobby and wrote a rude memo on the noticeboard, I almost caused a fire and I made Irene go to the hospital. This is *bad* bad.

Eyes draw around our group suspiciously. I try my best to remain neutral, but I swallow down a gulp.

At best I'll be evicted for this. With no steady job standing to secure a new place in this market, it'll be rough. But at worst . . . What if I get charged with a crime? I swore I'd never make my mom go through that again—picking someone up from jail, wondering what the hell went wrong.

The fireman continues, "We'll be following up with your landlord about a wiring inspection when she's up for it." His cheek curls up. "It's actually good this issue was caught this way rather than something worse." He looks up the length of the building. "These old buildings, they're—"

"Are you going to investigate who started the fire? What about the footage from the lobby camera?" Weird Girl Beside Me asks, arms crossed.

Here's where my life as I know it ends. It feels like I'm watching it all in slow motion.

Mather's eyes draw to her. "My colleague did check. Looks like the hard drives were too full to record new footage, so the camera hasn't been functional for some time. That would be another thing that needs updating."

It takes a moment for the good news to reach the right part of my brain.

Holy shit.

I'm somehow . . . saved? It's like a hurricane warning has switched to a low wind. I wipe my forehead with the sleeve of my shitty bathrobe. Yikes. I didn't realize how much I'd been sweating.

My life isn't completely fucked. If I can get away with this mess, I can redeem it all. My career, my pride, everything—I still have a fighting chance. From now on, I'll be *very* nice to Irene. I'll send her flowers and be a model tenant. I'll—

A tap on my arm, light but firm.

I turn and Diner Loudmouth's dark eyes burn into me, his jaw set. He has this way of focusing on everyone he talks to like they're the most interesting thing in the world. "You like it just black, right?" He's holding the tray of coffee out for me. And suddenly, a flash of fuzzy memory returns to my hungover dopey head.

"Thanks." I take a coffee and will myself to smile. His forearm tattoo confirms it: a realistic black and shaded wishbone—I recognize it from when he helped me stand up last night.

"Sure," he mutters, seeming to suppress whatever expression his face truly desires. "Feel better." And then he turns to greet Uniform Family.

And that's when the memories take full shape.

I should've just gone home after my Uber dropped me off, but my head was only thinking about cheese fries, so instead of disappearing from society for the night like a dignified person, I went to the fucking diner and said words to this man. Words I no longer remember, but I went on for a while. I think. I know I stumbled at some point, and he held me up and I . . . don't know what else.

People start filing back into the building.

Diner Loudmouth has finished giving coffees to Uniform Family. As he tucks the now empty tray under his arm, his eyes make their way to me again, as if sensing me watching. I quickly look away, but not before clocking the curious look on his face.

He knows it was me. He *has* to.

He walks up to Old White Perve. "Hey, Carmen, you said someone trashed the lobby. Are you for real?"

Old White Perve/Carmen replies, "Yes, it's real bullshitty too. Come have a look-see."

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The White Board Less Bored

I should be grateful I'm not being carted away in handcuffs right now. But all I can think is: This can't be happening. One day of terrible actions can't be ruining my life this deeply, this thoroughly. If I had just stayed home yesterday, I'd still be working today, still have a solid housing plan, and not be at risk of having a record.

Diner Loudmouth/Sami follows the crowd toward the building ahead of me, but as we reach the landing he turns around to give me one of those "after you" gestures.

He definitely fucking knows something.

I try not to let the flush of heat get to me as I nod and walk ahead of him. I follow in behind 1A Incel, who walks with his arms pressed firmly at his sides, not moving, which seems like a red flag. He doesn't hold the door for me.

But Sami is quick to reach around and grab it before it slams shut. The motion brings his bicep right in front of my face, and the scent of coffee and something citrusy encircles me. "Thanks," I mutter, head stuck forward.

He's much taller than me, and as I pass under his arm through the door, I remember a snippet of dialogue from last night. I'd asked him if he had multiple copies of the same diner hat, which is probably offensive. Still, it proves very little about my character.

And what we're dealing with here is his word against mine. Actually, it's less than his word because he wasn't with me in the lobby. He may think he knows I was the lobby vandal, but what evidence does this Sami actually have? That I was at the diner and drunk before *someone* destroyed the lobby?

Circumstantial.

Once inside, the familiar old wood smell of the building greets my nostrils as my eyes adjust to the sunless lighting of the lobby and the disaster I made of it.

The elevator dings and Divorced Dad, Uniform Family, and Fighting Couple load themselves in, disappearing without a second glance at the wreckage.

Sami weaves forward and I dare a look at the side of his head as his eyes drag from the mess of flowers to the old water splattered on the beige textured wallpaper, to the knocked-over little library books and restaurant flyers scattered everywhere. When his gaze reaches mine, he quickly diverts. He puffs his cheeks full of air before saying, "We should straighten things up while Irene's out, if anyone's got time to help before I gotta be back at the diner?"

"I do!" I call brightly, willing Sami to look at me and indicate he doesn't think I'm a total wretch worth turning in to the cops. He just lowers his chin in a half nod, not even fully turning my way.

"I can't," 1A Incel croaks as he weaves around the group. "I have to log into work." He marches past us, stiff as cardboard, as he makes his way through the door that leads to the main-floor hallway.

"See you around, Norm!" Sami waves behind the guy.

I get the feeling that Norm may need days to recover from this ordeal.

As soon as he's gone, Old White Perve—*Carmen*, I mentally update—just has to announce, "Funny that that guy is named Norm when there ain't nothing *norm* about him." Nobody laughs, so, of course, he doubles down. "I'm just saying he's got a shitty way about him, that guy." Carmen shakes his head, his leathery skin crunching. He's looking pretty affronted for a man wearing gross brown leather flip-flops, and I don't remember consenting to seeing his funky red toes while I'm this hungover. "Don't you think he must've done all this? He's so creepy." I get the feeling Carmen doesn't contain multitudes.

Although he has a point. Norm lives on the lowest floor, and even though he has a walk-out balcony, I've never seen a door or window without their blinds completely sealed. In short, he could have some bodies in there, and maybe that helps my case, if we're getting into speculation.

"I don't know about that," Weird Girl Beside Me says. "There are a lot of fucking weirdos in this building." She looks pointedly at Carmen. "It could be someone dangerous. I watch a lot of true crime. For my anxiety. This is how it starts."

While I get it, you don't say that kind of thing out loud. Directly to a guy like that.

"I suppose you're right, Jane," Carmen says.

Does everyone here know each other?

All our eyes draw to the noticeboard as Carmen makes his way over to it. "Anyway, I doubt he'd have written *that* on the board." He raps the wall next to it with his knuckles.

Scrolled across the whiteboard in dry-erase marker is a note from Irene:

Dear Residents,

A city technician is coming to do routine pipe draining Thursday, May 20. Water will be off for 2–5 hours. I suggest filling your sinks for personal use. This is the charm of a more seasoned, private building.

Sami advises that Corner Coffee & Food will have plenty of drinking water available for residents.

*Best Wishes,
Irene Laird*

I always forget to check the whiteboard when I'm rushing out the door to work. I've asked Irene several times if she could email important notices. Once, I even offered to set up a Slack account for her to communicate on. Still, this note is kind enough. If I had been my best self, I would've been annoyed at worst, but I also would've given very few fucks.

But after the day I'd had. It's not an excuse of course, but after drinking, after not keeping myself in line, seeing that notice was the last straw, and I became the lowest form of myself. The person I always feared lived inside me.

And my heathen self had to Cheeto-powder-up the marker Irene sometimes writes inspirational quotes with, and draw a big arrow pointing from her notice to a new addition:

I have to dunk my vagina in the kitchen sink now! Sorry but—
It cuts off.

My uncle once traced back the ancestry of our entire family on my Persian side. I found out I was the direct descendant of a Zoroastrian poet. An *ancient* poet. It's fascinating, what he may have mused on about the human condition. And now, this is the latest piece of writing to come from his bloodline.

Carmen grabs the eraser from the track below the board, and while Jane's cat rests on his shoulder, he starts wiping the slate clean. I catch Sami looking at me again before he quickly kneels and grabs a recycling bin and gathers the wilted flowers strewn near his feet.

I rush into action and make my way to the tumbled-over little library, only too eager to be rid of the rest of the mess I made. I push the cabinet back against the wall and leave my coffee cup on top as I start gathering the books. I can't imagine why I would've even touched this thing. It's an old glass record cabinet. I'm never drinking again.

I sort the books I'd strewn by size. Over the years, we've had such classic literature as: retro Canadian Tire flyers, a porno DVD (which I opened out of anthropological curiosity and the disk inside was actually a twenty-five year *Oprah Winfrey Show* celebration), and my personal favorite—*Microwave Cooking for One*. I almost considered taking it for the artistry, but someone beat me to the chase. Today, there are just a few worn-out Clive Cussler-type books.

"Hey, I don't know if I ever caught your name?" Jane taps my shoulder, holding out a pocket *Farmer's Almanac* from 2018 for me to add to the collection. The scent of Aussie shampoo wafts from her. I've never met an Aussie user who wasn't a train wreck of a person.

"Oh, I'm Mona," I say. "Like the painting." This gets a few cheap chuckles from all, which is as expected.

"And you work downtown?" Jane asks casually, her bright pink nails tapping against her paper Corner Coffee cup.

Another uncomfortable feeling surrounds me. Why does she know that? Is she watching me? "Yeah . . . I work at a firm just above the Core." The words feel awkward on my lips already.

Jane's eyes light up. "I figured you worked near there. I always see you at the place on Fifth with the good sandwiches, the one with the barista who shows off his butt cheeks."

“Oh, nice!” I force a smile. The Lululemon-clad barista is a notable landmark. But I’ve never noticed *her* there, in all her bright clothes. To be fair, when I’m in work mode, I really only have eyes for people who look like potential clients. God, I want *that* life back. “So, you work near there too?”

Jane nods. “At an office on Third. So, are you sick today?” Her head tilts again, assessing my situation. “Hungover?”

I catch Sami’s head perking up at the corner of my peripherals. My mouth is cottony dry. “I’m . . . Yeah, I had some vacation time that I needed to use up.” Technically true. I feel Sami’s all-knowing eyes boring through the back of my head. Did I talk about my basically forced leave with a random diner guy?

“Hey, where’d the vase go?” Sami interrupts, his attention now locked on the corner of the lobby.

Shit. The vase is in my bedroom, of course.

Sami searches behind the old chair. “I’d left it on the table here.”

He brought the vase of flowers in here? I don’t want to be mean, I just . . . you have to wonder what kind of person puts flowers in a lobby of some apartment that isn’t even theirs. It’s next to the cum chair, for crying out loud.

“That’s so weird.” Sami stands, his expression harder. “Did the vandal actually go and steal the vase my family gave Irene her birthday flowers in?”

Oh, that makes more sense. And I’m a wretch and a loathsome fool.

Carmen shifts Jane’s cat from shoulder to shoulder. A barbed-wire tattoo from an unfortunate era of body ink peeks out from his shirt. “Looks like we got ourselves a vandal *and* a thief.”

I’m so, so fucked.

A loud screech of a meow comes from Jane’s cat, drawing all our attention. The cat is hissing at the front stairwell landing, where two buggy eyes have just appeared. A geriatric weiner dog waddles into the room. His legs are so short that his penis grazes the floor in a way I sort of pity. Beside him, a leash is held by one of the remaining firefighters. Ernest is Irene’s dog, which she sometimes lets wander through the common areas. He’s old enough that he usually just plops down somewhere and watches people pass by. His beady eyes always seem to be boring into my soul, judging my innermost thoughts. Right now, he’s shaking terribly.

The firefighter clears his throat. "This guy was really spooked by the alarms. We found him hiding under the stairs." Ernest's shivers intensify as he looks up at us, proving the man's point. "Your landlord had asked if anyone would be willing to take care of him while she's getting checked out."

Irene treasures this dog like nothing else. Like *nobody* else, because honestly, I think she has hardly anyone in her life. If I treat him as well as Irene would want, maybe I can start to make up for my misdeeds. This ridiculous dog can be my moral savior. I call out, "I'll take him!"

Sami steps forward, glancing at me with a warm smile. "Don't worry, Mona. I'd be happy to take the little guy in." I don't like the familiar way he says my name. The judgy look he's giving me, like he thinks I shouldn't be near Ernest. Does he think I'm too deranged to take care of a dog?

"Sami," I start, just as familiar. "Don't be silly. You said it yourself, you need to get back to the diner. I'm happy to take him."

"No really, I've watched him for Irene before." Sami makes his way over and puts out his hand for the leash. On instinct, I run interference and accidentally grab him by the bicep before pulling back just as fast. Another flash of memory from last night shudders through me. Sami helped me up after I stumbled getting into my stool. I said he had a really nice arm and I'd like to dance with it sometime. I just know that I'm going to lose hours of sleep over this comment for years, no matter what else I accomplish in my life.

I turn to the firefighter and say, "I'd best take the dog. I live on the same floor as Irene." I direct my gaze to Sami. "I think Ernest will probably want to stay close to his home."

Sami inserts himself again. "Don't worry, he knows the diner. I've watched him before."

"Well, then it must be my turn to help," I say, through the tightest smile.

If it weren't for me, Irene wouldn't have fallen. She's could've died. Everything from the past twenty-four hours draws a weary feeling into my bones. I wrote such a horrible thing. Wrecked her flowers. Meanwhile, this guy just came in to help clean and imply that he "always helps." He doesn't need this. *I* need this.

I'm going to show this dog the best time ever. I smile as I crouch down. "Come here, boy, it's okay." I coax Ernest closer, and when he wobbles to my feet, it feels like a miracle. Like this one creature can see that I'm not so

bad. I lift his warm floppy body into my arms and try to ignore the fact that his peehole is grazing my torso.

The firefighter either takes this as confirmation of Ernest's consent, or he's not interested in watching us duke it out any further. He drops the leash and makes his way out.

Sami raises his brow. "Are you sure, Mona?" There's a tenderness in his tone this time.

"Yes," I say. "I'm actually on vacation for a few weeks, so I can take him, no problem, for as long as Irene's gone." It might actually be nice to have another living thing in my apartment aside from Alice and her bullshit.

"Oh, right," he says in a way that indicates I *did* say something to him about my job last night. He casts his eyes down onto Ernest, and reluctantly says, "Okay then. That's great." His eyes shift back toward Carmen, who is handing Jane her cat, with a bit of struggle. "Well, I should get back to the diner, but I'll drop by after my workout. I have a couple of Ernest's things from the last time I watched him."

"Sounds good," I say. I hold Ernest higher. His earthy smell is so pungent for such a tiny little tube. I might have to give him a bath, lest he transfer his musk to my items. I make a show of patting him.

Sami turns to go, then abruptly stops, his forehead wrinkling. "Oh, you almost forgot." He reaches out and plucks my undrunk coffee from atop the library.

"Right. Thanks!" I accept it with my free hand and take a sip. Its warmth and subtle nutty taste is probably the only good thing that will happen today. "Good coffee," I mutter.

His eyebrow raises. One of his dimples has returned. It's actually . . . not bad when he smiles. "By the way, on Fridays cheese fries are half price."

I cough up the coffee I inhaled into the wrong pipe.

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Disturbing Some Animals

As soon as I make it to the dingy hallway of my apartment, I glance guiltily to the end of the hall, where Irene's door is. She's got a joke sign that reads: *111 days since last incident* above her door that'll need to be reset.

I let myself into my unlocked suite and Ernest nervously follows me in. After I unclip his leash he shuffles around, smelling each item, then exhaling little puffs of air like he's wondering what my deal is. He's pressing his wet nose on my clean furniture, but I try not to think about it.

Alice is floating listlessly in her bowl, her eyes tracking my movements. I left her here during a fire evacuation. This might just be the final nail in the coffin of her already dismal opinion of me. Although she's seen me eat sashimi before—she knew what I was capable of.

It's time to tidy my mess. I slide off my slippers and align them in the row of shoes near the wall. I grab the Cheetos bag and toss it, then consider the two pieces of the vase I broke/stole last night. Another flash of memory returns. I'd stumbled into the table and knocked the flowers over. Like a moron, I'd brought the broken vase back with me, figuring I could glue it back together today and nobody would notice if I got it back in time (I definitely underestimated the rest of the mess in the lobby). I should've just left it. Now I'll have to sneak it to the bin when the coast is clear.

I rinse off the shards and leave them drying in the sink, like some kind of low-stakes criminal souvenir.

I retrieve my phone from atop my dresser. I haven't left it alone for this long in . . . I can't remember. At least I remembered to charge it before I passed out last night. I take a breath and face the screen.

My work-friend group chat is filled with messages from last night and this morning. The messages are of the "hope you all got home okay," "feeling like shit," "surprised that I *actually* got drunk" variety that usually accompanies a night of regrettable choices.

I type: *All good here! Never drinking again! Coffee soon?*

My message looks too upbeat, not at all like the shithole inside me. Corbin and Lisa heart it immediately. They're probably standing around the espresso machine gossiping right around now, and a pang overcomes me. I just want to sit in my tiny office in my little rose-colored velvet chair that's designed for crossing your legs on (I got it last year with my small bonus), stare out my narrow window that has a view of the side of another building (like an industrial late-stage capitalist art instillation), and drink the office coffee that's so much better than the drip machine I have at home.

A side message appears from Olivia: *Best wishes to your mom. Let me know if I can help with anything here, but I'm sure things will be great when you return! Love you!*

Olivia and I are the same breed of person. We didn't come from money or get help from our parents. She knows how hard-won everything I'm now at risk of losing is. She's a level below me, and my promotion to director would have cleared the way for her to move into my old role. Falling off the treadmill now feels like I'm letting *her* down too.

I heart Olivia's message but can't handle saying anything more.

I also have three missed calls from *Mom Cell A*. When I don't answer—which is often, these days, as I've been so tied up with work—she leaves me what's basically a podcast in my voicemail. But today, she just sent two texts.

MOM: Is it legal for a restaurant to steal your money in a slot machine?

MOM: I think I'm being cheated and it's not professional.

Ah, shit. I immediately call via FaceTime.

She picks up after the first ring, and I'm greeted with the boldest sight in the world for 11:04 a.m. She's dressed in a shiny metallic blouse and has

more makeup caked on her face than I've worn over this entire moon cycle. "Mom, you're in public, I see. Haven't they suffered enough?"

She immediately flicks her hand at me. "I don't have time for silly jokes, this is an emergency."

It's the blinking lights in the background and the machines I notice next. "Mom, are you in a casino?"

Her eyelids flit downward for a second, shameless. "Safa says they have nice beef dip, and we're watching the Britney Spears drag queen. She's not good so she does lunch crowd, but I feel like she can get better with encouragement, so I clapped a lot. I'm very supportive." She grins, as if everything she just said is perfectly mundane.

"Cool." The least amount of words is usually the most efficient way to deal with her lately.

She leans toward the screen conspiringly but doesn't quite lower her voice when she cups her mouth to say, "But there's a big emergency here. I found a scam."

"Oh?"

"My hand slipped and pushed the button of the slot machine too early, before I could infuse it with luck, and the machine stole from me. The asshole tried telling me I couldn't get a respin with new money on the house. Now this fucking manager guy is telling me I need to calm down, but how can I when they've *stolen* from me?"

She angles the phone toward a dignified-looking older white-haired guy in a starch-pressed casino uniform.

I sit up higher in my seat. "None of what you're doing sounds good or reasonable."

One of those novelty giant plastic cups with the long swirly straws suddenly pops into frame. My mom takes a giant swig of what looks like a margarita. "I know they cheat us, but they don't have to be so rude on top."

My mom isn't exactly great with people she thinks are trying to cheat her. Last time I was over for dinner, she got a telemarketer scam call with an automated voice that said her credit card was compromised. She let it go through to one of the call center guys and told him that her brother was going to fuck his mom (my mom's version of a comeback, for some reason). The guy on the other end began thoroughly cussing her out. This all happened on speakerphone, and once she hung up, she continued eating

her dinner completely casually, nary a look in me or my Aunt Safa's direction.

But the real problem is, whenever my mom gets into these kinds of scuffles, she ends up saying something along the lines of, "You can't talk to me like that, my daughter is a *very* important manager." Then proceeds to try to get me involved.

I take a deep breath. "You didn't use the 'my daughter is a manager' threat?"

The wide-eyed flash of her eyes is my answer.

"Mom!"

Her voice (miraculously) lowers to respond, "Just a little bit, but I didn't give out your name yet."

"Yet?! Mom, you have to stop with this. Last time, my assistant had to field a call from the car wash. It was a mess."

Hurt creeps in behind her eyes. "You should *want* to help me, after everything." Her eyes cast down for added sympathy. "I'm your mom. When I'm dead, you'll see." This is her evergreen comeback, but it has become less of a casual threat after Dad's funeral.

And that's just it.

My mom was never super reasonable, but since my dad passed, it's like she's become addicted to chaos. I mostly checked out of my relationship with my dad eight years ago. In all that time, I only communicated with him in the most basic surface-level ways, just to keep family gatherings peaceful for my mom's sake.

But the last time he got drunk was five years ago, when Mom called me to help pick him up from the police station. I guess he came home too drunk for his front door keys to work. He apparently thought Mom had changed the locks, so he sliced through the screen of an open window and crawled inside before passing out on the living-room couch. Only problem was, it was the next-door neighbor's house. Anyway, Jim and Pauline didn't take too kindly to this, and the cops were called at one a.m.

It happened the night before my first solo pitch for a micro soda company. I only ended up getting three hours of sleep and uploaded the wrong campaign. Twice.

After his death, something unruly was unleashed inside my mom. Something I'm not sure I can handle.

“I do want to help, of course I do,” I say. “But actually, I should talk to you about my job . . .” I try to lock eyes with her without success. The frostiness of her eyeshadow feels almost reckless with how sunny it is today. “Hey, I actually want to talk.”

“What was that, Mona?” she crows, the screen tilting as she lifts her drink again. The casino manager’s torso comes into view briefly—he’s still standing behind her.

“Things have been kind of weird at work lately, with everything that’s happened.” I force each word out with the hope that she’ll hear them.

“Since Dad and all.”

Instantly, her eyes drift away from the phone screen. It’s like her mind is traveling a million miles away.

All the pain and angst of the past twenty-two hours hits me at once. I don’t know what I expected. She’s still too caught up in her grief, and if I tell her I’m having trouble at work, that’ll only add to it. And she’ll probably end up doing something a lot wilder than arguing with casino managers. Besides, it’s not like she can help me—it’s never been that way.

“Hey mom, I’ll try and come by for a visit soon,” I say, forcing a smile on my face. “Just please, stop arguing with the man for doing his job. You know what it’s like.”

Her gaze turns down again. My dad worked in construction, mostly as a roofer, but he took on anything he could get. Even still, relying on his income when he couldn’t always retain a job was volatile. So Mom ended up spending decades waxing and threading eyebrows in her basement salon. I think some customers knew how much she needed them. Every now and then, someone used that desperation to say and do horrific shit.

“I’m not being *that* rude,” she replies. “I know the limit.”

Now she’s working part time at a small salon in a strip mall in Killarney. At this stage of her life, she should be having some well-deserved peace. But Dad died, and his debts didn’t. So yeah . . . it’s not me she needs to worry about. “Just try not to play the machines anymore. They’re designed to keep you losing money—you could get addicted and it could . . .” The words fall between us before I even realize what I’m saying. We both drift to different thoughts about the same man. “Just don’t play them anymore, okay? You have to pay for utilities soon, don’t forget.” This month, with my leave pay, I actually can’t loan her extra money if she ends up needing it.

She nods, and the tense energy my comment brought carries through the phone. “Okay, it lost its luck anyway. I will never touch these filthy machines again.” She’s far too loud again. In the background I see the casino worker keep a straight face as his one visible eyeball drifts to side-eye her. “I’m going to see about putting a curse on him.”

“Sounds like a solid plan.”

Her eyes twist curiously. “Why aren’t you at work?”

I want to sigh. She finally notices something about me, but it’s too late. “Oh, I just had a late night.”

“With a man?”

“Not this time.”

Her eyebrow raises. “What happened to that one with the beady eyes?”

“Are you talking about Drew?” The literal last guy I was seeing for longer than a few dates was a litigator who was really into this one cheese and meat shop in the NW. He had this hoodie with holes in the sleeves for thumbs, and one time he popped his thumbs through it, and that’s the image of him that’s been burned into my mind ever since. “I stopped seeing him like a year ago.”

“Your problem is you’re very picky.” Her lips flatten. You would think after dealing with a man she couldn’t rely on pretty much her whole adult life, she’d respect my decision never to settle.

Her eyes widen at something off-screen. “Looks like the fake Britney is going to sing again and this time it’s ‘Toxic.’”

She hangs up before I get a chance to give one last warning about the slot machines.

That lady, I swear. Of course she can’t understand making reasonable life choices.

But the hollow quiet that fills the room without her and the casino is thicker now. All I see is space, emptiness, time to fill.

I open my work email, despite their strong recommendations that I log off, but it’s like my inbox has experienced a sudden death. All that’s come in today are some office-wides and an email from my boss, Carolyn, with HR cc’d, confirming I’m basically not to come in while “taking the time to grieve a recent family death.” There’s no professional way to communicate that I already grieved—that I already said my goodbyes years before his actual passing.

Now, they're allowing me three weeks of personal leave, and essentially forcing me to take my vacation time afterward. I'll be gone for six weeks total, which is a lifetime. It can't possibly be legal to do this to someone. To cc some guy named Bill Cleg in personnel, when we've never needed him before.

She said I was under her wing when I joined her department four years ago—that she would help me go far. Now, she's basically forcing me out and saying that's what's best for me.

I once subtly bused a teacup she vomited into during a conference in Banff when a head office guy stopped by our table, because she didn't want to kill her promotion by letting them know she was pregnant. I can't look at floral porcelain teacups now without thinking of chunky orange spew, which is a pretty life-altering thing to deal with.

I pace around my clean apartment, Ernest following like a little shadow. I take inventory. I have a bunch of prepped meals and containers in the fridge—I refill them every Sunday at two p.m. So I'll be set for a while longer before I have to forage for food outside. My closet is filled mostly with professional clothes. I own only three pairs of casual pants. I can't be on leave; I don't have the wardrobe for it.

The walls tighten—the whole place feels smaller as the gravity of my situation hits.

I spent years attending to every factor of my life to prepare myself to become a marketing director—building the perfect wardrobe, reading books on leadership, figuring out the optimal shape of my eyebrows. Four years of college, two unpaid internships, eight years of fourteen-hour days. During the Covid lockdown, I took on additional duties to lighten the load for Carlyne while she homeschooled her eight- and twelve-year-old, and her toddler ran free (and topless) in the background of our Zoom calls.

So many complicated and entitled clients. I was drowning in work all the time, but nobody could tell because I kept my emails so chipper.

When I first found out my dad was in the hospital, I was in the middle of designing a PowerPoint for one of Carlyne's clients who'd asked for a new concept at the eleventh hour. If I'd known how dire his health was . . .

I swallow the lump in my throat. The point is, I gave the company so much. I was a true professional every single day, except for one.

Still, this also feels inevitable in a way I can't quite express. In the way all things feel on the brink of breaking when they're going well.

Ernest starts licking his paws loudly, pulling me from my thought spiral. He's taken up a place on the floor and is staring at a wall. The peace this unemployed dog must feel all the time.

That sentiment is enough to stifle all the other thoughts that threaten to surface.

Shower. I need to shower. I stumble to my bathroom and crank the tap. As soon as the warm water starts running, the anger loosens. All the things I wish I had said and done differently roll through my mind, and in this version I win every argument and reason with my boss. It's surprisingly cathartic.

After toweling off, I go through my usual skin routine. A regimen I bought into during the best of times, when each tailored product seemed very important, even though they sometimes also feel pointless (times like these). But I keep going through the motions. I have to have hope that it'll matter again.

After, I slip into some yoga pants and an old T-shirt from a horrid team-building exercise three years prior—if it meant yesterday not happening, I'd even go back to that humiliating escape room and the fuckasses who got way too into it. (We're not trapped in an actual mine, Josh, please put this same effort into your client research.)

Somehow, Josh is still working in that office today, even though he sucks donkey dick, while I'm stuck here. But I need not dwell. I need to *do* something.

I open my laptop and go to my work's landing page. It's not like a website can tell me how things are falling apart without me. But it doesn't stop me from checking. I just want them to be fucked too. Because in like a month, when they're begging me to come back, I can be classy and stoic and quietly indignant. It'll feel even more petty that way.

I navigate to the About Us section. Only my headshot isn't below Jace Richter's wide-eyed photo like it normally is.

Instead, there's a single sentence below the page of faces:

All those being managed by Mona Bucket have been reassigned. Please reach out to Jace Richter or our reception desk for your inquiries, otherwise our team will reach out as required.

I stare and I stare. It's just gone. I swallow and take a tight breath.

My files are being referred to Jace Richter, and Jace Richter hangs his socks on his office windowsill while he's working.

And now that very guy is in charge of all the campaigns I've put hundreds of hours of my life into.

I pace the creaky wood floor of my tidy apartment. I'm ready and willing to put in hours of work. And this feels like injustice. A puzzle. They want me to take time to get myself together, but how are they going to see how great I'm doing from here?

I turn around and notice my tote purse has only one strap looped around the hook—the other hangs open with a second bag of Cheetos inside. Oh god, I was on a bender.

I grab the snack bag free to throw it out.

And then I see it.

My knees feel weak, like I'm back in that meeting. I feel just the same. Like the world is falling away from me. Like I'm stuck inside myself.

At some point last night, I bought a Pez dispenser.

It's like my brain shuts down from reality. I'm taken back to all the moments, all the apologies, all the times when my dad would give me one of these to make up for his latest screwup while drinking.

A knock sounds at my door, and Ernest loses his shit barking, ready to bite someone's dick off. I'm shot back to reality.

"Mona, it's Sami," his voice calls through the door.

I wipe my eyes and steel myself. I need to show everyone I'm perfectly normal, and I might as well start with him.

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About Last Night

I pull open my heavy wooden door to find that Sami has changed into a light-blue T-shirt. A giant bag of kibble is leaning against the doorframe and a harness is in his hand. His hat is gone and his hair is slightly wet; he must have showered. A few damp pieces fall just over his brows, teasing at his eyes.

“I come bearing Ernest’s stuff.” He holds the harness a little higher and a clean minty scent wafts my way.

“Thanks,” I croak. He must sense my discomfort, because his gaze crawls up me, assessing.

He eyes the Yoshi Pez dispenser that I’m still holding on to. “Pez?”

“Oh . . . yes.” I swallow down the unease and force brightness back into my voice, the way I always do at work. “Would you like one?” I hold it out, as if offering him a little welcome candy at the door was always my intention.

“Sure.” He accepts the dispenser and tilts Yoshi’s head back once to release a candy, then pops it into his mouth. “When I was a kid, I used to pretend I was dramatically popping pills whenever I had these.”

I can’t help the loud huff of air that releases from my nose, almost a laugh. Almost a joke, even; is this a good sign? “In that case, are you sure you want just the one?”

He grins, that dimple creeping back. He taps his belly. “I better not. Lunch is coming up.”

“If you’re sure.” I take the dispenser back and bury it in my purse, far out of sight. “Come in.” I back into the door to invite him into my tiny theoretical foyer, which is more the floor space between the kitchen and bathroom. He hoists the jumbo bag of kibble higher and rests it on the hall bench, arms flexing in the process. I can’t believe I commented on his arms last night—and that’s only the part I *remember*. I can’t believe I attempted to flirt in that state of drunkenness, let alone with a guy I live so close to, and will probably have to make eye contact with several times in the foreseeable future. What was my drunk ass thinking?

Since I opened the door, Ernest has been jumping excitedly by way of greeting, which for his short tube of a body means flopping around like an eel out of water.

“Hey, buddy.” Sami kneels to pat the little guy on the head. When he stands back up, he takes a step further in—which is a step too far. I follow his gaze as he takes in my apartment. The place is tidy but it’s not exactly unique or groundbreaking. There’s no art on the walls—that’s for when I make it to a real home. Furniture: Ikea specials that I assembled while listening to a Dr. Death podcast. Bookshelf: *Closing the Deal*, *The Persuasion Effect*, *Brand Like You Mean It*. Alphabetized, of course. And yet, as I watch Sami’s eyes flit around the room, I feel exposed. He probably already thinks I’m a creep after the lobby situation. Does a strange lack of personal items just reinforce whatever idea he already has of me?

His stare crawls to the ancient white fridge à la rental that has my meal-plan whiteboard magnetized on the front before turning back to me. I tense. “You’re extremely organized.”

“You got me.” When you grow up in a house of madness, organization is the only antidote.

His expression shifts to the old Persian rug under my coffee table (that portion of the floor is so scraped it needed covering with a rug from home). “You know, I didn’t realize you were half Iranian until last night.”

My face grows instantly warm. “Me neither?”

He chuckles at my terrible joke while I freak out internally. Another piece of knowledge to add to my blackout gap from last night. I shared that I was half Persian. God, I must’ve been babbling like a total dong.

Then his eyes snag on the vision board hung above my desk. I'd originally tacked it there to collect inspiration for new campaigns, but slowly it became a dream board of things I wanted: vacations I planned to take, outfit combos my dream self dared to wear, recipes I would prepare when I miraculously found the time and energy to cook. Also featured: nicer rental listings I would check out once my promotion was in hand. I was so close to the end of my *second* Five-Year Plan, this was all supposed to become a reality this year. But then I biffed my life, and if Sami ousts me as a prime suspect to Irene, those dreams are DOA.

I square my shoulders. I need to apologize, but I shouldn't confess to things he has no proof of. That would only get me in more trouble.

"Hey, so I'm actually glad you came by . . ." I start.

"Of course." His eyes soften. "I'm always happy to help *Irene*." Is it me, or does he say my landlady's name rather pointedly?

Right. He *does* think I'm a dickhead.

"I also wanted to apologize." I inhale, hold my head high, and summon my best I'm-an-upstanding-citizen-and-good-Samaritan voice. "I'm sorry about the way I acted at your place of business last night."

He stares at me, eyes wide, before a real smile cracks across his face. "You know, Hallmark should make a card for that."

"I wasn't myself," I continue, looking down at the floor with contrition. "I never drank that much before. This has been a bit of a hard twenty-four hours, but I'm hopeful I can turn it around." When I look back up at Sami he doesn't seem too convinced. "Seriously, I can't remember much, but I want to die a little bit every time I think about what I likely said or did. Normally, I . . . I . . ." I gesture around myself as if my organization system proves something. "I mean, normally at that hour I'm in bed and not harassing diner employees for fried food."

A wounded look flashes across his eyes, one I didn't anticipate. One that matches the feeling in the pit of my stomach that has been churning since yesterday. He nods stiffly. "It's all good." He takes a step backward, toward the door, but stops when he glances down at Ernest, who's curled up like a little donut on the carpet. "Do you have everything you need for him?"

I bend down and pat Ernest, who looks up at me with his huge, cloudy, somewhat vacant eyes. "I think so. I'm actually a really big animal person, but I haven't had time for a real pet." This is true. I've browsed the local rescue pages on occasion and broke my own heart before closing them out.

I choose not to disclose that I've never actually cared for a pet either, aside from a clinically depressed fish who only requires the occasional shake of flakes into her bowl (flakes that smell concerningly like fish). "So I'm looking forward to it."

He notices that my gaze has slipped toward Alice. "You have a pet fish. That's kind of random." I can't tell if he's trying to be nice or accusing me. His expression is giving me nothing.

He tugs on the harness he brought with him. "Has he gone for a walk? It's been a few hours since the fire drill."

"Right." I smile confidently, like I've always known dogs took walks. Although, honestly, with this dog's penis grazing, I'm not sure more ambulation is what Ernest actually needs. Does he have a callous for the part that rubs against things? Instead of asking that, I just say, "Of course—but no need, I was just about to take him on one." I put out my hands for the harness.

"Oh that's great!" Do I imagine his knuckles tightening their grip on the harness? "I can join you. Show you his route, his favorite trees to pee on."

"All good. I think I can manage to find a suitable tree." As I kneel and pat Ernest's head to prove my point, he sneaks little dog kisses into my palm. I smile to demonstrate that I find this very cute.

His voice hardens. "It's just, if Irene is in the hospital for much longer . . . Well, she can be kind of particular about Ernest's routine."

All right, this is no longer a normal threshold of concern. He definitely knows. He thinks I'm a wretch, a scoundrel, a scumbag. And worse still: He's witnessed enough of my debauchery to ruin my life. And by the looks of it, he's planning on doing just that.

I have nothing else to lose now. Or at least, I won't if he chooses to ruin me. It bursts from me before I even think it out: "Okay, I did it!" I let out a huff at the same time his stance squares. "I vandalized the lobby, wrote on the board, caused the fire drill. All of it." My words are tight, like they're being fed through a sieve. "But it really wasn't like me. That's not a cop-out, I just mean I've never done anything like that before. And I never will again! I've been a ball of guilt all day. I feel terrible."

He rubs his jaw; a scratching stubble noise filters into the otherwise silent room. I wait in tense silence for his verdict. Finally, he nods. "I mean, I figured it was you."

I stare at my feet. "I was that bad last night at the diner, eh?"

He half grins as the tops of his ears redden. “I mean you were a tad drunk, but mostly I figured it out because of the broken vase from the lobby that’s currently in your sink.”

Both our gazes crawl toward the shattered vase that’s visible from here. Truly, I’m an idiot.

I look at him pleadingly. “Can you please do me the biggest favor *ever* and . . . not tell Irene? Or anyone, really . . .”

The words draw instant unease into his expression.

I take a step closer, earning another waft of his minty soap, and look into his eyes imploringly. “I know I’m basically a stranger to you, and Irene’s your friend, but yesterday was . . . Well, it was the worst day ever.” Not the *real* worst day, not even the second worst day, but I shove that thought down. “The career I’ve been working toward all my adult life imploded, so I went a little wild, and I really don’t think I *meant* to cause the damage.”

“Yeah.” He leans against my kitchen counter, a pregnant silence filling the room as he considers his words, before finally saying, “Last night you mentioned your work was stressing you out.”

I cringe at the mention of the conversation we had that I can’t recall. “Sami, when I came in last night—it’s a little spotty.”

“Oh, you mean how you acted at my place of business?” He rubs his mouth with the back of his hand, before his eyes round out with sincerity. “Honestly, you weren’t that bad. And it was pretty empty when you came in. Just me and my dad. I think he’s a fan of yours now.” He smirks.

“Oh god. What did I do?”

“Nothing wild. You ordered cheese fries. It’s just at some point you got up—I think to go to the jukebox—but you didn’t know how to work it, so I tried to show you, and you stumbled, and I helped you up.”

“And I made a weird comment about your, um, arms?” A faint echo of my words, something about *wanting to be wrapped up in them*, floats through my memory, which I’ll never be able to forgive or forget.

“Don’t worry.” There’s a blush on his forehead. “You made sure to clarify that you weren’t hitting on me and that I was probably a gym asshole.”

“Oh god, I’m sorry. That was very rude.” Why must I exist as the person that I am sometimes?

“Don’t worry about it.” But his wince appears for a flash before fading. “My dad certainly appreciated it. But you really won him over when you

told us you were half Persian and started sharing your favorite Farsi phrases.”

“Okay.” I let this information trickle in. “But I mostly only know, like, really offensive words.”

The glint in his eye is a terrible confirmation. “Yeah, that’s what my dad loved.”

“Fuck my life,” I reply evenly. “I’m such a weirdo. I wish I could hide in a pile of warm clothes from the laundry and never emerge.”

“That is a common thing to wish for,” Sami says. “But seriously, it wasn’t that bad. For that diner, anyway, it’s pretty tame. You weren’t even the most unruly costumer this week.”

I swallow down my shame. I’ve got this guy doing mental gymnastics trying to put a positive spin on this. “For me, it’s definitely rock bottom.”

But it’s more than that. For other people, one night of reckless decisions is okay. One hangover is tolerable. But for me . . . I had a career setback, and I coped with it exactly like I promised myself I never would. I became what I’ve always feared—a drunk in public.

Sami shrugs. “Seriously, let those among us who haven’t sworn at two strangers in their first language while waiting for cheese fries cast the first stone.”

His words draw a pleasant warmth into me. If I had to have this news delivered by someone, at least this guy has a good bedside manner.

His recounting of my wild night is solidifying other memories. “I really didn’t mean to mess up the lobby. I knocked over the table by accident and the vase broke. I remember, I was going to apologize for the mess so I went to write on the whiteboard, but then I read the notice and got annoyed, and thought the other comment would somehow be funnier.” I throw my hands over my face.

“See, you didn’t mean any harm.” Sami’s smile is too reassuring.

“You shouldn’t be comforting me, man.”

“Fair enough. But you do seem really sorry.”

I nod furiously, muscles still clenched. “I truly, truly am.”

He presses the tips of his fingers together; there’s an edge to his stare. “So I won’t tattle on you.”

“Thank you!” The relief is almost too much; I almost rush to hug him before catching myself and putting out my hand to shake his. He hesitates

only for a second before his brow raises and his hand wraps around mine, warming my fingers.

As our hands part, Sami says, “It’s been awhile since someone’s given me an old-fashioned handshake. Kind of nice.”

“Well, you deserve it. Seriously, I was feeling like the worst person in the world today and now I feel like I can actually . . .” Sami’s mercy is a lifeline. With it, I can start to pull myself back in line. “Like I can fix things.”

He chuckles softly. “I get it. I’ve had bad hangover regret in my time.” His gaze crawls over me assessingly, and for no good reason this draws warmth to my cheeks. “So, this is why you’re taking Ernest? To make up for things?”

“A little,” I say honestly. “But also, it’ll be nice having him around. I’ve got a few weeks off and walking him will at least give some routine to my day.” Already, the world feels off-kilter, and I’m tempted to crawl into my bed and not wake up until my leave is over. “Plus, Bill Cleg made an infograph that mentioned the benefits of walking for mental health.”

“Sorry, who’s Bill Cleg?”

“Oh, he’s this guy that was cc’d in an email.” I probably didn’t need to bring up Bill Cleg. I look at Ernest, still on the floor. “Point is, I’m genuinely happy to take him.”

“Yeah, he’s a good bud to have around.” He watches the dog in question, who is currently licking his chode, truly shameless. Then his phone dings and his eyes flash toward it as he tilts his screen. “Hey, I gotta get back to the diner.” He finally holds the harness out to me to take.

“He likes the park on the corner?” I say.

“Yep. That’s one of his usual haunts.” Another half grin as he kneels and pats Ernest. “Well, if you ever need more dog-sitting advice, you can always stop by the café. I’ll whip you up some fresh cheese fries.”

I jolt in surprise at his offer. Is it a joke or is he trying to . . . make friends? After witnessing me in my absolute worst mode. I rove over his open, easygoing expression—his dark eyes and sturdy jaw—yep. I can see why I would’ve hit on him, but he’s not the kind of guy I would seek for anything real. I need someone whose ambition matches my own—but if I was trying to escape, if my lizard brain was trying to vacation from the reality of it all . . . I know myself. I know where I come from. I swallow

these thoughts, thankful that I didn't go *that* far off the deep end and complicate things further.

I force a polite smile. "That's kind of you, allowing me to show my face there again."

"Oh, that's not me being nice. It's, like, really hard to get banned." He smirks. "I can't afford to be exclusive—like at all. You could probably shit on the floor and I'd welcome you back."

"Charming," I giggle, but a pleasant warmth floats through my chest. "I'll keep that in mind."

He heads toward the door and I realize, after I close it, that I'm still smiling.

It doesn't last long. I allow myself five minutes to flail in shame about all my offenses. Then I take a breath and grab my sneakers to take Ernest for a walk.

When I get back, I sneak the vase chunks into the basement garbage bin and toss the Cheeto wrappers on top to cover the evidence.

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Aggressively Mediocre Internet Use

SWOT ANALYSIS: MONA BUCKET'S LIFE:

Strengths: Can recover from scandal! Can repress emotions, including shame. Am the right amount of insane about work to succeed.

Weaknesses: Tends to get annoyed quite easily. Has trouble hiding it.

Opportunities: Returning to work in six weeks. Have time to do things like study branding and industry trends and research potential clients to bring in. Have time to make the five hundred recipes I bookmarked. Can train for a marathon. Purchase a loom?

Threats: I only like running as a vague concept. Might be evicted. Possibly my mental health is suffering.

I close my notebook and look at the clock on my phone. Damn, the SWOT analysis only ate up twenty minutes.

It was the worst of times, aka Saturday, three days since I fucked up my life. The rest of the week has passed with a (mostly) silent phone and empty schedule (the water shut-off the day after the fire drill turned out to be only a minor inconvenience).

But I'm determined to *nail* this leave by making the best use of my time, to turn this into an opportunity to come back stronger, like my boss said. But that is proving harder than expected. I'm trying to maintain a routine, but it's veered slightly. I blame my environment. The constant sounds: the blasting TVs, random yelling, and hallway wall bangers (I swear the thumps must be on purpose at this point). The smells: always someone burning or smoking something—I think Old Couple Below Me even had a small garbage can fire on their deck for some reason; and the sights: always someone picking up a delivery in questionably held-up pants. The problem is, they don't prepare you to be thrust into having no life. And as it turns out, when I don't have work to hyperfocus on, I don't relax and reflect—rather, I simply find other things to satisfy my urge to fixate. I am on a sliding scale further away from the realm of normal.

Without work to occupy me, all my senses feel heightened. Every little thing feels louder, more intense. I've lived in this building for five years, but now that I'm stuck inside all day, it's like exploring a new world. If I hear someone in the stairwell, I can't help but check through my peephole to see who it is.

I lean against the window and watch people coming and going. I lie on my couch and listen to them doing their little routines. I've learned that Fancy Widow below me is a mediocre violinist and every morning she practices for exactly one hour. Off-key. Divorced Dad across the hall uses some kind of buzzing appliance way too often in the evenings, and my visions of what it could be have become increasingly . . . creative. And yes, that means I've witnessed more distressing sights in my brain. Across the street, Sami goes for a jog every morning at six a.m. and does elevated push-ups against the benches outside the café before opening it up. Seemingly without shame.

I am being kind of freakish. If I truly lose my job, maybe I'll spiral so far down the drain that I'll be forced to ask Divorced Dad if the shit show of a call center he seems to work at (based on the aggressive amounts of times I've heard the phrase “thank you for holding” through his door) is recruiting.

At least there is Ernest, who makes me feel more stable by comparison. Three times a day we trot to the park across the street while Ernest shakes uncontrollably, acting as if he's terrified of every single person who passes, the birds chirping, life itself. The poor guy needs Irene, and every shudder

makes me feel like an even worse human being. After all, I'm the reason she isn't the one taking care of him right now.

On our very first walk together, in a rare bout of optimism, I took a picture of him in nature (the inner-city green space). It didn't pick up his shaking or his peen, so I posted it to my Instagram story so that everyone at work who follows me would know how great I/mysterious dog was doing.

Forty-five minutes, and dozens of views but no hearts later, I no longer related to the version of myself that had posted it, so I deleted it.

Better to fix myself internally before going online anyway. So I turned to cleaning out my fridge. Behind the crumbling wall of meal prep containers—I was starting to run low on food—I found some artisanal kimchi I remembered purchasing at a farmers market six months ago. At the time, I'd been all about it—proud to be getting my probiotics in and confidently getting the bigger jar, chin held high like a total tool. I took the jar down to the trash area to dump the unused contents into the compost. When I opened the bin, I saw an empty can of Pepsi sitting there among the rotting banana peels and potato skins. Didn't that just sum up the culture of complacency in this apartment building beautifully? This is what life can lead to, not even caring about the bin systems.

My friends' group chat has been strangely quiet in a way that indicates they probably created a new side chat that doesn't include me. I shouldn't feel offended: I'm not there for the day-to-day anymore, and they probably just don't want me to feel left out. At least they've been responding to the interesting (if I do say so myself!) links that I've sent: a start-up skin cancer detection camera; a video of a guy bouncing *really* high on a trampoline; and a brief history of Alberta's rat control program. Olivia texted me on the side to ask how things were going ("really great!!!") I'd replied, way *too* quickly, but the three exclamation points were the true overkill.)

How long would it take before things started falling apart in my absence? The excessive hours I put in, the extra effort I took to keep our clients happy—that wasn't the kind of hole you could easily fill just by shuffling around my caseload. I ended up checking my boss's socials for some kind of clue that she was overwhelmed, understaffed, in over her head without me. But after viewing an Instagram story of her oldest kid's piano recital, I felt like a garbage human (again).

Finally, I resorted to reading the entirety of the internet. Did I find what I needed? Absolutely not, but my algorithm is in complete shambles. I looked

up old clips from *Kim's Convenience*, got curious about a specific episode, and realized there was a whole subreddit dedicated to the show. And of course I felt like I could become one of the people who commented! I could be a joiner. But then I saw the last comment was posted thirteen months ago. They'd all simply . . . moved on. How depressing. I clicked the window shut and vowed I would never let myself end up in a lonely corner of the internet again if I could help it.

It was on Sunday morning that I started to freak out again, certain that my luck will run its course and Irene will still find a reason to kick me out. I search rental properties and find the market to be depressingly lacking. With my current situation and no proper job references, the only apartment on the rental website I'd be able to afford is a yellowed basement suite in the Deep South. The landlord didn't even bother to clean up after the last tenant before posting pictures of the bare mattress and questionable floor bucket.

I need to make sure things are good with Irene. Some of the tenants mentioned they'd check on her in the hospital. If I did the same, wouldn't that make me incredibly kind? A model tenant, really.

So I buy the flowers. I plan the words. And make it all the way to Rockyview General.

If only she wasn't at the same hospital that my dad . . . where we lost him. As soon as I pass the reception desk for the elevator bank, something about the smell of the disinfectant mixed with the laminate flooring brings me back to that day. Me racing into the building, trying desperately to make it on time. I figured it was just another drunken incident that landed him in the hospital, so I didn't rush out of work at first, until my mom called to explain the urgency. I'd just stepped into the lobby when I got the text from my mom.

He's gone.

I was too late. Fitting, really. He had a tough time sticking around when I was a kid. And when he started reaching out again a few years ago, I made sure to be busy. That was our rhythm—we kept missing each other.

Reminders of that day flood my mind as I push the elevator button to make it to the room I'm told Irene is in.

She's in a private room at the end of the hall. When I enter, she's sitting up in bed staring moodily at some off-brand Jeopardy show silently playing on the television. Her leg is in a chunky pink cast propped up on a stack of pillows. The sight of it makes my stomach curl with guilt.

Sitting beside her is a younger woman I've never seen before, who's intently reading something on her phone.

"Irene, I'm so glad to see you." I force the words out through my dry throat. I'd dressed in a clean button-down shirt and jeans, hair in a tidy bun, new tang under my pits. But I feel like she can see the shame clinging to me like dirt.

Mystery Woman looks up from her phone and stares down her button nose at me. Now that I have a better view of the sharp angles of her face and signature auburn hair, she's not a mystery. This is Lana Winston, a well-known commercial realtor. I've seen her face plastered on bus benches and in the front windows of closed-down storefronts. But I especially recognize her because she came into the Westmore Communications offices four years ago as a potential client. Carolyn was desperate to woo her—I'd even been sent to buy special cookies for the meeting because Lana had posted about liking them on social media. But ultimately, she ended up signing with one of our competitors. I'd been an associate at the time, sitting in the back of the meeting room; I doubt Lana would remember my face.

I nod toward her in greeting. "I'm Mona, Irene's tenant in 4C."

She half smiles. "Lana. Irene's niece."

I turn back at Irene, who's grimacing as she tries to adjust her butt on the mattress. "It's so great to see you! How's your ankle?"

"Well, it's about to be more metal than bone, but I get to do narcotics for a couple of months."

I don't know if I should smile at this, so I do this weird half-open mouth thing that I understand is typically off-putting.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt as their eyes dart to me. "I mean, it's really awful this happened." I hold my breath steady, but can they hear my heart racing?

Irene lets her head drop. "Every day I'd notice the carpet was coming up right on top of the stairwell and I'd think to myself: somebody is going to trip over that if I don't get it fixed. Goes to show, you should always trust your gut."

Irene's blaming herself. The guilt I'd been carrying like a change purse rattles inside me. I have to fess up. I have to make it right—

“Don’t beat yourself up too hard,” Lana chimes in. “There were plenty more factors than a tiny bit of carpet. It looks like the wiring should’ve been inspected a long time ago.”

There’s an angle behind Lana’s words, her demeanor.

“Anyway.” Irene narrows her brows. “Aren’t you usually at work this time of day, Mona?”

As if I could forget *that* part of my life’s mess. “I’m just taking a staycation. Sort of a mental health thing.”

Her eyebrows raise slightly. “That’s good they have that now.”

“Yeah, and since I’m around, I’ve been helping with Ernest.”

Instantly her eyes widen, her whole face going soft. “I heard! Oh, how is my sweet baby?”

“He is *such* a good dog.” My smile is real, but my mind draws to all the dog privates I witnessed Ernest huff during our walks—it was like he was trying to figure out all their deepest secrets via their anuses.

Irene smiles. “I’m surprised at you, Mona.”

I try not to let my smile crack.

“I assumed Sami would take my little Ernesto.” Irene’s grin stretches into every corner of her face. “But I’m glad that sweet boy didn’t take on too much with all his work at the diner, so I appreciate you helping us.”

“It’s really my pleasure.” I practically croak as newly developed sweat cools my chest. “I’m free if you need any more help. Checking your mail, watering plants—anything really.”

“You mean that?” Irene’s eyes raise.

I nod. “Of course, anything you need.”

Lana’s hands clap together so fast that Irene and I both jump. “I was hoping you’d say that.” She bobs her head toward her aunt. “Aunt Irene is going to stay with me while she recovers, but I’m so allergic to dogs. I’d be sneezing all day and night.”

Irene scowls, but I hastily nod. “Ernest can stay as long as he needs.” He’s been decent company so far. I don’t even mind feeding him the poop-pellet-shaped food that Sami left for me, even if the smell triggers my gag reflex.

“And,” Lana continues, “we really would appreciate some help around the building. Things have been tough for my aunt lately.”

Irene’s hands ball into little sharp fists against the bed’s arms. “I don’t need help. I’ll be back running the place soon enough.” Even though she’s

been sitting in a hospital bed, this is the first time she's looked vulnerable.

Lana turns her phone on again and clicks her manicured fingers against the screen. "That's not a long-term solution. You can't do this forever. And if you want to avoid bringing in a management company . . ."

Irene's expression plummets. "Fine, but only if you stop threatening me with that."

Wait. Does she mean for me to be, like, a temporary super?

I interject too. "I'm not sure I'd be able to—"

"Oh, you'd be great!" Lana turns to Irene. "There's nothing to it."

I can kind of believe that is the case with the way Irene's been running things.

Irene's eyes flash just before Lana continues. "And I know my aunt would be happiest with a tenant who really cares."

Shit. I force the guilt to still.

Irene's grin is too hopeful. "It would only be while I'm recovering. I'm sure not too much can happen in that time."

"Yes, I'm happy to do it."

"Great!" Lana actually makes eye contact with me as she makes her way over. "My aunt needs help with the operations of this place and wants to avoid the rental companies. Given her injury, she'll need to rest." Lana's pointed stare shifts to Irene, who shakes her head, before returning to me. "So we appreciate you alleviating the burden."

"Absolutely!" And I really mean it as I stare at Irene. Having something to do might be the only way to keep myself going. I've been so lucky. I can get my life back on track and I won't screw up again. But before that, I can help this lady. I can make amends for my wrongs. I don't have to be like—

"What's with your perverted smile?" Irene's scrunching her face into her glasses.

My expression blanks. "I just . . . I'm happy to help."

"Mmm." Irene shifts in the bed.

"Great! We really do appreciate it." Lana walks over and lifts her hand for a shake, her sandalwood perfume overriding the smell of disinfectant.

I take her boney hand as she says, "I'll come by later and get you everything you need."

"Hope you feel better." I wave to Irene and back away toward the doorway.

“Thank you, Mona,” Irene says, and then coughs, wincing as her body jolts.

Lana rushes over to her side. “Let me ask for more painkillers. Here, lie back down. Want me to change the channel? You like *Frasier*, don’t you?”

“Fuck Frasier.” Irene lets out a raspy cough.

Fair enough, I think as I make my way into the hall.

“And his brother Niles too.”

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Drama, Diner, and a Deal

When I get back to my apartment, I brace for my new roommate to greet me with a tail-wagging party, but I open the door and—

Fluff.

Everywhere.

My apartment looks like an exploded snow globe.

There are little clouds of stuffing on the rug, on the couch, floating midair. Alice looks like she's been pacing her bowl for some time, unimpressed.

I follow the trail all the way to its source: one of my navy throw pillows that literally came with the couch has been torn to shreds.

And there, next to the scene of the crime, is Ernest. Fluff in his beard. Guilt in his eyes.

He's hunched like a tiny gargoyle, just staring.

But then his eyes bulge and he starts making this horrible *hurk hurk* motion with his neck like he's trying to cough something up.

"Holy crap. Holy crap, are you dying, little guy?"

I scoop him up. He's trembling again, just like he was when the fireman pulled him from under the stairwell. His eyes are glassy now.

Holding him like he's a live grenade, I race down the stairs two at a time. Is there a version of 911 for animals? Where do people go when dogs are

dying? Probably a vet. But where is there a vet? Can I google that while holding this dog with both hands?

I burst out of the building and right away my eyes land on Corner Coffee & Food. Sami. He'd know what to do. I just know it.

A tiny bell dings as I barrel through the diner door, Ernest still cradled in my arms like I'm Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard*. When Sami looks up from behind the counter and locks eyes with me, his face brightens and he stands straighter—then, clocking my expression, the smile drops like a rock.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think he’s choking!” I hold out Ernest toward him. “He chewed up my pillow and I don’t know why and I don’t know what to do.” It all comes out in one breath now. Ernest lets out another terrifying *hurk*.

“Okay, okay.” Sami is already moving, coming around the counter like he does this kind of thing every day. His brows narrow on the tiny patient as he makes his way closer. “Here, let’s go outside. Put him down for a sec.”

We burst through the diner door, and I lower Ernest gently to the grey, patchy sidewalk. He trembles again, lets out a deep and dramatic hack, and with it he spits up the tiniest, soggiest tuft of pillow stuffing. I stare from the shiny glob to Ernest. He blinks up at us each like he’s already forgotten how we all got here.

Sami crosses his arms, nods once. “He’s fine.”

“What?” I scoop Ernest back up, comforted by the warmth of his little body. “He almost died choking and he’s just . . . fine?”

“Yeah basically.” He nods. “You said he got into one of your pillows? How’d that happen?”

I nod and a new guilt settles in. “Yeah, I left him alone to go visit Irene. I thought he’d be okay.” I sound about as defensive as I feel.

“Of course.” Sami’s face softens. “He was probably nervous. New place. His person’s gone. Chewing is how dogs deal with stress.”

“Oh no.” My hands fly to my face. “I’m the stress. Irene was so happy I was helping him. What is she going to think when—”

“It’s not your fault,” he says, his voice soft as he reaches to pat Ernest, a motion I find strangely comforting as I hold the guy. “And you can’t exactly stare at him twenty-four seven. Here—when I get off work later, drop him off. We can switch off his care, so you can take a break and run errands or whatever.”

“Seriously?” My voice cracks a little now. “That would be really great.”

“Of course. Like I said, I’m happy to help, plus Ernest can give me the neighborhood tea I missed while working in the diner.”

I chuckle at this and shift Ernest to my other shoulder. I’m glad dogs can’t talk. Ernest has seen too much of how I’ve been living lately.

He jerks his head back toward the diner. “Gotta finish up in there, but I’ll see you two later?”

“For sure.” I grin.

I hold Ernest a little tighter as I head home.

Back in my apartment, I gather the pillow innards and stuff them in the trash. I’m about to grab the blanket that I’d folded on the end of my couch for him to lie on, but his little body shape is imprinted on it, so I leave it in case he needs to have a nap here after his walk tomorrow.

My stomach growls, reminding me what a long day it’s been. It’s slim pickings in the fridge, so I settle for two Babybel cheeses. That doesn’t do much to alleviate the hunger, so I scrape a well-frosted bean burrito from the bottom corner of my freezer, pop it in the oven, and scroll around on my phone while I wait for it to cook. First up is a reel of some random toddler doing a sloppy job of feeding some backyard chickens. (The toddler is the child of this girl I met in college during a Bermuda shorts party. We got stoned and decided we were kindred spirits who should start a no-nonsense advice agency. We exchanged IG follows and never spoke again. Now I’m watching this.)

A knock sounds at my door. Ernest, once again, starts losing his entire shit in barks and acrobatics toward the door. A great sign.

I pull the door open and answer. “Hello.”

It’s Lana, holding a giant box in her arms and a chunky ring of keys dangling from her fingers. “Hi Mona. I wanted to follow up on what we discussed in the hospital, make sure you have everything you need.”

Before I could say anything, she shoved the box into my arms. It thudded against my stomach.

“Sorry—what is this?” I stagger back a step under the weight.

“Information on the building, the tenants, everything you’ll need.”

I blink at her before setting the box down on my hall bench. “Oh. This seems like a lot.”

“It’s really not! I just read your tenant profile. You’re in marketing, right? It’s totally the same. Marketing is all about identifying needs, solving problems, managing expectations—right?”

“I mean . . . yes, but—”

Lana steps closer to the doorway, and shame bubbles as her eyes rove over my vision board behind me. I’m going to need a new place for that thing if people are going to keep showing up like this.

I stand taller to block as much as I can and clear my throat. “I’d invite you in but . . .” My eyes land on Ernest, who has settled into a spot on the hall floor. Of course! “It’s just with your allergies—”

“That’s okay, I’m not staying here long.” She says it a little *too* quickly, before a polite grin softens her expression. “But I’m sure you’ve noticed my aunt has been having trouble keeping up with this place for a while. Even the tenants are expressing concerns in varying . . . creative ways.” That’s about the classiest way someone could’ve put the lobby fiasco. “Well, I’m sure you’ve considered moving to another building. One that’s more . . . suitable for a young professional.”

There’s no use pretending I haven’t. Especially as her stares behind my shoulders keep focusing in on that board. “Yeah I . . . of course Irene’s been really great, but I’ve had those thoughts.”

“That makes a lot of sense. You don’t seem like the other tenants here.” I try (and fail) not to take that as a compliment. Her voice has brightened all the way up before taking a solemn, almost practiced, dip. “But I have quite a few colleagues who work the rental market, and from what I hear, it’s even worse than last year. We all hate those stories about hundreds of applicants just for a glorified closet.”

I think about my own earlier rental website browsing. “Yeah, it’s pretty bad out there.”

“Worst I’ve seen in a long time.” Lana shakes her head. “Not many privately owned buildings like this one left.”

Her focus lands on Ernest. He’s licking his anus rather pointedly in our direction.

She continues, “And I know my aunt does her best, but it’s getting tough. She won’t admit it, though. The building means a lot to her, and to watch it go this south like this, along with her health . . .”

Another flash of guilt. “Yeah, I’m really sorry to hear this—”

Then it hits me. But of course: Lana's a realtor. And because I'm a genius, I only now realize what this means.

"Wait, are you going to sell Valleyview Apartments?"

It would make sense. Irene is getting too old to keep running the building herself, and the way the neighborhood has been changing, now is the perfect time. Still, I'm surprised. Irene didn't even seem to want a management company in here when we spoke at the hospital.

Surprise flickers across her face. She laughs again, and this time its concerningly forced. Might I know how to speak realtor?

"Not right now." She lowers her voice. "But to let you in on a bit of a secret, it's something we've been discussing."

"Oh . . . that's . . ." I don't say more.

Her eyes widen with sincerity. "I'm sure it's clear she doesn't want to sell to just . . . anyone. We're hopeful we can find the right buyer with a vision to preserve the structure and do their best to keep the current tenants. A private owner like my aunt. But you can imagine, most developers take one look at this place in its current state and just want to tear it down and build new."

I nod. This place would probably have been worth *more* if it really had burned down—save the developer some time.

Lana chuckles for no reason. "But my aunt is adamant. She believes in this building staying put, so in order to get it sold the way my aunt would like, there are quite a few things that will need to be updated, and issues to resolve so that this place will have a chance of selling."

"Hey!" She talks so fast and clear. "I had a thought. Something that could help solve both our problems."

Her words make me instantly wary. It's not just that I want her to like me for some reason, but because she's a realtor and that makes her sales-y and sales-y people are a weakness of mine. If I shop any type of retail where I'm alone with the worker who greets me, instead of shopping, I will become what can only be described as a performer of shopping: making interested facial expressions as I respectfully walk through what's become a wonderland of intrigue. If I don't purchase anything, it'll feel like I'm committing a crime as I walk out of the store and thank them.

Most importantly: I'm not financially or mentally stable to make such a purchase at this juncture.

“To save you some time,” I cut in finally. “I’m not in a position to buy right now.”

Lana’s fake and forced laugh is a touch offensive. “Of course, I understand that. I was actually thinking I could help you rent a place. Not immediately, but once my aunt is back on her feet, of course.” She angles her head thoughtfully. “You know that new building that’s opening up early next year just off Sixteenth, they’re calling it One Lofts. Great suites, close to the river, a walk to the core, incredible views, and an exclusive gym with a hot tub. Anyway, one of my clients is the builder there, and I’m investing in a few suites. I’ll be looking for responsible tenants to rent there. To get straight to it, I could likely set you up in one if that seems like a match?” I can feel the hope pooling inside me as much as I try not to let it. But she continues, “It doesn’t look like it would cost much more than Irene is charging you here.”

“Really?” My voice is a squeak, too afraid that something has maybe worked out for me.

Somehow.

I clear my throat. “That would be amazing.”

“I’d just need a small bit of help from you.”

There it is. The hope refuses to dissipate even though my brain knows realtors are not always the honest, upstanding citizens we civilians see them as. “So, let’s hear the catch,” I say, bolder than I’ve felt in days.

“I’d just need your help, getting this building in working order again—just enough that a private buyer could see its true potential.”

“So, all I need to do is get it ready to sell?”

“Yes! And it would be, of course, best to keep the upcoming listing discreet. Wouldn’t want to fluster the tenants when we’re not even sure anything will change. And my aunt, well, she’s so attached to the old place. I want to make it simple for her when the time comes.”

An instant red flag draws up in my head. “Hiding it from my landlady doesn’t seem—”

“Believe me, I get it.” Again, her voice softens as she leans closer. Her now-familiar perfume wafts my way. “My aunt is having a difficult time, not just this past week, but also . . . I just don’t think she’ll ever feel okay letting go.” She exhales loudly. “It’s really hard because she knows she *has* to sell, but it’s very emotional for her. All I want to do is get the building in

a position where she'd be peaceful with its fate so that she can live her final chapter of life with dignity."

"That's fair." She makes a good point. I suspect Irene would be better off doing anything else with her golden years.

"She believes the building *needs* her to run smoothly and that nobody else can take care of it the way she can. I really want to seize this opportunity while she's in recovery and show her it's okay to step back."

I nod but don't say more.

"So that's why your discretion is important as you prep the property, but also, we really need to show my aunt that she's not needed anymore. That she can step away for good and have someone else run things and things will be okay without her there."

I nod again. The scent of my cooking burrito is curling our way. A hint of shame floating with it.

"Tenants go to my aunt often, and she means well, but it flusters her. While she's healing, I want to keep things peaceful. So I want to ensure that nobody reaches out to her while she's in recovery."

"That makes sense. She should be resting."

"Exactly." Lana's voice lowers just the tiniest bit. "And, of course, we don't want to cause alarm with the tenants either. You never know what can happen when people suspect big change like this."

There it is. The ickiness that always comes. Of course, there's a good chance the next owner will increase rent—something most tenants here likely can't afford. We can't even muster one *real* porno DVD for our library FFS. And my dreams of moving somewhere better dissolve as soon as they form. "I'm sorry, I just don't feel right about it."

Her tone somehow softens even more as her eyes cast down. "Believe me, Mona. I get it, but I will say that unfortunately if we are unable to sell it soon, this place will be doomed, my aunt and the tenants with it. She cannot continue to manage this and financially . . . what she's charging the current tenants is not viable and hasn't been for some time. It's draining her future nest egg." She sighs again. "I'm her only relative that can help. If we can't get it sold this way, unfortunately it will have to end up in a developer's hands in six months, tops."

"I see," I say, because I don't have any better ideas. I don't know what my problem is. I can normally compartmentalize the parts that feel wrong using Lana's exact reasoning. It's just the idea of sneakily doing this to

Irene . . . I hardly know her or these people, but it's more than I know most clients and consumers.

I'm off my game. Ever since that meeting, it's like I messed up my brain.

"Mona, I'm not asking you to do anything overtly deceptive." It's like she's reading my mind, but there's a soft pleading quality to her voice.

"Selling the building is on me. All I'm asking from you is some help improving the building. And that helps everyone here."

It hits me. It's the way she's negotiating. It feels like she *needs* me to do this. And that always gives me the feeling like I should be countering. But even that doesn't make sense. The new apartment is better than I could've dreamed, so why doesn't it feel like enough?

"I mean . . . I'm not totally against it but I just don't know, it still feels . . ."

"I understand. Tell you what, why don't I just send over more details of what I need from you, then you can decide. I'll also go ahead and send some brochures for One Lofts so you can picture your new life while you're at it." She backs out the door. "I'll be in touch."

"Okay," I reply as I wave her off. "Sounds good."

It's when I'm settled on the couch, burning my tongue on that first inferno bite of burrito that an email buzzes into my phone:

Subject: Your New Life

Oh god.

I click open the attached brochure. Everything pictured in the building is glossy and modern. I bet they don't have that weird smell in the hallway of the second floor.

I reread the subject of the email and try to picture my new life there. Preparing meals in the kitchen; proudly hosting my friends without feeling self-conscious of the water stain on the corner of the ceiling or wondering whether Divorced Dad is going to yell when the Flames score a goal and ruin the illusion that my life isn't a little shitty. I picture myself getting ready for work using that closet that doesn't have a door that catches and hides half my clothes. It seems like exactly what I'd want, and just as quickly I deflate. It's a little bit more than I can swing, and there's a good chance I won't be getting promoted this year, after all.

I pick up the phone. I now have a counteroffer. As soon as she greets me, I say, "Thanks again for sending the tasks over. I'm happy to do all the prep

work shared, and I'll make sure that Irene isn't bothered. One additional ask."

"Oh."

"It's actually something that can help you too I think. You'd been working with Motley and Sons for your company's branding, right?"

"Yes, for years. They've been great."

She's right. Motley senior *has* been great. He announced his retirement last month. His one son left for personal reasons last year, and the remaining son has been investigated at least once for expense misappropriation. We both know that she'll be on the market for a safer firm once Motley leaves.

"Lana, I can get this building in shape in any way you need. And I will do everything to ensure Irene isn't bothered by the tenants. But would you consider coming to Westmore Communications?"

"Oh." Her voice drops, as expected. "I don't really see the benefit of going elsewhere right now."

"I get that, but I'd like the chance for you to consider our firm. All I'm asking is for one opportunity. You know our reputation, and now you'll get a chance to see what it's like working with me. Can you give me your word you'll at least come in for a pitch meeting?"

The line goes quiet. Too quiet. And my palms start to sweat that fast. She could back out now and everything I need to get my life back on track could slip through my fingers. I should've been happy with the new apartment.

But if I can return from my leave having secured Lana as a client, even on a trial basis—that's all I'd need to prove I was director material after all.

They can put me on leave, but I'll come back stronger.

The promotion and bigger office will be mine. The new apartment will be mine—and at such an affordable rate, I'll have enough spending cash to start marking my dream board a reality.

My heart pounds as I blurt out, "Unless you have someone else who can do what you're asking of me, without Irene finding out."

Another rush of adrenaline. It's not a threat but it may as well be. There's something alive inside me again.

I just hope Lana doesn't know how much I need this.

"Okay." She lets out a breath. "Sounds good. If things work out, I'll come in and hear your company's pitch for a longer-term partnership."

“Thank you so much, Lana. It’s a pleasure.” I let her go lest I say the wrong thing and make it all go to shit.

No matter what, this building is going to be sold. It won’t matter if I rearrange the chairs on the *Titanic* or play in a string quartet, the iceberg is coming. I may as well get into a lifeboat that’s being offered. And maybe I read too long an article on submersibles in bed this morning?

I open the email again: *your new life*. In a few weeks, I can be moving into that apartment. I could even be onboarding Lana. Having brought such a big client into the firm, I’ll be sure to redeem myself. Hell, this will put me even further ahead than I was before.

I can flip this blip in my career into something to be proud of.

And it’ll all be worth it. Everything I’ve worked for. Everything I’ve sacrificed . . .

I think of the last time I saw my dad before his stroke. I had him come to a coffee shop near my office. He was already waiting for me when I got there. He’d just gotten a haircut and wore a golf shirt that had a collar—his nicest shirt. There was a tiny hole in the sleeve that broke my heart.

And there was that box on the table. The box that sits hidden in the back of my closet.

He was so happy I came; I was so antsy to get back to the office. I downed my coffee so fast that it burned. He told me about his new job—that he’d become the resident old guy in the warehouse.

When we left, he asked if we could meet next week again.

His smile was hesitant and hopeful. I looked into his eyes, and they were clear. Everything was clear.

So I said, “Sure, same time next week.”

His smile was so full of promise that I could almost imagine what he looked like as a child. Like how his mom might’ve seen him.

I took the box home and didn’t open it that night.

Then I got really busy at work and ended up staying until eleven every night for a week. I had to cancel our next coffee. And the one after.

The third week, he died in the hospital.

I push the thoughts deep into my core and pull up a different memory: when he showed up to my MBA graduation hardly able to stand. How he stumbled through the room, stuffed his hand into his rumpled suit coat, and fished a metal flask from his pocket. I was so embarrassed that it felt like *I* was doing it.

I live in the memory until the anger surges high enough to be comfortable.

Alice zeroes in on me, but I can't hold her stare.

In a few weeks I'll be moving on from here. Everything will be back on track.

My new life awaits.

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Email Sent from Mona Bucket to All residents

Email from: Mona Bucket to: All Residents, Valleyview Apartments, May 24, 9:07 a.m.

Hello Everyone,

If we haven't already met, I'm Mona and you can find me in apartment 4C.

As you've likely heard, Irene has had an unfortunate accident and until she's back on her feet, I'll be taking over the management of the building. She's in recovery and we'd like her to rest, which means I'm your contact person for everything building related.

To make things easier, I've attached my contact info below. I've also gone ahead and set up a Slack for all residents. (Link below.) This will definitely be the quickest means of communication regarding building matters; however, if you prefer, you can always reach out to me at my contact info below.

Looking forward to speaking with you all!

Best,
Mona

Reply from: Carmen Thurston CT64@hotmail.com May 24, 9:44 a.m.

This "Slack" sounds like one of those websites the government is tracking. Just go ahead and knock on my door 1D or if you really must, you can email me. You'll find me.

Valleyview Slack Monday, May 24

Mona Bucket joined #General

Mona Bucket created a channel: #electricianappointments

Jane Brando joined #General

JANE BRANDO, 8:09 A.M.: is this a good place to mention certain concerns I have?

Norm Olivers joined #General

JANE BRANDO, 8:14 A.M.: It's a tenant issue . . .

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The Children in the Hall

I get started on my “new job” first thing Monday morning, after Ernest’s walk. I grab the box Lana gave me and plonk it onto the Persian rug next to my coffee table. Alice doesn’t seem all that curious, even as I pull off the lid and start rooting around. The mess of papers inside the box are such an anxiety-inducing jumble that I can’t help but get started sorting right away.

It turns out Irene has an email for everyone on their tenant profile forms—as well as phone numbers, previous addresses, occupation, and references. With so much personal information at her fingertips, her not using them (ever!) is even more boggling.

First step: announcing a change in leadership. I hit send on a group message advising all tenants that I am the new manager. There’s no going back. I can officially get started on Project Turd Polish.

I’m currently on Phase One: *Tenant Inventory*.

I start by going through the tenant’s files in earnest and creating a new digital grid for easy reference.

Carmen Thurston 1D (Old White Perve) has been here for seven years. His occupation is listed as: Outlaw, which I’m sure is normal and nothing to worry about.

Jane Brando (Weird Girl Beside Me) is an administrative assistant. Not what I expected. The other morning, I spotted her leaving for work in bright

pink tights, a wrinkled beige trench coat, and a purse that didn't quite hold the giant paperback novel stuffed inside.

It made me feel bad.

Norman Olivers (A1 Incel) has a name so generic it borders on familiar. His listed occupation is IT, which I could've guessed. He seems like the type who's constantly glued to a computer screen for one reason or another. It probably doesn't matter where he lives—his life would just keep rolling down its flat, grey road, unchanged.

All these people will have to move in a few weeks, if I do my job well.

But that's just how it goes, right? It's like Lana said; this part of town has been gentrifying for years. Buildings up and down the street have been bought to be refurbished. None of us can fight that.

Next, I move on to the list of tasks Lana sent. The electrical inspections are the most pressing, given our recent fire scare, so I'll need to book someone ASAP.

As I do some basic arithmetic, tallying up the monthly operation costs, it becomes abundantly clear: Irene isn't charging nearly enough in rent. This place is sinking faster than a pebble in Alice's bowl.

It's an odd kind of relief to know that Lana wasn't full of shit. These evictions really are inevitable, no matter what. If anything, I'm actually helping save Irene from herself.

Right, time to do a walk-through. Lana wants photos of the building to begin gathering interest. I close my laptop, pick up my phone, grab a bottle of flat Perrier from my fridge to take a big swig, and head for the halls.

I'd almost forgotten how grounding it is to deep focus on a task. I realize just how much a few days of idleness messed me up. I'm suddenly thankful to have something like this to do, small as it may seem right now.

I start on floor three, the level below me. Being on a level of the building I've lived in for five years but never have a reason to go to feels like an odd breach. It looks exactly the same as floor four, paint chipping on white floorboards, but the feeling is all bizarro world.

The hum of a vacuum scrapes across the ceiling above, competing with the muted chatter of some anonymous daytime show echoing through a door at the end of the hallway (3D: the apartment of Fancy Widow, who I now know from her tenant profile is named Lorna Frank).

Lana shared in her not-so-patronizing instructions that it's important to keep the buyer focused on "potential" and to eliminate anything that

distracts from that. Apparently, “shitty carpet and wallpaper” (the main features of the three floors I’ve walked through so far), aren’t as much of a concern as, say, “weird mysterious odor seeping into hallway from 1A Incel’s unit that could be a body and might be impossible to remove.” (The first thing I noticed when I reached the ground floor). I suppose a normal amount of tidying up won’t be enough to deal with that. According to Irene’s papers, cleaners come by once a month—and they’re apparently responsible for the random bursts of cinnamon in the air.

When I get to the lobby, as usual, a dozen midsize cardboard packages are piled up precariously high next to the lobby door. Naturally, we don’t have a doorman, so the mail carriers tend to just throw down the boxes in the landing. There are so many right now that they’re spilling across the floor and blocking the way in.

I pull out my phone and attempt to take some pictures of the hall while artfully trying to avoid the mess. But it seems obvious that part of the hallway is cut off compared to the other floors.

Just then, the door to the stairwell creaks. I shove my phone away as the dad of Uniform Family walks out, hair combed back ready to start his shift. As he passes by to go to the mailboxes, he respectfully doesn’t acknowledge me.

I suppose I’ll have to come back later to get a better snapshot.

I take the stairwell into the basement area next and am greeted by the usual musty, concerningly earthy scent. The basement truly shows the building’s age, with its low ceilings and cinderblock walls.

I’m in the landing standing under the always-flickering light when I notice the tiny rice-shaped brown specks. I wish I hadn’t inhaled so hard when there are freaking mice droppings in the zone. Great, I will have to get an exterminator to deal with this.

“What’s your problem!”

I jolt as, out of nowhere, a loud thump sounds.

It’s Old White Perve’s voice, coming from the lobby.

My heartbeat skips with the flicker of the lights. Does he know what I’m up to already? Visions of my murder in this dank basement flicker behind my eyes. I can imagine the interviews my mom would give to the media: “She tried so hard at everything. Always got straight A’s but had mini breakdowns earning them.”

“It was blocking the door from closing properly!” Jane’s voice is sterner than its usual fluttery tone. A creak sounds from above.

Something’s going down in the lobby above me.

I tiptoe back up the stairwell as Carmen’s voice drawls, “Look, I ain’t here for no drama!”

The shadows move against the propped-open doorway above me. Jane lets out a frustrated screech. “It’s unsafe! Anyone could walk in here.”

I finish making my way up the stairs, until I’m close enough to see the back of Jane’s head. Her red hair is bouncing with the sound of her voice, her head shaking with the power of her words coming out. “Doesn’t it bother you some vandal just broke into the building?” She’s got a large crunchy Ikea tote bag propped under her arm. She points in what I’m guessing is Carmen’s direction, her chewed fingernails holding on to the last few chips of bright green nail-polish. “I’m going to talk to Irene about this.”

Shit. Normally, this is the kind of situation I’d get the hell away from without a second glance. But since I’m supposed to be keeping the tenants calm and out of Irene’s hair, I guess this is my fucking rodeo now—whether I like it or not. I inhale. Time to go shut this mess down.

I step into the entryway and Jane turns to notice me, a twinge of curiosity in her expression. I wave, like I wasn’t eavesdropping. “Hey there. Everything okay?”

They both stare at their shoes in response. Carmen’s ears are red as he crosses his pale, freckled arms, jaw clenched. Even though these two people aren’t usually dripping with joie de vivre, nor is the bare light bulb on this landing (that will need to be replaced if I want to imply that this building isn’t a shithole), the situation still looks dire.

I take a quick breath and summon my best work smile—the kind I’ve had no problem pulling out for unsavory clients like Bob Wolch, until recently.

“You might have seen the email I just sent around? I’m helping Irene out, doing some building inventory.” I hold my phone up as if this validates something as I take a more purposeful stride into the room. “I’m happy to help if there’s anything you need.”

Jane angles her head in Carmen’s direction before staring at the packages that litter the hallway. “Carmen’s constant stream of deliveries and random boxes are getting out of hand. They’re blocking the doorway and it’s not safe,” she huffs.

“That doesn’t mean you should kick my package across the room.” Carmen’s voice is stern against his clenched jaw. “That’s my private property.” He points to a box that has a clear foot-size dent in it, which explains the initial thump I heard.

Jane leans close enough to me that the distinct scent of her Aussie shampoo filters into my nose. “Carmen has random people coming in and out of his place all the time, and then right after a break-in, his package is wedged in the doorframe. Isn’t that a little suspicious?”

“They’re not random.” Carmen’s leathery neck has instantly shaded to pink. “They’re my associates.”

Having “associates” when you’re the type of guy who carries a comb in your pocket can’t be anything good.

“And let’s not forget all the other weird stuff going on here,” Jane continues. “Like the fact that my underwear keeps disappearing from the laundry room. Couldn’t these things be connected?”

“What in the hell are you accusing me of here?” His face has now gone deep red and patchy. “What would I steal underwear for? I got my own intimates.”

This is not a thing I wanted to hear about at all.

Jane just shakes her head, arms crossed, cupping her elbows. Honestly, I can’t believe she’s so directly accusing this guy. Carmen seems like the kind of man who processes his emotions by smashing beer bottles against dumpsters. And podcast volume aside, she’s not usually one of the more vocal tenants. Already, she seems to be second-thinking her outburst. She shifts uneasily on her feet, watching me wearily as she waits for my reaction. There’s a run in the back of her pantyhose I’m not sure she’s aware of.

I’m trying to craft a response that recognizes the situation without putting me on anyone’s bad side, when Carmen fires back, “You know, I’ve had a few packages go missing myself, matter of fact. Maybe I can lay a trap—borrow a turd from Hank’s litter box to package up for the thief.”

Shock slackens Jane’s features before they contort in disgust. “What the actual fuck?”

He lets out a disappointed sigh, like he’s lost faith in her as a person.

“Hey guys!” I cut in, hoping to head off another round of vandal speculation. But as both of their gazes snap to me, I immediately second-guess getting involved. I prefer my conflicts sanitized and corporate—not

whatever *this* is. “I was actually going to talk to you about your packages, Carmen. There are quite a few, and they need to be moved to your unit in a timely manner.”

Carmen rolls his eyes, and I can tell my words won’t be changing a thing. “Irene’s always been okay with it.”

There it is. As suspected, Carmen is a little weenie. If I try to tell him to change his ways, I bet he’ll go running to Irene, which would be exactly what Lana doesn’t want happening.

I nod in fake understanding. “I appreciate that, but with Irene’s broken ankle, I think it’s best we try to reduce the hall clutter. We don’t want anyone tripping again.”

Sincere concern drips from me and lands on Carmen’s face. He wipes it off just as fast, turning on his heel and stomping back to his apartment.

Jane shoots me a wide-eyed look, like, *Can you believe this guy?* “It’s no use trying to be reasonable with him. You’re right, *this is* a fire hazard. The marshal told us to contact him if we noticed any other issues.”

Shit. If she contacts the marshal, the alert will also go straight to Irene. How is it so hard to keep these two from pestering a semisweet old lady?

I hold out my palms in a placating gesture. “There’s a better solution.”

“Which is?” Jane raises an eyebrow.

Good question. “Look, if you contact the marshal, I’m sure the packages will miraculously disappear for a week and then start piling up again. I’ll come up with something more long term.”

Jane sighs, brushing back the strands of her bangs that cling flatly to her forehead. She looks like she’s on the edge of something—crying or something else. Obviously, these packages aren’t the real problem.

My gaze falls away from Jane and snags on the tufted carpet by the door with the metal mesh window. At once this entryway feels like the most meaningless place to be. Like, if they were to cumulate every situation happening in the world at this given moment, this would be the most insignificant use of our life on earth.

The door to Carmen’s apartment down the hall flies open again. I catch a glimpse of mismatched furniture, cluttered with ornaments. I spot three lamps on one table before he notices me peeping and closes his door.

He’s holding a laundry basket. He comes into the lobby, starts picking up packages and throwing them in.

“All good here now?” Carmen bites at Jane.

Jane looks at me instead. “Fine.”

I keep my grin in place and try not to flinch as Carmen shoves past me to grab another box. His belt buckle glares at me, too close for comfort.

If I’m going to survive these people for six more weeks, I have to reframe this. I just need to pretend this is a professional development opportunity. Good practice for handling entitled clients who sometimes make me want to disassociate. And when I’m back at the office—Lana as my client, promotion in hand—I’ll have plenty more of them to deal with.

Carmen heads back to his apartment, and Jane walks out of the building via the front door. Peace having temporarily been restored, I continue into the basement to complete my inspection.

The laundry room is decent (for Valleyview standards, which means there’s a pile of old detergent boxes and lint balls that tenants just tossed next to the bin provided without giving a shit); the garage is full of what I can only guess is more of Carmen’s junk (including a box of twisted metal that gives a real your-catalytic-converctor-is-not-safe-here vibe); a few cars, including Divorced Dad’s red Santa Fe, and a rack full of rusted bikes whose owners have long since moved on with their lives.

After leaving the garage, I reopen my phone’s notes app in the hallway. I write all the tasks needed:

- Electrical inspections (Several suites and areas)
- Have Carmen clear out his boxes/junk/tools/bullshit from common areas
- Figure out origin/get rid of odor on first floor (somehow)
- Exterminator
- Get someone to clear out/donate old bikes

It isn’t long. It seems so *doable* that it’s like a glimmer of hope after such a dark tunnel. The hardest part will be convincing other tenants to do things. Inspections will involve getting access to their units. I get the feeling it’ll be like dealing with toddlers again.

But the faster I can help sell this place, the faster I can get back to my real life. My better life—away from this place and all this bullshit.

In a few weeks this shit show will all be over.

I just have to keep my eyes on the prize.

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Normal Food

Irene emailed me. Again. This time she insisted I put Ernest's booties on for his walks due to the expected storm. They just make his legs step independently from one another, like a baby deer learning to walk. As I make my way down the block, the heavy rain creates tapping sounds on the oversize hood I've cloaked over my head. I reach the diner, where a warm glow spills onto the sidewalk. I'm a tad early this evening, so Sami isn't waiting for us yet. I'm about to head to the park when the front door of the diner lets out a chime and an older man's voice calls out, "Mona joon!"

Ernest tugs the leash. I turn to see Sami's dad staring at me. His thick brown pants hang a little too low, yet don't quite cover his ankles. "You were the girl with the joke words last week, yeah?"

Shame bubbles as I recall there was another witness to my drunken actions. Why must this hangover never end?

"Sir, I'm really sorry about how I acted—"

He's already flicking his hands in my direction, shaking the apology away. "That was a good time. And who is this man you call, sir? You call me Abu." He points to himself with two thumbs and stands tall, fighting the rounding of his shoulders.

I nod. My cheeks are still warm.

He holds the door open wider. "After you drop off the dog come in from this rain."

I shake my head on instinct. It's been almost a week since my drunken mess, and I'm not ready to face the diner yet. "Normally I meet Sami at the side door . . ."

Sami comes peeking out from behind his dad's shoulder, his frame almost a full foot taller than his dad's. "Hey Mona! Sorry, I was caught up."

"Mona, tell me, you like zereshk polo?" Abu asks. "And don't tell us 'no' just to be polite. We don't have time for you to make up all the lies."

Before I can answer, Sami's face twists. "Dad, what the fuck are you even saying?"

Abu swats the air near his son. "You shut up with your *fuck this* and *fuck that*. You think it's so cool to be swearing? I'll show you fucking."

"Um, please don't." Sami's eyes widen before they drift to me apologetically.

I suppress a giggle, and suddenly all my shame is gone. I've gotten coffee from Sami's dad before, but he's never talked to me like this. I must've bonded with him real hard last week.

Again, Abu waves Sami back with a shooing motion before returning to me. "So do you like zereshk?"

"Yes?" I say uncertainly as Ernest starts to sniff a dark wet pile of something on the sidewalk. I tug his leash right before he gets the first lick in. Zereshk polo is in fact a comfort food I haven't had in years. My mom kind of stopped cooking as soon as I figured out how to make toast and macaroni. It worked out because she could work longer hours in the evenings, and I could eat alone in my bed.

"You don't have dinner plans?" The way Abu asks feels more like an accusation. Valid, since I planned on eating an overpriced cranberry turkey salad I'd grabbed as a 2-for-1 from the Foodway Grocer. The romaine leaves are already going brown. "You took too long to answer. Come, we have lots." The old man waves me in again.

"*Dad.*" Sami covers his eyes with the palms of his hand and wipes them down his face before looking at me with a plea for forgiveness in his eyes. "Feel free to ignore him."

I don't know if it's the fact that Sami looks so uncomfortable (a refreshing subversion of our dynamic), my recent isolation, or most likely that I have nothing good at home to look forward to. My mouth is watering so badly at the thought of warm chicken with barberry rice, the decision seems out of my hands.

“Oh, I’m so in.”

Abu claps his hands together. “Good.” He reaches out to take Ernest’s leash from me and then hands it to Sami. “Are those boots? These Canadians with their dog babies, huh? Sami, go put the baby for little nap.”

Sami obliges as he picks up Ernest and carries him around to the side door that I assume leads to their private home. I follow Sami’s dad through the front entrance into the café.

Entering the diner on a rainy evening is like slipping into a warm bath. The soft yellow lighting from the table lamps, the warm scent of saffron, the tinny 1970s ballad playing from the old jukebox—all of it fills me with a feeling that I can’t quite pin—like unearned nostalgia for a place I’ve never been.

It’s a small building, so the space is more like a narrow hallway with booths on one side and the kitchen bar lined with stools on the other. There’s a small TV in the corner currently playing a repeat episode of *Property Brothers* on mute.

“Please make yourself at home while I go tend to the kitchen before it burns.” Abu winks at me before making his way through the swinging door on the far side of the counter. The stiff limp makes me suspect he has pretty significant back pain.

As soon as I’ve hung my coat on the wooden rack in the corner, Sami comes down from a staircase that must lead to their apartment and slides on one of the dark aprons from a hook in the hall. “I’m going to make some tea. Want some?” he asks me.

“Sounds perfect.” I take a seat on one of the squishy stools as Sami lifts the flap to stand behind the bar.

He leans across the counter, his diner cap on backward, his hair peeking out from the sides. “Hey, so tonight is going to be weird as shit since my dad’s involved. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, come on.” I grin, kind of amused by his discomfort. “He seems sweet.”

“Oh, good you’re still here.” Abu comes through the swinging doors, a large platter of food hoisted across each arm. “I worried Sami would throw you off again because of how he is.”

Sami runs to his dad. “Let me get those.”

Before Sami can reach him, Abu plops the plates on the counter. “This guy, huh? Thinks just because he’s a gym asshole, he’s only guy strong

enough to carry plates.”

I snort at the echo of my words from the other night. Sami rolls his eyes. “More like I didn’t want you to drop all the food I worked so hard on.”

Abu returns through the swinging door. Sami’s gaze trails his father’s movements before he shakes his head and rounds his eyes on me.

“Seriously, thanks for coming.”

“Um, are you joking?” I nod toward the platter of steaming rice and glistening meat, their saffron and turmeric scents warming my palate. “I’m not the one doing any favors here. Seriously, thank you.”

“Well, now I should disclose. There are ulterior motives.” He leans across the counter conspiringly. “Believe it or not, that weird man can cook, and I’ve always wanted to learn how to properly make some classic Persian dishes. But after years of hounding him for his secrets, trying it *all*, only now has he agreed to share his brain.”

“For real?” I grin, but then that weird sense of hollowness that I’ve felt a million times before hits. I can’t imagine I’d ever have voluntarily given that much of my time or patience to my dad. And I give my mom more than enough already. I swallow away the discomfort and say, “That’s sweet.”

He glances toward the doors to the kitchen and frowns. I follow his eyes and see his dad’s head peeking through the glass circle.

“Oh, yeah, real sweet—so long as the guy doesn’t end up murdering me.” Sami pours hot water into a mug and pushes it my way, followed by a box of tea bags for me to pick from. “Tonight I asked him one question about measurements, and he threatened me with his slipper because only imbeciles *measure things*.”

But that one dimple appears. His love for his dad is so obvious, and it pulls to the surface memories I haven’t thought about in ages.

“You’re taking me back to when my mom taught me to drive,” I joke as I drop a bag of black tea into the mug. “She insisted, because my dad was the worst driver, but then she spent the next few hours panicking so hard anytime we moved, that my dad ended up having to teach me in secret. If it weren’t for him, I’d probably never have learned.”

I’d accidentally driven onto a curb and killed a little tree. My dad never told anyone.

The memory unspools without warning. I haven’t thought of that day in probably a decade. A heavy weight presses on my chest.

I take a sip of tea to obscure the discomfort. It's comforting and grounds me back in the present.

But, as though reading the void inside my head, Sami cuts in with, "Are you two still pretty close?"

I shake my head without thinking, then realize I need to say something. "My dad passed away in March, so not really."

I try to make it sound like a joke, but Sami doesn't laugh. His wince isn't great either.

"Oh, don't worry, it's totally okay," I explain, hoping to get ahead of the *I'm so sorry* thing. Sami raises an eyebrow, and I clarify, "Or, it's complicated. But, like, I've grieved properly and stuff. Done all the therapy." I firm up my smile to showcase how very unbothered I am, even though my insides are still squirming.

He nods, giving me a grin that looks equally forced. "I'm glad you got that checked off your list, then . . ."

"So." Desperate for a change of topic, I cast my eyes toward the food. "Am I the guinea pig for your lessons?"

One side of Sami's mouth lifts higher. "I'm afraid so?" The door swings open and Abu returns with a colander overflowing with fresh herbs. Sami flashes me a regretful look. "But I assure you that if it sucks, we can order something from Uber Eats."

Abu drops the colander onto the counter and jabs Sami in the ribs with a finger. "This piece of shit, huh?" he says to me, before poking his son again. Sami flinches back, swatting at his dad's hand playfully. "Talking about ordering takeout to a restaurant. What are you, a secret tech billionaire asshole?"

"See what I mean about this guy?" But Sami's smiling. He moves out of his dad's reach and winks at me.

A spark lights in Abu's eyes. "Now Mona," he says, growing somber. "I invited you because you seem very honest when we spoke the other night. So eat and tell me what you think."

I pick up a fork and gather a bite. The chicken falls off the bone onto my fork. As soon as it hits my tongue, I'm overwhelmed. It's perfect. The tangy barberries mix perfectly with the subtle sweetness of the saffron rice and caramelized onions, but the true star is the most tender bite of chicken. Like a warm hug. I feel their eyes on me, so I try not to let it get awkward by closing my own.

After a bit too long where the only sound in the room is my chewing mixed with the faint music, Sami ticks his jaw in anticipation. “Well?”

I put him out of his misery. “It’s”—I pause, enjoying the curiosity in his eyes a little too much—“Decent.”

“Really?” Sami’s face drops as he looks toward the dish, his eyes narrowing like he’s trying to make it reveal its errors.

“No!” I rush, feeling a little bad for teasing him now. “It’s amazing!”

Sami looks at me skeptically.

“Truth?” Abu grabs his own fork and comes to join me. He chews thoughtfully, then gives one micro nod. The way Sami’s shoulders drop in relief, I suspect that may count as a gold seal of approval from the guy.

I take another bite. This one is somehow better than the last. “It’s so delicious. Are you kidding?”

Sami looks at his dad, who is now on his third gigantic bite. “It is good.” He grabs a plate and begins to gather himself a meal. “Now, I’m going to finish it in front of the TV and have peace.” His eyes shift to side-eye Sami. “Teaching this guy has been giving me a headache: always asking how many teaspoons everything, like I’m a fucking chemistry man. He thinks cause he went to culinary school he’s like a food scientist.”

An odd, distant look touches Sami’s eyes for a flash, like something his dad said cut deep.

“I kid, I kid.” Abu grins. “Mona, was nice to see you again. Come back next lesson, huh?”

I almost protest but challenging this man’s hospitality seems pointless. Abu waves to me with his free hand, then moves toward the stairwell to their apartment.

Sami rapidly follows him. “You need help upstairs, Baba?”

“Of course not.” His dad shakes his head, irritated. “What next? You want to help me watch TV?” He gestures in my direction. “Hang out with this lovely lady and stop bothering me.” Right before he steps onto the staircase, he looks toward me and says, “He knows how to cook a little, plus he’s single.”

I giggle at what I’m sure is a typical move of Abu’s. He disappears up the staircase with a playful glint in his eyes.

Sami’s face has the thinnest rouge as he comes back behind the counter. “Don’t mind him. He’s got problems.”

He leans against the countertop, and I take a moment to appreciate his muscular biceps from this angle. I imagine touching them. Then, I imagine introducing him to my friends, and the impulse fades.

I've made enough impractical decisions lately. I better not linger here.

I basically inhale the next few bites, eager to clear my plate. Sami takes a seat on the other side and does the same.

"That good?" Sami says, noticing my renewed focus on the meal.

I nod. "I'm going to be honest now that he's gone. This was the best random meal I've ever had."

"You just couldn't say it in front of him?" He rests both his hands on the counter, those arms distractingly in my field of vision.

I look down to my plate, searching for something to say to distract myself. "So, you went to culinary school?"

Unexpectedly, Sami's eyes droop. He removes his cap and brushes his hair back with his fingers. "How else was I going to take over a diner that serves exclusively deep-fried food?"

I chuckle, but there's a distant gaze in his eye, like I pressed on something delicate.

"Well, I'm no expert on fine dining, but I have been to a few Holiday Inn Express breakfast bars and can confidently say, this is fantastic."

"I appreciate it." The side of his mouth lifts and the dimple returns.

"You should add it to the menu."

His head shakes so fast it seems almost on instinct. Again, it's like I touched on something that isn't quite right.

I shift in my seat. "So . . ." I start, searching for safer ground. "How long has your family had this place?"

"Oh, let's see. I was about nine and I'm thirty-five now. So, two decades?" His expression brightens. "The funny thing is, it was a Persian restaurant for like two seconds when my parents first bought it."

"Really?"

He nods. "But it was the nineties in Calgary and there were already enough Persian restaurants in the city." At my raised eyebrow, he smirks.

"All three of them." His expression flattens as he leans just a little closer to me. "This one night, my parents were freaking out that we hadn't gotten a single customer all day, so I told them they should just sell normal food. To a nine-year-old, that meant burgers and fries. But they actually listened. They must've been desperate." Sami winces. "My dad originally wanted to

rebrand it as Corner Coffee and *Normal* Food. I wish he'd done it, would have been hilarious."

I chuckle. "And it worked?"

"Yeah, after that my parents were kicking me and my friends out because we took up space for *real* customers."

My fork scrapes against the plate as I gather the last bite of juicy chicken. "You must really love it, to keep working here."

"Yeah, I mean . . ." Again, his stare is distant. "It's special. It hasn't really changed in twenty years and that's comforting."

I can't relate, but I suppose if I had Sami's sweet parents and this home I'd maybe understand not wanting to leave.

Sami cuts into my mind with, "Obviously, the neighborhood changed a lot. Things have gotten quieter." There's a mournful look in his eyes. "Every time they tear down a building to make a high-rise, we lose another group of regulars. And if it's a Northern Properties project, then we get a two-year minimum shit show of an empty lot, followed by years of construction." He points his fork out the window, toward the site across the road beside Valleyview Apartments. He's right. Despite all that drilling the other week, the pit hasn't changed much this month, apart from some weeds growing and poking through the ugly orange fencing they've erected, and all the lovely garbage and broken beer bottles that have sprouted.

"Hopefully when that's built, the new residents will love the diner too?" I try saying optimistically.

Sami shakes his head. "The land proposal for that place says that thing is going to be a massive tower with condos that aren't affordable for most anyone, and a bunch of chain restaurants below. Not a single individual-owned business in sight. And that's if we're lucky and they actually finish it."

I stare at the empty seats around me that seem to echo a different time. "Ah," I say awkwardly, dropping my fork against the empty plate.

"But hey," he says, and his eyes brighten. "There are still some holdouts who value the community, like Irene."

I focus on my mug, then drain the last gulp. "Speaking of Irene, I better get back there. I offered to help out around the building while she's recovering."

"Seriously? Irene's always been so bad at accepting help." His eyes soften. "It's nice of you."

He reaches for my plate and the motion brings him closer to me. Even though he isn't touching me, it sends shivers up my skin.

"What do I owe you?" I rush, standing up and rooting into my pocket for my wallet.

He shakes his head. "No, your money's no good here today."

"Oh god, don't say that. I insist." I flush, suddenly feeling like this is the end of an awkward date. I imagine dating him again. Yeah, he's my type as far as looks go, but he seems pretty set on sticking around here.

"You can get me next time."

I nod. "Sure."

I grab my raincoat and head back toward the apartment. I glance at the construction site beside it with its giant wooden wall. Maybe that wall will extend across Valleyview Apartments pretty soon, too. Change can be sad, but it's inevitable. These high-rises are going up for a reason, anyway.

I fish my phone out of my pocket. There's a new post from Lisa, with Corbin and Olivia. Caption: *Work crew! This Monday was 35 hours long.*

It snaps me back into the present. It's like when I have a lot of work to do and I accidentally nod off at my desk, then snap awake feeling guilty that I lost track of time.

I like the photo and comment: Love it!

Immediately Olivia likes my comment back.

Corbin replies: Monday roundup wasn't the same without you!

I heart his comment.

I swipe the photo away and go to the internet to search for electricians with availability this week.

The faster I get this place up to par, the faster I can make it back to Monday roundup, Tuesday drinks, and all the rest. The faster I can get my real life back.

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Bottled Yellow Liquid

I've made it to Thursday afternoon with mixed progress.

The good: I got a package box for the lobby that seems to be working okay for Carmen's "system" or whatever the fuck his life entails. Delivery people now have a place to throw his packages without clogging the hall, and I just have to hope I'm not enabling a drug-smuggling business.

I've also booked an exterminator for the basement. Soon this place will have a few less residents.

The bad: I posted to Slack days ago that the electrician was coming and we'd need tenants to let us into their apartments, and the results were dire. Only about half of the residents acknowledged that they'd be able to, while many more just straight up ignored me or asked me random shit like if the electrician can install an air conditioner while he's around. (Nope!) My favorite reaction was from Lorna Frank (Fancy Widow), who replied to my message with: Everyone needs to stop feeding the geese because it only emboldens them, before seeming to log off for good.

The neighborhood geese are well-known assholes, so I'm pretty sure nobody *was* willingly giving them food, but I digress.

Carmen is the worst of them. His response to my message was simply: NO can do!

Of course I have a key to his place and can let myself in with proper notice, but I just know he'll go crying to Irene if I pull something like that.

Now the electrician is here, and I'm going back and forth through the floors, knocking on doors and begging people to let me in.

I try knocking on 1A a second time. "Hello, Norm! We're here for the scheduled electric inspection." Still no answer. 1A Incel didn't acknowledge my note, yet I'd held out hope since he never seems to leave the building.

Worse still, the weird funk in Norm's corner of the hallway is only getting more pungent. Jamie, the electrician I've been dealing with the past hour, crunches his nose in agreement before he taps something into his tablet that's outfitted with a giant "war-proof" case before saying, "Another one who's ignoring you, then?"

"Guess so." It's nice working with Jamie because he's such a dickhead.

This evening, he's already stomped his dirty shoes through my place and Irene's (uneventful, unless you count Ernest excitedly smelling Jamie's ankles). The first resident to let us in was Uniform Family (they had a giant puzzle in the middle of the living-room floor that warmed my cold heart). Divorced Dad also let us in but ignored us entirely, retreating into his bedroom. His place was all dark leathery furniture and a framed Flames jersey (like he'd adopted a '90s sitcom idea of bachelor life before thinking too hard about it). Most recently, we got let into Fighting Couple's suite. The guy (Marcus Johnson) pretended to read on his couch while watching us out of the corner of his eye, and the girl (Janine Chen) emptied a dishwasher. Slowly. The place was very basic: candles that are overly perfumed (to cover the hot dog smell?), framed "couples" photos (the type the media puts out when he murders her), and art prints from a big-box store. It started to feel like we might all be NPCs—which could explain a lot.

And now I am forced to consider these people the *good* tenants.

Because everyone else has left me in the dust. After all their complaining during the fire drill, apparently we're all just happy to do nothing and let this place burn to the ground.

I try knocking on Norm Olivers's door for the *third* time, because after this I'll have no choice but to approach Carmen's place, and his hostile response to my Slack post does not have my hopes up for a peaceful interaction.

My knuckles find a more desperate pace. I know he's in there; he never leaves.

Right as I'm giving up hope and mentally preparing myself for Carmen's place across the hall, Norm's handle jiggles. I start at the unexpected motion, a surge of excitement flooding through me, followed by a sense of dread.

Norm only half opens his door, leaving the safety chain intact. He's sporting giant headphones, a dandruff-y rolled-out-of-bed-but-not-in-a-cool-way hairdo, and a freaked-out expression.

"Hi, Norm." I give him my best professional smile, which makes him flinch an inch backward. "We're just here to check the outlets."

He abruptly closes the door.

For a second I'm left blinking at it, wondering how I managed to scare him off that fast, but then it opens fully a second later, and I realize he was undoing the chain. "Oh, right. I, um, forgot." He turns away, shoulders rounded as he retreats into the suite. "Come in."

I follow tentatively behind him, focused solely on the back of his head. Ignoring the concerning strength of the smell.

Given that Irene hasn't been on top of maintenance for a while, it's quite likely that nobody has entered this suite in over five years, other than Norm.

Anything could be in there. Honestly, the smell might be even more of a red flag than I've been giving it credit for. Maybe it's hearing random phrases from Jane's crime shows all this time, but Norm does seem to have the right kind of profile for a guy hiding a body in his bathtub.

Norm is probably six feet tall, but it's obvious he's trying to make himself smaller by crouching low. Like he wants to disappear, or he's afraid of being seen.

He takes a seat in a flaking pleather desk chair whose yellowed foam is trying to escape through the many cracks. He turns to face the giant monitor on the desk that's covered in almost a half dozen glasses and bottles with varying amounts of liquid in them. He clicks his mouse. "I'll be here if you need, um, anything," he practically whispers, face red, before he crouches down, obscuring himself behind the chair's back.

I take in the rest of the place. There's an old living-room set featuring pink fabric with a golden wheat pattern that I'm pretty sure half the nation's grandmas were issued in 1996. A bowl of potpourri sits at the center of the coffee table, almost as a joke, because the sour odor is making my stomach curl.

The desire to open a window overwhelms me. I search for some access to fresh air—then notice the sliding door to the patio has cardboard duct-taped across it, lest sunlight or anything joyful penetrate. Or to keep people from seeing the horrors that happen in here? Suddenly I feel a bit more grateful for the presence of the dickhead electrician.

Jamie clangs his toolbox down behind me and starts setting up shop in the corner near the ancient wall heater. The contents of the china cabinet in the corner rattle with his steps—flowery plates and tiny teacups and a bunch of porcelain trinkets shaped like wild birds and other shit that doesn't fit the guy.

There's nothing on the kitchen counter. No shoes lined up by the door. The throw pillows arranged on the sofa are so plentiful I doubt anyone has sat on it recently. I'm not convinced this guy ever leaves the chair he's currently perched on unless it's to accept takeout or take a shit. I glance his way again; behind the chair, I can make out the top of his head and his rounded neck protruding as he leans over the monitor. He's playing some "walking in a field with a bow and arrow" game.

I'm actually pretty worried that he's got a glass bottle half full of pee right next to his computer. Or, more hopefully, apple juice.

Another unfortunate whiff of that odor hits my nose. It's very hard to pin to one thing, and just when I think I'm getting used to it, a slightly mutated aftershock of the stink rolls in.

As Jamie moves to check the outlet above the kitchen counter, he announces, "Wow, I see what you meant about the odor in here. I couldn't smell it from the hallway, but this place reeks in the kitchen."

My stomach drops at the same time that Norm stiffens. I point to the back of Norm's head before pressing a finger across my mouth indicating to Jamie that he needs to shut the fuck up. I thought by giving this guy a heads-up he could act *normal* in here, not broadcast it like a sports announcer.

"Oh, don't worry," Jamie dismisses me. "My cousin is a gamer, and the guy can't hear his own farts with those on." He motions around his ears to indicate the headphones that engulf Norm's head, at the same time I notice Norm crouch further into his chair, his knuckles going white against the armrests. He's not holding his controller anymore.

"You think this guy has a dead rodent in his fridge?" Jamie continues.

We might be in the lair of a serial killer, and here Jamie is goading him. Again I try to shut Jamie up by cutting him a shitty look. I twist my head back toward Norm, but he's holding his remote again, the buttons clicking like he's deeply immersed in the game. Maybe I imagined his reaction before, and he really can't hear us.

I step closer toward the kitchen, experimentally sniffing at the air (a bad decision). Jamie has a point, unfortunately. The fridge is definitely the source. It looks perfectly clean from the outside. My eyes snag on a curled sheet of paper posted on the door, a Canadian Pizza Unlimited magnet tacking it down for dear life.

It's a letter of some kind. I step closer, keeping one eye on Norm. It's the logo on the letterhead that caught my attention. What is Norm doing with a letter from Westmore Communications, aka *my* workplace?

Norm's chair creaks and I practically jump out of my skin, stepping back from the fridge. He lets out a huff as he tugs off his headphones and rakes his hands across his forehead.

Without warning, his head turns and he catches me staring at him.

I should be the one startled, but his expression is like a lost baby deer. Then suddenly, it's like he snaps back into himself, into this world, and looks down at his body like he's seeing it for the first time.

"Mona, come here a sec," Jamie calls. He's moved on to the hall leading toward the bedroom.

I tear my eyes away from Norm and move down the completely barren hallway to where Jamie stands near the fuse box on the wall.

Jamie points at it with his thumb. "We need to change out a breaker in the box. None of the plugs in this hall are working. Can I go ahead and do it?"

I nod.

Without missing a beat, Jamie pulls a little light bulb device from his toolbox and plugs it into the hallway's outlet. "I'll be five minutes. Text me when that lights up."

"Oh, sure."

He stomps past me fast enough to create a draft, pulling a flashlight and screwdriver from his tool belt as he leaves the apartment, which I didn't expect.

Now I'm alone with Norm. Shit. He probably did overhear what Jamie said before. And he's got something from my company on his fridge. Is that where he keeps the corpses?

I occupy my time with staring at the thing that's supposed to light up and try to pretend I am not in a possibly life-threatening situation. I dare another glance at Norm. His headphones are back in their rightful spot on his head, pale pointy elbows poking out from either side of the chair as he clicks his game controller. So long as he stays absorbed in his game, I should be okay.

No sooner than the thought crosses my mind, the powers that be seem to decide I haven't been screwed with enough. A beeping noise from the microwave is my only warning before darkness envelopes me.

It happens so fast that my brain takes a second to register that the power went out. It's pitch black in here because Norm's blacked out all the windows with cardboard.

"NO!" Norm yells, or more like screeches, followed by a crash—I think his chair. "My game! My *team*."

I hear the sounds of Norm's tall body fumbling in my direction. I stumble backward, my heart instantly in my throat.

"Hold on," I say. "Just stay where you are."

The sounds of glass shattering makes me yelp.

"Fuck!" Norm cries out.

Somewhere beyond this unit, I hear the sound of doors opening. Other tenants must be coming out to see what's happening.

I need to get out of here. I feel the apartment walls and make my way toward what I hope is Norm's apartment door. To safety. Meanwhile, Norm continues cursing and wailing.

Another beep sounds, and then the power surges on again, the lights flickering back to life. Norm snaps back into view. His eyes are pressed shut, a sheen of sweat on his patchy pink-and-white forehead.

Then I notice the smear of red. Blood is dripping from his hand.

"What happened?" I ask, frozen in place.

Surrounding Norm is a pile of broken glass and yellow liquid. That crash I heard must have been the cup I thought was filled with pee.

"I knocked a glass over," he stutters. "I cut myself trying to catch it too late." He holds out his hand just enough that it feels vulnerable. There's a giant gash straight through the middle of his palm, blood pooling to the surface at incredible speed.

I don't mean to suck air through my teeth. "Do you have some kind of cloth?"

His eyes flash like the idea never occurred to him as he tentatively steps around the glass and makes his way to a kitchen cupboard and pulls out a roll of paper towels.

Without announcement, the suite door bangs open and Jamie stomps back into the room. He looks at me and says, “I ended up cutting the power for longer than my usual, but we should be all good now.” He moves toward the hall and starts assembling his toolbox. “That place is done. Ready for across the hall?”

“You didn’t warn us the power would go out,” I hiss, gesturing toward Norm. “He’s hurt!”

Calling out Norm was obviously the wrong move, because he starts to bend into himself again, the mound of paper towels in his grip slowly darkening. He seems seriously uncomfortable with so much attention from us strangers.

“Ya didn’t think I’d keep the power running to change a breaker, did you?” Jamie doesn’t wait for an answer as he pulls out his iPad and taps it. “You ready, then?”

There’s nothing more I’d like to do than get the hell out of here, but Norm was intact when we showed up, and now he’s hurt, and I feel like that’s gotta be my responsibility. “Um, I think he might need medical attention.”

Norm’s eyes widen at my words. “No, I’m okay,” he says to his feet. The paper towels he’s holding are already fully saturated. They look like a crushed rose.

“Hey, let’s rinse you off.” I go to the kitchen sink and start running the tap, waving Norm over.

Jamie shifts on his feet. “I got a work order in Bankview coming up soon. How bout we schedule the rest of the appointments for . . .” He stares at his iPad and continues. “I’m booked solid until June eighth. I can come back then.”

I look at Norm, at the sink, and resign myself to my fate. This quick fix isn’t going to be so quick after all.

“Okay, sure,” I say. “I’ll call you.”

Jamie stops in the doorway. “Hopefully with that much warning, you can have people actually *let us in* then.”

I fight the desire to say something back as he stomps out. It’s not like his winning personality was doing us any favors either.

Norm sticks his hand under the sink and we both wait a beat as the water cleans the wound.

“How’s it looking?” I ask.

Norm pulls his hand out for inspection. “It feels . . . okay. I think it’s, um, better.”

I wince at the sight of it. It’s very deep. He must’ve speared his hand hard. “Shit, looks like you’ll need stitches.”

Instantly his face goes taut. “I don’t need to go. I’m not . . . good at that.”

Just a few minutes ago I was speculating that this man may have a body hidden in here. Now he looks so frail I can’t imagine him overwhelming anyone. He looks like he wants to disappear, like he needs a hug but wouldn’t know what to do with one.

“Norm, I really think you need to get this checked out.” There’s a plea in my voice. The guilt is clawing its way up my throat.

“No.” His tone is firmer this time. His eyes shift to the door. “I can, um, go to the twenty-four-hour clinic . . . when it’s quieter. I just, not now.”

It’s the shaky airiness in his voice, the stiffness of his stance that does it. Obviously forcing him out into the world, or even the hall, where people are probably lurking to get a view, isn’t going to go well.

“Okay, yeah.” I nod. “Let’s get some gauze over it for now, then. You okay with me going to my place to grab some?”

“I have gauze under my bathroom sink. I’m fine, seriously.” His face is so pale. He presses a new paper towel to his hands and this time there’s something more in his eyes than pleading. “Please,” he whispers, and I recognize it.

Shame.

My eyes shift to the broken glass and spilled juice. “I can help with the mess.” It’s a meager offering, my final attempt to make things right.

He shakes his head. “Just leave it, Mona.”

My name in his mouth catches me. Of course he knows it now, since I’ve been messaging, but it still feels oddly familiar.

I remember again my company’s letterhead on his fridge. Has he been paying attention to me longer than I realized? No, that’s silly—Norm seems too skittish to be a real villain. Maybe he came by the company for a pitch meeting in the past? Unlikely, given his obvious fear of exiting the unit. Whatever is going on here, it sends prickles of unease down my spine.

I need to leave.

“Okay, well, take care,” I say.

He doesn’t lift his head as I make my way to the front hallway. From this angle my eyes are drawn to the open crack in the hall closet’s door. Through it I spot two giant orange jerry cans. Why the fuck would anyone need to store *that* much gasoline in their apartment? Is he planning something messed up?

Instead of sticking around to contemplate this shit, I make my way out the door and close it behind me.

It seems like most of the residents went back into their apartments after the lights turned back on. But my friend Carmen is leaning against his doorframe. (Of course he was home!) He’s in a violation of sweats and a tank top—the kindest thing you could say about it is that it was probably white once. “I heard all the commotion,” he says. “Everything okay?”

“Yep.”

He lowers his voice and leans toward me conspiringly, yet also creepily. “Don’t suppose you noticed any packages in there with my name on them? This kid is suspect numero primo.”

I cringe back from him. “Nope. Nothing like that at all.”

“Was that joke of an electrician the inspector you’ve been trying to schedule?” he grumbles. “Ruined my movie with his power outage stunt.”

In the sliver of view of the apartment behind him, it looks like there are about a thousand pieces of furniture and junk strewn about. The chef’s kiss is the haze of smoke clouding the air. I swallow my annoyance; I’m pretty sure he’s not a smoker, so what the hell is he burning in there? “Sorry about that. Speaking of, can you let me know a good time to—”

A moaning sound comes from inside his suite. It sounds like a very . . . enthusiastic woman.

Carmen’s face goes red. “Excuse me. Like I said, I was watching a bit of a film before all of this.” His eyes cut to me accusingly. “A documentary.”

He turns around and closes his suite door hard.

Suddenly, I wish that electricity wasn’t an actual force in the universe. Something that needed maintenance.

And I’m so exhausted at the idea of it all. It shouldn’t be this hard. *Wouldn’t* be this hard, if these were normal people.

When I get back to my apartment, I plop onto my couch. Ernest sidles up to me and presses his nose to my palm, so eager to smell the world of bullshit I was just in.

I pull my phone from my pocket. One new message is displayed on the screen:

JANE BRANDO, 4:09 P.M.: Shit I completely forgot about the electrician and ended up stuck at work! Obviously, I don't want some random guy let in while I'm not there. Have you seen that news report about the man who hid cameras in girls' rooms? Please let's reschedule.

I type out a reply: No worries, he will be back Tuesday, June 8.

I mute the Slack app for the night. If today proves anything, I know for certain I can't live among these people much longer.

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An Ernest Walk

Sami is leaning against the brick wall in the alley beside the restaurant when I head over to do our daily dog exchange. I didn't expect he'd still be here; I'm almost half an hour later than our usual time. I tug Ernest's leash, and the little guy trails after me without any sense of urgency, taking his tiny steps like each foot exists in its own universe.

"Hey, sorry for the wait. Got caught up with building stuff." Sami's whole face breaks into a grin as he kneels to touch Ernest's nose. "You weren't just waiting here the whole time?" I ask as my feet crunch against the gravel.

"I guess I was?" Sami's eyes flash toward me like he was caught out.

"I'm so sorry. I was trying to handle these electrical inspections, and it was just . . . a nightmare. I lost track of time." I don't mention that I took a shower after I got back from Norm's place to wash any remnants of stink off, then lay in a towel staring at the wall for ten minutes letting my thoughts disturb me, before I realized I needed to go.

"Oh, it's all good." Sami's voice is easygoing. "I was just adding unsalted nuts to the crow trading post I'm trying to get going." He gestures to a tall metal bird bath contraption next to the diner that I'd never noticed before, and continues, "I figure if I keep giving them little gifts here, one day they will give me something in return. A piece of foil or button is my dream."

I nod, and my words come out automatically. “Well, thanks for understanding. I know you’re busy.” I hold out the leash handle. All I want to do right now is get back to my apartment, bury my head in my pillows, and try to pass out.

“Not *that* busy.” His expression is mellow enough to ground me. “Like I said, I’m trying to get Russell over there to be my friend, and it’s not going well.” He chuckles as he points to a crow on a powerline, but his grin flattens when we lock eyes. “Hey, Mona, you doing okay?”

“Yep,” I nod. “Fine. Like I said, the inspections were just a little chaotic.”

Sami stares at me a touch too hard, like he’s trying to decipher something. “Why don’t you come for a walk with us? The street is good this time of night.”

“I can’t. I should get back to . . .” My voice fades at the realization that I don’t have anywhere I need to be. I don’t have anything left to do. Maybe I can loom shop?

“It’ll only be a few minutes,” Sami promises as he starts walking up the alley. “Come on, let’s make that Bill Cleg guy with the infograph proud.”

I suppress a grin as I catch up to him. It’s unfortunate that he has a knack for remembering all the weirdo shit I’ve said as of late.

Our steps fall in line together. He hands me back the leash, and the comforting warmth from his hands is still infused in the leather. “As a fellow local businessperson,” he says, “you should never take a rough inspection personally.”

“Is that so?” I glance up at his half grin.

“Yep. It’s par for the course. I don’t know why, but this one health inspector really had it out for me—I was basically told I’m a terrible person trying to murder people because my hand soap wasn’t optimally placed near the sink.”

“I mean, fair.” I grin, my mood somewhat boosted. “That’s a clear indicator that you’d let customers shit on the floor if given the chance.”

“Shit, I did say that, didn’t I?” Sami nods, stoic. “Good point.”

I tug Ernest away from sniffing a tiny plastic baggie on the ground. There’s a bunch of garbage on the sidewalk, so I watch my feet, taking careful steps lest I step in anything unseemly.

Sami’s gaze moves down the alleyway. “We used to play street hockey here. It was the only road nearby where cars weren’t constantly driving.”

He must catch the skepticism in my eyes because he quickly adds, “It was a lot different then, if you can believe it.”

I try to imagine that. Right now, it’s not uncommon for an actual human turd to crop up around here. Heartbreaking if I think too hard about it. “I’m having a hard time picturing it back then.”

Sami’s lips press together, a distant look in his eyes. “The whole street was busy, not full of ugly construction lots, but with little family shops and stuff. My friend Theo lived in your building when his family first moved to Canada. They used to own a florist. Irene loved them because they were always bringing her flowers.”

“So you’ve known Irene a long time, then?” I ask, remembering the birthday flowers Sami’s family must’ve had to get from elsewhere, now that their local florist is long gone.

“Oh yeah, she’s always been awesome about supporting us. Like, I’m sure you’ve experienced her pushy pitches about the best local this or that.” Sami shakes it off with a small grin, but I can tell he appreciates it.

“Just a little.” I remember when I first moved in, I was sure I wouldn’t be living in such a place for much time. Irene gave me a whole printout of places in the area she likes. It sat on my counter for a while and eventually I threw it in the bin. When I got takeout or went for drinks, I usually did it around the office anyway.

We reach the end of the alley, marked by a dumpster that’s equal parts spray paint and piss, and Ernest adds his piddly contribution to the collective. The road has all the ambience that three construction sites in a row can offer. There’s a perpetual beeping from the yellow machinery kept in their ugly orange-fenced enclosures.

Sami pushes the crosswalk button for us as we make our way toward what I’ve mentally dubbed Ernest’s Park. “Where did you grow up?” he asks me.

“Nowhere exciting. Just a bungalow in Renfrew.”

His eyes flit my way. “Wait, so you’re from Calgary?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I assumed you came here for college or your job or something.”

I shake my head. “No, I’ve been in the city pretty much my whole life.”

“Cool.” I feel his eyes on me, but I keep looking ahead, watching Ernest examining several blades of grass. “So your mom’s in town?”

“Yeah. She’s still in our old house.”

“Not too far, then.” His voice brightens. “That’s convenient.”

“Yeah . . .” I smile tightly. I’ve seen her maybe three times since my dad passed, and one of those was at a registry to get some paperwork filled for his non-estate. A weird kind of unfounded shame digs at me, even though I know it’s for the best I haven’t seen a lot of her recently—she can’t help me right now, and I’m not able to help her in any real way. Turning back to Sami, I say, “Not as convenient as you have it, though.”

Sami rolls his eyes. “Yes, my parents are like unhealthily close to me.”

“It’s nice.” I try to smile, but I need off this topic, so I change the subject. “So tell me about the hairstyle.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You know, the awful haircut you had back in the alley hockey days.”

“Oh, of *course*.” His nose crinkles. “I guess it was like, the longer swoopy one? A little bit Tony Hawk? Wait, are you laughing?”

I press my lips together to stifle it. “I’m sorry, but only because that’s exactly what I was picturing.”

“Wow. Laughing at me with an imagined haircut, seems cheap.” Sami’s grinning along with me.

We make our way around the corner past the alley. Ernest starts to pull the leash as soon as the park comes into view. Sami introduces me to Ernest’s favorite tree, which is different from the one I’d been thinking—but he’s right, this is totally the real favorite tree. After, Ernest goes through his protocol of sniffing all the benches and street poles on his list.

We start making our way back to my apartment and the stress slowly makes its way back to me. Somehow during our walk, I’d almost forgotten about the day I had, until I spot the cardboard covering Norm’s window. I wonder if he’ll actually make it out to get stitches tonight.

Sami’s expression lifts as he spots Old White Perve and Fancy Widow standing just outside the apartment’s entrance. Lorna’s fur-trimmed coat is a stark contrast to Carmen’s ripped Wranglers. Their voices carry from the front walkway. Fancy Widow giggles as Carmen loud-whispers, “It’s not like in our day. They’d take you out back and—”

I feel like I’ve more than hit my quota for strange interactions with the building’s residents today, so I’m planning on sneaking past them quietly, but of course Sami has to call out, “Hey, you two!”

Carmen stops whatever he was saying and turns toward us. His eyes swoop suspiciously over me, but he doesn’t say anything. At least Fancy

Widow gives me a microscopic nod.

Sami, oblivious to any tension, continues, “Carmen, I started streaming that movie you suggested with the folks who wake up in a cube. I’ll finish it tonight.”

In an instant, laugh lines appear around the sides of Carmen’s lips. “You actually watched *Cube*?”

An intrusive groan of drilling from a jackhammer shakes through our group. In unison we all wince, while Sami flips off the general direction of the construction site next door, where the sound is coming from.

“So what did ya think of the film?” Carmen asks when it’s finally quiet enough to do so.

“It was interesting.” But Sami’s expression gives him away.

“Hear that, Lornie? Now you have to watch.”

“Oh, stop.” She flicks her hand as though Carmen said something truly naughty, the shine of her maroon nails dancing in the sunlight.

I smile too, but immediately Carmen looks away, while Lorna checks her watch. “I better get going,” she mutters.

“I’ll walk you. I’m headed that way too,” Carmen offers, and trails after her.

As soon as they’re out of earshot, Sami leans into me and whispers, “That guy’s movies recs are never great, but curiosity always gets me.”

I half smile, before remembering the unfortunate noises his film made earlier today. “It’s nice you get along with so many people in the building. I’m pretty sure everyone hates me now that I’ve taken over super duties.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Sami says, too sincerely. “Everyone here seems pretty chill.”

I can’t stop myself—I actually guffaw. Sami sends me a sideways look. “Sorry.” I clear my throat. “It’s just—*not* how I’d describe it. I had to break up a fight my first day on the job. And it’s not exactly gotten better.”

“Are you serious?”

I nod. “Jane was kicking Carmen’s packages across the hall and accusing him of stealing panties, and Carmen asked Jane if he could borrow her cat’s turds so he could literally box them up. And then with Norman, I don’t know where to star—”

I’m about to go into what went down at Norm’s but stop myself as soon as I turn to face Sami. The easygoing smile has fallen from his face, and it’s like the air has somehow flattened.

“Yeah, that’s tough.” His jaw tightens as he stares back toward the diner. Something I’ve said has broken a string I didn’t realize was there until now. “That sounds like they might have stuff going on we don’t know about then, eh?”

“Maybe . . .” I pretend to concede, although I definitely don’t see it that way. “How are you always so good with people? Don’t you ever get annoyed?”

Sami shrugs. “It kind of comes with the territory of being the diner guy, I guess. People come in for coffee in the morning, half awake, grumpy, whatever. You get five minutes with them, tops. No idea where they’re from or where they’re heading. Least I can do is remember how they like their coffee, maybe make things a little less crap for them.”

The sincerity in his expression can’t be faked. He’s really a good person. And I am . . . I don’t know.

“Hey Sami, can I ask some advice?”

He gives my face a once-over. “Of course.”

“So, as you can probably imagine, I’ve had a bit of a tough time communicating with the residents. I’m no *you*.” I smile stiffly. “And I need to get the rest of the electrical inspections done, but most people ignored my Slack request to let the inspector in.”

A wince shows up for a flash before he quells it. “I heard about the Slack . . .”

My jaw drops. “People complained?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But one or two people mentioned it.” He rubs the back of his head. “I think people are used to Irene’s chattiness when she wants something, so maybe it’s a little impersonal.”

I nod like this isn’t the most ridiculous thing. Sami’s eyes seem to pick up on what I’m thinking and soften. “Don’t worry, I’m sure people will get used to it eventually.”

“Only these inspections, they’re important. I have the electrician returning June 8 and if they aren’t all completed then, the building could be screwed.”

“They’re that important, eh?” Sami’s eyes widen with concern.

I nod. Of course, making sure the building is up to code is important, but more pressing: Lana needs a cleared electrical report because without it I guess it’s pretty much impossible to sell the place. I nudge Sami’s arm

playfully. “Don’t suppose we can fast-forward things if you tell everyone that I’m a wonderful person and they should listen to my instructions?”

“Hmm, I mean I could try.” He nudges me back and a warm buzz pulls through me. His gaze drifts through the front-door window toward the lobby. “But I think it would be better if they see that for themselves. Hey, what if we do something, like, a mixer?”

His eyes are too bright for the words that just came out of his mouth. “Oh! That’s an interesting . . . *approach*.” I try and fail to keep the cringe out of my tone. I genuinely don’t know if these people can even handle anything like a mixer. Not after what I’ve seen of their interactions with one another and the world at large.

Sami must pick up on my skepticism because he continues, voice bolstered. “No seriously, this could be great! We could tell everyone it’s a meet and greet for you and welcome them to share any ideas or issues with the building.”

Okay, that sounds somehow *worse* than a mixer. Giving those people a pedestal to complain means I’ll be hearing about the geese feedings and package thefts for hours on end. “Yeah, maybe. Although I’m not sure I’d be able to take on *new* suggestions when I’m having trouble getting even smaller things done as it stands.”

He shakes his head. “So many people vent to me over their eggs without expecting me to solve their problems. Thing is, they just want to be heard.” He tilts his head thoughtfully. “They need to feel that you care. That’s how you’ll get their trust.”

He has a point. As it stands, they pretty much ignore me, but I’ve been ignoring them for years. “Okay, yeah, maybe that could actually help.”

His smile creases the corners of his eyes. “I can even promote it at the diner. I’ll be your hype man, tell them all the great things about you.” I kind of want to ask him what he means, but there’s something in the way his eyes sparkle that make me believe he has something to say.

“Yeah, that would be really great.” I nod. “I’ll send out a message about the mixer tonight.”

I guess I can attend one shitty get-together if it means getting things done.

“Of course,” he grins. “Anything for someone who actually cares about these old buildings.”

His words hit me like a splash of cold water. I try not to let my eyes shift as I hand him back Ernest's leash and wave.

I can attend one shit party to charm a crowd that'll probably hate me again in a few weeks. I've faked my way through enough corporate networking events to keep a straight face.

What's the worst that could happen?

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Message Exchange Between Lana

Text Message Exchange Between Lana Winston and Mona Bucket Friday, May 28

LANA WINSTON: Hi Mona, I was in the neighborhood for work and popped in to collect my aunt's mail. Loved seeing the packages organized in the new boxes. Make sure it doesn't get too full please.

Quick question: the Google Doc shows the electric inspection was scheduled for yesterday, but I can't locate the completion certificates. Can you please add them—would be nice to add to the info packages I'm prepping.

MONA BUCKET: The good news is we were able to complete inspections for five of the units. Unfortunately, a few tenants weren't able to accommodate their appointment by giving us access to their suites. Not to worry, I've gotten our fantastic electrician Jamie to agree to return to complete the inspections June 8.

LANA WINSTON: Great! I'm hoping to schedule some pre-viewings with select clients prior to officially bringing to market (discreet, of course!). You positive you can get

them done by June 11? That's when I want to start notifying.

MONA BUCKET: Yes, that target works. Thanks Lana!

Lana Winston liked message from Mona Brando

Slack Message Exchange Between Jane Brando and Mona Bucket: June 1

JANE BRANDO 3:47 P.M.: Shit! I just remembered the inspection was set for today, but they're making me stay at work again. I hate being the newb. I'm sorry. You can let the electrician in with the key! Please just watch him and make sure no funny business (like I don't want him sniffing my things).

JANE BRANDO 3:48 P.M.: I forgot I was going to clean up before letting people in! Just don't look at things too much!! Tell the electrician to do the same!!

JANE BRANDO 5:58 P.M.: I realize the inspection was two hours ago, but still!! Erase your brain. I swear I deep cleaned last month, and it was sparkling. I said: from now on I'll be a clean apartment girl. But the next day I was back to being a piece of shit.

MONA BUCKET 5:59 P.M.: No worries! The inspector isn't scheduled until Next Tuesday, June 8. Thanks!

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Shit Building Mixer

In a normal building, I'm sure scheduling an electrical inspection wouldn't cause a person to question their existence. But this is anything but.

I was hoping that after five days of asking/reminding, at least one person would've acknowledged the upcoming inspection appointment, other than Jane, who might be a bigger mess than I'd previously realized. But it seems most tenants are blanking me.

Sami is certain that people will come around after the mixer, but I have my doubts.

Worse still, I stopped by the diner for my morning coffee run and found Carmen sitting at the counter. He has a truly upsetting method of slurping sunny-side-up eggs. And he swallows his triangles of toast whole, like a fucking pelican. He just glared at me—so I guess I am still on his shit list for making him take his packages into his own home once in a while.

But it's when I return to the lobby that the real bullshit starts. I ease my way through the finicky first door and spot a long narrow strip of white paper taped to the interior door. It's got the city's logo on top next to big bold letters: **VIOLATION TICKET**.

Crap.

I peel the plasticky paper from the glass window, flip it over, and let out a sharp breath so big it makes Ernest's eyeballs bug out. The back of the paper is covered in words that indicate Irene has been fined \$250 dollars

due to our building bins having been consistently improperly sorted. She has sixty days to pay or it could turn into more money and a court date. Worse still, they apparently are refusing to take this week's recycling until the bin is properly sorted. Which means that—instead of preparing for the office's annual director's luncheon that would've been happening in my real life if I was still working—today I get to pick through literal garbage.

How is it possible for this place to constantly find new ways to blow using such limited resources? Is this building screaming out for a merciful death?

I drop Ernest off at my place and change into my dirty team-building shirt and the sweat shorts that give me a bad crease in the front before making my way to the basement.

The area where we keep the bins is somehow worse than I thought. It's immediately apparent why the city guy refused to empty it, because it's overflowing in a terrible way no one should have to deal with.

Sitting on top of a flattened Amazon box is a dirty jar of Supershops brand peanut butter. These animals. Sure, rinsing peanut butter out of a jar is a pain in the nip, but you don't put the caked-on thing in recycling. I'm pretty sure I saw this exact jar on Divorced Dad's counter during his inspection. I remember because there was a spoon sticking out of it and it left a small void in my chest. I take a picture of the offending jar for evidence and lift the dry cardboard box to find my next treasure: A Michael Fucking Bublé CD—still in its cellophane! The person could've done the right thing and put it in the library to live out its eternal days instead of tossing it. I take another picture and continue rifling, finding such gems as a wooden charcoal toothbrush and the ugliest pepper mill ever (I dare say it's haunted/cursed/never experienced love). It's shaped like a trout that is standing on its tail. (Are the little fins meant to be legs?)

I move on to the compost bin next, which smells worse than Norm's kitchen. There are several empty metal cans straight on top. I slide on the rubber gloves I use for washing dishes and pull them out, disturbing the odors. The urge to gag rises in my throat as my eyes start to water—and I can't even wipe them with these disgusting, gloved hands. I choke back another gag as I drop the cans and gloves and all into the waste bin.

I never thought I'd miss working with clients like Bob Wolch, but today I'd kiss that piece of shit if it meant I could end this torment. Still, I wouldn't suck his dick, so at least I've not bottomed out yet.

Right, this internal debate is not productive or pleasant. I take a few more pictures and write a caption for the Slack feed.

MONA BUCKET, 12:48 P.M.: Recognize any of these? Well if they're yours congrats you got us a ticket for improper sorting. You are part of the problem! Please be more mindful in the future! This isn't the nineties anymore!

Just as I'm about to hit send, I remember Sami's words. As tempting as it is to yell at these people for their low-level ineptitude, it won't help today. I delete the note and pictures and try again:

MONA BUCKET, 12:50 P.M.: Friendly reminder the building town hall/mixer is this Thursday, June 3. Come ready with questions and suggestions for me and enjoy treats from Corner Coffee & Food! Looking forward to chatting with you all!

The diner has a similar ambiance to the night Sami made dinner. A warmth that invites you in, but this time there's a lingering sweetness in the air. The jukebox is playing the Tragically Hip's greatest hits, which seems like the most crowd-pleasing album one could pick.

"Hey!" Sami calls out from behind the counter when I enter, door jingling. Tonight he's not wearing his cap or apron, his hair is combed back, and his shirt has a collar. It's a not unpleasant change. "You're the first mixer guest."

Which is true since the only other person in the place is a guy in his twenties who looks to be having a small breakdown over a bowl of French onion soup. AirPods in each ear.

Sami throws a cloth over his shoulder and smacks his hands together. "Can I get you a drink? Tea, juice, wine?"

"A white wine would be great." I grin.

"Coming right up!" He opens the beaten-up glass Kokanee Beer cooler that's behind the counter.

"Mona!" Abu comes down the back staircase. Following behind him is a poised lady with curled hair dyed deep auburn (a typical Aunty move when

things go grey). She's wearing a respectable dress and her brows are perfectly groomed. As she comes to stand at Abu's side, I notice they are exactly the same height. It's not hard to guess this is Sami's mom, but the dead giveaway is the round and deep-set brown eyes—they're exactly the same as Sami's. I immediately straighten as Abu mutters something under his breath to her. She turns to me with a sweet smile, her eyes crinkling with curiosity.

Sami hands me my wine before gesturing to the lady. "Mona, this is my mom, Ava. She sometimes bakes the pastries we serve, but understandably, she doesn't always have the energy after dealing with Abu as a husband."

Ava lets out a surprised, fullhearted chuckle at this before giving Sami a scolding air slap. She's gazing at him lovingly, like he's the king of the world.

"Nice to meet you," I say as I extend my hand. Instead, she curls me into a warm side embrace. The scent of her floral perfume invades my senses.

Abu tells her, "She's a very successful businesswoman." The pride in his smile is too much for my current situation.

"Oh." Ava puts her palm to her chest. "Your parents must be so proud. A beautiful, smart daughter."

I hold my grin through gritted teeth. Abu's whole face crinkles with joy. "Of course they are, her mom is from Iran!"

Ava's smile warms a full ten degrees. I'm having a hard time reconciling that my mom, who regularly names her email subjects: "HELLO ASSHOLE," is from the same place as this calm and kind lady in front of me. Ava starts throwing a flurry of Farsi words my way before Sami cuts in—also in Farsi—likely advising that I don't speak the language unless you count what I did to him and his dad while wasted. Sami turns to me and says, "Mona's mom is also in Calgary."

I smile uncomfortably at this classy lady who is like the antithesis of my own mother. She seems to be waiting for me to add something to the conversation, but all I can get out is, "Yes." I find it's best not to elaborate, as the community here is small and people's experiences with my parents have been a mixed bag. Worst would be if she'd met my dad when he wasn't sober.

"And what does your mother do?" Ava pries.

I swallow. "Oh, she um works at Lina's salon on—"

“I know that place!” Ava interrupts with a joyous hand clap. I’m oddly taken aback by how shit it feels to have this place filled with nice people become tainted by my family once again. “What’s her name, Mona joon?”

I wonder if I can get away with saying “I normally call her Mom.”

A sudden crash sounds behind Ava. All three of us whip around to where Abu has half fallen into a red leather stool and knocked it over, its metal frame clanging against the counter. Sami races to grab him by the shoulder and helps him up before straightening the stool.

“You okay, Baba?” He rubs his dad’s shoulder.

“I’m fine.” Abu smacks Sami’s arm. “This guy’s hitting on me or something?” he jokes toward me. “A little weird since I’m his dad, huh.”

Sami’s expression is pure exasperation. “That’s not a good joke, even.”

I laugh anyway, to Abu’s delight.

“Well, we must get going.” Abu starts moving toward the front door, his leather shoes slapping the linoleum teal-and-white checkered flooring. “You kids don’t want us old people here too long.”

“You’re still going out?” Sami’s voice strains with unease.

“But of course, our taxi’s right there.” Abu casts his hands toward the window, where indeed a yellow cab is waiting next to the curb.

Ava takes Abu’s hand and grins at me. “It was nice to meet you, Mona.”

“My pleasure—” I begin, but Sami interrupts.

“Is that really a good idea?” Worry lines are imprinting on his forehead. “What about your heart?”

Abu’s grin slips off his face before he regains himself and stands taller. “That was almost five years ago, and I don’t have stress like that anymore, unless you try to keep me from dancing.” Abu raises a brow in my direction. “First he hits on me, now he doesn’t want me to leave him.”

Again I smile, despite the tension. Or because of it. Abu claps Sami on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about everything I do. My heart is good now.” As if to prove his vitality, he lifts his foot. “That was just my fancy shoes being too smooth.” There’s a sweetness to the way Abu looks at Sami, so much love below the surface.

“Okay, yeah.” The tension eases from Sami’s face. “Have fun, Maman and Baba. Call me if you need a lift. Love you.” Sami gives a small wave and rests his hands on the metal edge of the counter as he watches them go. Once they’re out the door he mutters, “He needs to take it easy.”

“His heart isn’t good?” I don’t mean for my voice to croak, but I realize how disturbed I am by this news.

Sami’s gaze cuts to me. “It’s better, they say, but I thought it was fine five years ago, when he had a heart attack, so who knows.” He’s doing that thing where he phrases it almost like a joke to defuse the tension, but I can see the weight in his shoulders.

“I’m so sorry. That must’ve been scary.”

“Thanks, but honestly I wasn’t here when it happened, so I don’t know what it was like.” His jaw ticks like he’s holding back some big emotion, then lets out a breathless chuckle. “I was working an intense shift under this militant head chef, so I didn’t even look at my phone. I didn’t even know that he was in hospital until like seven hours after he fell in front of Carmen, actually. I could’ve missed the whole thing had he . . .” He doesn’t need to finish.

Behind my eyes, it plays on repeat: myself rushing to the hospital, staring at my mom’s text on my phone. Sami was lucky, I want to tell him.

“You worked elsewhere?” I say instead as I gaze around this cozy place that seems so much a part of Sami. It’s hard to believe he ever left.

“Briefly, yeah.” He grabs a cloth and wipes a clean part of the counter that he’d just wiped again. “I was the sous at this up-and-coming restaurant on Stephen Ave. It was cool, but it was a lot.”

I try to picture him in chef’s whites, plating an intricate little dish, but I don’t quite see it. “You didn’t like it?”

His smile is sheepish. “It’s wild, because I really loved working there, but after that day . . . I guess I just never thought about how Abu was too old to be working so much, and there was so much to do here, and . . .” He chuckles. “Long story short, I never returned to that restaurant. I basically broke my apartment lease too. I’m probably blacklisted as a ghoster, but maybe I was never meant to leave.” He chuckles again, but there’s pain in it.

“Oh, Sami, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Sami’s expression brightens just a bit. “It wasn’t exactly what I planned, but I like making people happy with food, and what my parents built is special. I’m lucky.”

If my parents were like Sami’s there’s no way I’d want to leave either. I sip my wine to hide my dejection. “I get it. Abu’s great. It’s great you have this time together.”

“Ha.” Sami’s smile becomes real. “Mostly he spends his time pestering me. He’s really found his stride.”

We both laugh, and I try not to think about all the unanswered messages my dad sent me those last few months. There was a reason I cut him out, I remind myself. My dad wasn’t like Abu. Sometimes coming home isn’t a comfort.

“Oh shit, I almost forgot.” Sami disappears into the kitchen and quickly emerges with a whole plate of sandwiches that look like juicy mini burgers with crusty buns and an herby cream sauce. “Kotlet sliders,” he announces. “My dad thinks it’s messed up, but I think it works.”

Sami holds out the plate to me. I pick one up and take an initial bite. The pickles, onion, sabzi, and garlicky cucumber yogurt mix together so perfectly that I could almost cry. Mouth too full to express my euphoria, I slap Sami’s arm, but then my fingers kind of graze over his forearm and it turns into a squeeze (totally by accident, not at all an impulse I’ve had since that drunken night). He instantly locks eyes with me, and I realize I’m an idiot.

I swallow hard and pull back. “This is amazing. I think you just healed all my ailments.”

He can’t hide his delight. “Really?”

I nod vigorously. “I want to eat this every day. No, that’s not enough, I want to immerse myself in it. I want to *become* it.”

His lips twitch into a smirk. “Now I know you’re full of shit.”

“Seriously!” I press. “You should add this to the menu. You’d have a line around the block.”

“I doubt that,” Sami says, suddenly a little softer.

“You could call it Sami’s Sammie! I bet the folks at marketing would have a field day.”

He rolls his eyes. “I bet the folks at marketing would never stoop that low.”

The music on the jukebox suddenly cuts out with a fuzzy sound. The giant black clock on the wall indicates that the mixer started ten minutes ago, yet it’s still just me and Sami. Even that soup breakdown guy has disappeared, leaving a stack of coins on his table.

A nervous energy trickles in. What if nobody shows up to this mixer?

Have I really sunk so low that I’m going to get stood up by these fuckers?

I slowly sip my wine while Sami's eyes linger on the door. Only a few seconds later, the bell of the door chimes. I pop higher in my seat.

It's just Jane. One of the few people I don't actually *need* to speak with now that she's given Jamie and me permission to enter her suite. She perks up when she sees me at the counter, and I try not to let my disappointment show as I give her a friendly wave.

She's in a bright-pink fur coat, a black slip dress, and a pair of pink tights with holes in it that reveal orange tights underneath. Her hair is a new color, a frizzy yellow almost like straw. Somehow she makes it work with the high bun.

"Oh good, you're alone!" she mutters as she sidles in and grabs one of Sami's sandwiches off the platter. She turns to Sami. "Hey! I'll have what Mona's having."

"Excellent." He pours her a glass of white and passes it to her before making his way across the diner to clear off soup kid's dirty table.

"These are *good*," she says through her first big bite. Then she places her napkin on the counter and opens the sandwich, takes a knife to the pattie and starts mincing it into smaller pieces, mixing the yogurt sauce in. Once she's done whatever *that* is, she closes the sandwich and looks at me again. "So, I wanted to talk to you about the . . . Well, you know, it's pretty obvious."

I nod like I know exactly what she's talking about. But it's her nervous energy that throws me. I'm weirdly drawn in by the way her hands clench the fabric of her skirt and turn white at the knuckles.

"That's what we're here for," I mutter.

Smile lines fill around her eyes before quickly fading. "Your underwear has gone missing from the laundry room too?"

I almost cough into my wineglass, glancing at Sami over my shoulder, but his back is to us. "Oh, right. I'm not sure."

She nods steadily, like she expected this. "At first I wasn't sure if I was just mistaken, but I had this one pair with cherries on it that was lucky." She leans in closer and the scent of something synthetically fruity comes with her. "I washed them in preparation for this interview I had lined up, and when I went to get them, they were nowhere to be seen." She blinks slowly, accentuating her clumped mascara. "I checked everywhere. There's only one explanation left."

I nod, not knowing what to say.

She notices the skepticism on my face. “You don’t believe me?”

“Oh, no, of course I do,” I say. I *should* believe her. Although if I’m truly honest, she does seem scattered enough to misplace her undies without the help of a thief, and it’s possible that she’s let her true-crime obsession create this.

“Well, I started counting before I do laundry, and *twice* now I’ve had a pair go missing. Isn’t that creepy?”

“And you think it’s Carmen?” I ask as quietly as possible, remembering their spat in the lobby.

She taps her chipped yellow nails on the bar. “To be honest, there’s a lot of suspects.” She pats my arm conspiringly. “Like that guy across the hall from us has a sort of nineties molester uncle in loafers feeling to him, you know what I mean?”

At least I can wholeheartedly agree with this. “Yes, I actually do see it.” I can’t help my grin at her apt description of Divorced Dad.

“And his wi-fi is called something like “wi-fi daddy,” like what even is that? Is that supposed to be funny?”

I nod at this serious character evidence being presented.

Sami paces toward the front of the restaurant to lean against a booth next to the window, his elbow sinking into the squished red leather as he tilts the blinds back, eyeing the Northern Property Management construction site that he loves to hate most.

Jane leans in closer, one eye on Sami, and whispers, “And since you have all the keys and are checking everyone’s apartments for this electrical thing, maybe we could sneak for my undies?”

She looks completely serious. I jerk back. “Um, no. I can’t do that.”

Her eyes cast down as she nods. “Yeah, that’d be a bit dangerous, wouldn’t it?” Her voice is dismissive, like she already expected me to deny willingly breaking and entering in random neighbor’s houses. “This is the kind of thing you need a search warrant for. I’ll contact the police.”

Shit. I should’ve expected this. Of course, if she files a report, there’s a chance Irene will be contacted. And if she gets wind of a tenant dispute, then, of course, Lana’s not going to be thrilled.

“Wait, don’t do that.” I grab her arm before quickly retreating. She looks at me expectantly. I rack my brain for the plot of literally *any* podcast I’ve heard echoing through my walls. “If you contact the police, they probably

can't do much at this stage. You have no proof of a crime, and no real suspects."

"You're totally right." Her eyes brighten at this. "It's so frustrating how easily women's instincts get dismissed."

I smile politely and continue. "My bet would be the police might open a file, if you're lucky. But if we had proof, something concrete, then at least we could do something with it."

"What kind of proof are you thinking?"

I'm definitely getting in too deep, but judging by the way Jane's eyes are lighting up, I clearly have no choice but to commit. "We'll investigate ourselves," I whisper. Excitement radiates off her like static, and it boosts me enough to add, "Operation Dirty Pant—"

"Hey, I almost forgot!" We both startle and turn. Sami is suddenly behind us, holding out a clipboard. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up, but I told myself I'd gather signatures for this petition if either of you are so inclined." He holds out the paper for us. "It's something me and some other local small businesses have organized."

"Oh, sure!" Jane takes it and without reading it, she grabs the pen strung to the board and signs. When she's finished, she nods to the front door and says, "I was going to ask what that new sign was about, anyway." I follow her gaze, and sure enough, a purple sign taped to the interior of the front door has appeared. **CALM THE CONSTRUCTION!** in big bold letters on top.

Sami nods. "I put it up this morning. A few more will be sprinkled down our street I think." His jaw ticks for a flash before he smiles. "Anyway, thanks for indulging me during your mixer."

Except, we're an hour in, and it truly looks like it's going to be just Jane and me here. I don't know what Sami pictured for a mixer, but this has certainly bottomed out my low expectations.

Jane hands the petition to me and says, "Power to the people!" She flicks her wrist to check her loose chain watch. "Shit, I gotta get back and feed Hank or he'll pee on my work shoes, the vengeful creature." She stands and rests a hand on my shoulder. "Mona, let's discuss the details on Slack." She chugs the rest of her wine in one gulp, clinking the empty glass as she places it on the counter, and grabs another sandwich off the platter, wraps it in one of the diner napkins, and drops it into the depths of her giant tote bag, never to be the same again. "Thanks, Sami!"

The bell on the door jingles as it closes behind her, the CALM THE CONSTRUCTION! sign waving with the door, and then it's just Sami and me again. It occurs to me that I've never seen this place with more than two customers at a time.

I read the petition. The gist is that they want the city to slow down on issuing new building permits so that infrastructure like water mains and the like aren't strained by the sudden growth. Makes sense. But I know the real reason is so the businesses and old apartments aren't further devastated by all the new construction—by the nuisance of the constant noise, the road blockages, and the eyesores of the perpetual empty lots, and everything that comes after.

As I look at this vacant diner, at this nice guy who literally threw a “party” to try to help me out, it's a no-brainer. I sign and hand it back to Sami and hope it helps.

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Undercovers

“Hey, Olivia!” I say, making my voice as singsong as possible as I answer my phone.

I was on my way out the door to pick up Jane for our “investigation” when I saw Olivia’s name on my screen. Honestly, I was tempted to bury my phone under a cushion until the ringing stopped. These past few weeks the group chat has continued its silent streak, and it’s getting harder to pretend I’m not bothered.

But I didn’t want it to be weird when I returned to the office. Plus, I genuinely miss her. At work, she’d always been my realest fan—cheering me on and saying how much she wished she could achieve what I had. She was right on track. I’d always joke to her that she reminded me of a younger version of me (circa 2022), and that one day she’d be my boss. It was nice to be admired and to share the hard-won advice I’d gathered along the way. Right now, I could really use that ego boost. So I took a seat on the wicker bench by my door and swiped to answer.

“It’s so good to hear your voice. It’s Tuesday, which means it’s been exactly three weeks of only texting.”

“Yours too!” I smile even though she can’t see me. I can even feel my back straightening, like muscle memory, now that work has entered my apartment.

“So, how’s your mom?” She’s doing that low voice, high voice thing—like she’s faking interest. Fair enough.

Alice gives me a knowing look that I choose to ignore. My throat is already tightening with frustration over my troubles. “Things are going really well here.”

“Amazing. So you think you’ll come back soon?” Again, Olivia’s tone is that business chipper. Maybe it always was and I just didn’t notice when I was also in it. Man, how has it already been three weeks? I’ve already hit the halfway mark of my leave. In some ways, it feels like no time at all has passed—my meager accomplishments around this building are depressing. On the other hand, the office already feels like a lifetime ago. At least I managed to get all the rest of the electrical inspections done today. (Apart from Carmen’s place because he was too “busy with a big project.”) Jamie has miraculously agreed to come back when he’s in the area on Friday, which is cutting it to the exact day of Lana’s June 11th deadline. So if Carmen doesn’t let us in through his own volition, then I STG.

“I don’t know,” I start. “There’s still a lot going on here.” Technically, this is also true. I look down on my “stakeout” outfit. Black leggings, black hoodie, beat-up sneakers that I plan to use for their intended purpose.

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Olivia’s voice has lost none of its pep. “I miss my work wife.”

I grin at this. “Me too. How has it been at the office, anyway? I know Corbin and Lisa can’t match my mojo.”

As Olivia dives into all the goings-ons, like Corbin’s fight with the bicycle courier who didn’t deliver flyers in time for his client’s conference, so he’d started scootering all marketing materials himself until he ran into a stop sign pole and bruised his knee—hearing it all—it’s like I’ve taken a sip of Kool-Aid and need more.

After a break from our giggles, I mutter, “I can’t wait to come back.”

As I look into Alice’s tank, I know it’s true. *That* is the life I want. This undercover mission I’m about to do—and the fact that I’ve been actually looking forward to it—just proves how tragic my life has become.

“God you’re a much better person than me,” Olivia says. “There’s no way I’d step away this long, no matter what my mom needed. I mean, to press pause on your career like that—that’s really selfless.”

Olivia doesn’t know the truth, but it’s still grating to hear. Of course, it’s torture to leave this long. The truth is I wouldn’t—*didn’t*—put family first,

even for my dying father. It makes me want to scream thinking about waiting another three weeks until I can return. Already, it's clear my colleagues have begun to dismiss me as an afterthought. I'm off the group chat. I'm irrelevant.

And maybe that's why I blurt my next words. "Well, my career isn't totally on pause here. I'm still working on some leads."

"Oh? Now that's the Mona I know." Her voice has pepped up a full degree. "Care to share more?"

"I may be bringing in a big client. A huge one," I blurt out before thinking too hard.

"Seriously? I adore how even on leave you're chasing leads."

The excitement in her voice is palpable. It's exactly the kind of hype I wanted from my work wife. "So, who is it?"

I swallow. "I don't want to jinx it, but I'll say she's in real estate."

"Oh my god! If you return with a big new client, the directors are going to lose it. You realize that?"

I'm smiling so hard now, Alice is practically rolling her eyes (if she could move them).

"*Monaaaa!* Please! I need to know who!" Her voice is oozing with giddiness, and my mood is so buoyed that I just have to say, "I don't want to jinx it, but let's just say her name, were you to spell it backward would be . . . anal."

I didn't think that clue through when I started.

Olivia's chiming laugh burst through my phone so loudly I need to hold it away from my ear, just for it to stop with a sudden gasp. "Wait! Lana! Lana Winston? Are you kidding me? I love this so much for you! How did you recruit Lana while taking time off?"

I'm so pleased by her reaction it doesn't even bother me that parts of my story are a lie. I *did* recruit Lana for a pitch meeting with my own wiles.

I'm tempted to keep divulging, just to coax a few more scraps of Olivia's praise, which are soothing my bruised ego, but then I catch the time on my microwave clock. 9:17 p.m. I was supposed to be at Jane's seventeen minutes ago. "Sorry, I gotta run!"

"Of course! We'll talk later."

"And Olivia," I say, "I really appreciate you reaching out."

I'd almost forgotten how much I need my work friends. We can all be a little ruthless sometimes, but that's because our eyes are on the prize. They

drive me to be better.

I give a goodbye nod to Alice and slowly open and shut my apartment door, being careful not to let the sound of my footsteps reach Divorced Dad's place as I make my way to Jane's.

She must've been waiting by the peephole, because as soon as I reach her door, it clicks open.

"About time," she whispers. Her hair is slicked back into a high ponytail, and she's wearing black leggings too—but the purple sweatshirt, embroidered with bees in certain areas, definitely breaks the undercover dress code. "Come in."

We make our way into the silence of her living room. Our unit's layouts are identical, but even though Jane has only lived in this place for a year, she's actually hung art on the walls, filled shelves of books, and laid out pots of leafy plants and flowers—even a giant palm tree-looking thing in the corner! Her couch is one of those emerald-green velvet deals, and it's covered in fuzzy blankets and throw pillows. Covering her rustic trunk coffee table is a clutter of ornaments, and what seem to be random art projects: a half-completed embroidery, next to a crochet kit, next to what looks to be a deconstructed model ship. There's one chair in the corner that seems dedicated to random items of clothing. Everything smells fruity, which I suppose is the work of the gigantic pink candle burning on her countertop. All the colors and clutter create an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. It feels like she might be going through some kind of identity crisis. The room seems mismatched, like it's clashing with itself and unsure of its direction.

"So, there's about twenty minutes left until I move things into the dryer." She plops onto the couch, sending all the pillows bouncing. "May as well wait it out here."

I look for a suitable place to sit, but her cat now sits on the pink armchair across from the couch, eyeing me with the disdain of a creature who'd prefer to be the only tenant.

I move aside a throw pillow and join Jane on the couch, as I try to ignore the cat hair that may be sticking to my leggings.

Jane's eyes follow my gaze to the broken tiles on her coffee table. "Sorry, I only had a chance to do a little bit of tidying."

I try to imagine where she could possibly have hidden more mess before the tidying began.

“It’s very . . . eclectic,” I say.

“Are you being a bitch?” Jane retorts, voice flat. “You want me to be sad and beige?”

I almost choke on my spit. “Sorry?”

She chuckles, easing back into the couch. “I’m just fucking around. I know it’s mad in here.” Her eyes drift over the room. “This is my first time really living alone, so I’m just letting myself be for a while, you know?”

“Yeah.” I take a harder look at Jane. She’s close to my age, but just moved out? That explains the energy of this room, I suppose. It’s like she just realized she could stay up as late as she wants and eat ice cream for dinner.

“That’s fair,” I agree. “And you moved here a year ago?”

“Yeah, just about.” She taps her fingers against the arm of the sofa. “Thirteen months I’ve been in the city.”

I glance at her kitchen, toward the microwave that’s the same as mine. The little clock indicates only two minutes have gone by. I repress a sigh and try to think of something else to say. “Did you come here for, um, work?”

“You mean, did I move to Calgary to work as an admin at an insurance office via a temp agency? Now that would’ve been fucked up.” She chuckles flatly. “No, I lived in a town north of Edmonton. Extremely cold, and extremely small.” Something painful lingers just below the surface of her expression. “So when I left my home, I chose the biggest city I could that wasn’t as cold as Edmonton in January.”

Again there’s a hint of something more behind the words she doles out. I get the feeling her leaving was more about getting away from there than coming here. She continues with a grin. “The amazing job at the insurance agency was simply pure, unadulterated luck.”

I join her chuckle this time. Admittedly, there’s an honesty about her that’s kind of refreshing after talking to Olivia. She doesn’t feel the need to impress me.

She curls her toes under herself and sits higher. “How about you? Did you move to the city for your fancy marketing job?” She’s not saying it in a rude way, but it still stings after everything tonight.

“Oh, not really.”

She eyes me just as curiously as I did to her a moment ago. “What’s the deal with that anyway? I used to only see you coming and going from work,

and now . . .” She raises a brow. “You get canned?”

I swallow. “Oh, you know. I was sort of rude to a big client and the firm thought it would be best if I took a leave of rest.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh shit. Was he an asshole? I fucking bet he is.”

Something deep in my chest stirs with warmth that she takes my side without hesitation. “Well, he is a bit of a high-touch personality, but he contributes a great deal of . . .” Her eyes are already glazing over. And why am I filtering myself? “Yes, he’s a total piece of shit.”

Her head bobs in appreciation of my revelation. “I knew it.”

Suddenly, I start venting to her about all the effort I’ve put in, then shift to the office politics, and eventually I’m unloading the whole mess with Bob, my meltdown, and all the other mishaps and frustrations at work. Her reaction—equal parts delight and understanding—makes me feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders after the careful conversation with Olivia.

Because this doesn’t feel like a performance. It feels supportive.

“You know,” I say, “I haven’t shared that story with anyone. Or I did with Sami, I guess, but I wasn’t sober. So you’re like my first dry confession.”

“Wow.” She stares at her phone, where she’d looked up Bob Wolch’s crappy website. (She needed visuals, and that’s how we learned that Bob’s profile features photos of him golfing and holding dead fish. You couldn’t design a duller piece of shit.)

She rests her phone on the end table next to the peacock lamp. “So, are you and Sami like a thing?”

I reel backward. “What gives off that vibe?”

“I saw you walking together a few times. Seemed like you were getting close.”

“Oh, that’s just because he’s helping me out with the dog.”

“That’s all?” Jane asks, leaning closer. “I thought you guys looked pretty cute together.”

True, we’ve become buds. But my time in this corner of the city is coming to an end, and all Sami wants to do is stay stuck in the diner until it finally snuffs out. And besides, once he finds out I’ve been helping Lana sell the building, he’ll probably want nothing to do with me.

“He’s great, but I don’t think we’re well matched,” I say. “Besides, dating isn’t my priority right now. I want to focus on putting the bigger pieces of my life in place before committing time to that.”

Jane looks down on her hands. “I can respect that. I never planned things out and look where that got me.”

I look at Jane with renewed curiosity but decide against prying. I try not to think about the times I’ve heard her cry through the walls.

I nod. “I figure two more years should be enough to fully set my career path and allow myself more time on weekends and evenings.”

“Did you schedule all your shits for the next ten quarters?” She gives a cheeky grin as she tucks her feet under herself.

“If I could, I would.”

A loud buzz erupts from her phone on the end table.

“Looks like it’s time to change the load.” Jane waggles her brows at me, her sense of mischief restored.

A rush of adrenaline surges through my limbs as we tiptoe our way out her door. I go straight to the back stairwell to the laundry room as quietly as possible, while Jane takes her usual route down the elevator to the basement, not worrying who hears her.

We make it to the laundry room within seconds of each other, and once Jane transfers her laundry (comprised of two weeks’ worth of undies) to the dryer, we prop up my phone on the dusty shelf, stealthily wedged between two Tide boxes that haven’t been touched since the ’80s. Nobody is willing to touch them lest the owners come back. Our plan is to wait in the “rec room” with Jane’s phone FaceTiming mine. As soon as we see the perp, she’ll start screen recording. If we catch them in anything incriminating, we will confront the perve—also on camera.

After we’ve set up our sting material, we head to the rec room. I always forget this room technically exists. I haven’t had a chance to tidy (or really assess) this area yet, with all the more pressing items on my list. It consists of someone’s donated treadmill, a dusty Bosu ball that has stretched beyond use, and a pool table with a missing seven ball and broken corner pocket.

It’s not that bad, really, if you don’t plan on working out or playing a game or enjoying yourself in any sort of normal way.

We spend a miserable forty minutes in the dank room sitting on the pool table discussing the possible suspects. A mouse came by at minute twenty, causing us both to yelp, before quickly disappearing somewhere behind the futon to a place I hate to think about.

Finally, the laundry machine sends out its obnoxious buzz that the cycle is complete.

Jane lets out a sigh. “Should we call it?” she whispers. “I don’t think it’s happening tonight.”

I think she’s right, but fuck. I don’t want this hour of misery to have been for nothing. “Let’s give it fifteen more. Just in case.”

“Sure.” She nods, then seems to think twice. “I do have to get up early tomorrow. My work has started tracking me and if I’m a minute late they have *Janine* talk to me.”

“Jesus, that sounds miserable.”

“Right? This one time, Herman—the team lead for us admins—tracked me down in the file room and told me that I couldn’t do my filing when the brokers were in the office, in case they needed anything. Filing is literally my whole job.”

“Herman sounds like a piece of shit.”

“A bit.” She starts to giggle and then covers her mouth, remembering we’re supposed to be quiet. “I shouldn’t complain. I’m lucky to even have this job. I don’t have, like, a ton of experience.”

“Fair,” I mutter for some reason. I’m starting to suspect Jane has recently escaped a cult, but there’s no polite way to ask such a thing.

Jane spends the next fifteen minutes briefing me on the worst people at her office and all the bullshit things they say or make her do. I never worked in admin, but I get the distinct impression that what she’s describing isn’t how it’s meant to be.

“Anyway,” Jane sighs, “now it’s really time to call it.” She stands from her place on the pool table. “I bet the thief is asleep. This isn’t my usual time.”

She has a point. It’s almost eleven p.m. But her words draw even more weariness into me. Once again, I’ve ended up solving nothing around this building. I try not to show the disappointment in my face. “Okay, let’s try again when you normally wash your clothes.”

The thought of doing this again isn’t at all appealing. As if reading my expression, she says, “Look, Mona, I appreciate you trying to help, but I think this might be better for the poli—”

The sound of footsteps making their way down the hallway above us interrupts Jane. It’s followed by the sound of the stairwell, then the doorway to the basement opening.

They’re coming this way.

“Hide!” I call. “Behind the pool table!”

We scramble to the area right behind the table just as the footsteps enter the hallway. I try not to remember the mouse and the possible droppings I'm up against on the ground here.

As the footsteps come closer to the laundry room across the hall, my a nervous flutter overwhelms the pit of my stomach. I want to punch a hand through a wall, I'm so hyped! So alive!

Jane's eyes widen as a shadow passes through the hallway. From our crouched positions, we make out some very signature cowboy freaking boots passing by the rec room door.

Carmen. In his bad jeans.

"So gross," Jane hisses at the sight of him.

The rush of adrenaline coursing through me suddenly sinks, settling as a heavy lump in the pit of my stomach. I can't hide my deep disappointment—Carmen turned out to be a complete creep after all.

But his footsteps don't stop at the laundry room. They continue until then end of the hall. Then comes the sound of a metal key scraping into a lock.

The storage unit.

I swallow through the thick, musty air.

The sounds from the storage unit next to us muffle through the walls. There's a clang of something metal dropping onto the concrete floor. Carmen scrapes more items against the floor before he closes the door and locks up, then reenters the hall.

He doesn't stop in the laundry room before passing our door, this time carrying some weird metal statue of a dog in his arms. What the hell?

Jane and I stay crouched behind the table, our rhythmic breathing the only sound until he leaves.

I tilt to see if the coast is clear, when a bang sounds behind us. We jolt. Fuck. The eight ball tumbles from the corner of the table to an open pocket and rolls toward my feet.

The light flicks on. Carmen is standing above us, holding the metal statue above his head like he's about to take us out.

My heart stops. I swear it stops.

"What you doing down here this late at night?!" Carmen shouts. "I almost took you out."

I glance at Jane for help. She looks as puzzled as I feel.

Another muffled sound echoes in the background. Very light footsteps. A new shadow enters the hallway.

Holy shit.

Norm passes by the entryway, carrying a tattered laundry bag. Unlike Carmen, his steps are measured and as light as possible. Like he doesn't want anyone to hear him.

He makes eye contact with the three of us standing by the pool table, each of us exchanging horrified faces. Then he continues on into the laundry room without a word.

My heartbeat picks up as Jane lifts her phone to watch the live feed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Carmen asks.

"Shh!" Jane hisses.

She angles the phone so we can see just as Norm shows up, standing in the laundry room. He stares at Jane's dryer with her pink mesh laundry bin marking it on top.

He stands a good two feet away, not moving an inch. It starts to feel like time has stopped and we're stuck in a tunnel. My heartbeat and Jane's breathing are so loud they take over the world.

Finally, he seems to decide something because he turns to face the washers (and the phone we'd set up) on the opposite side of the room. He places his laundry bag on top of the machine, the fabric blocking out half the screen now. Shit.

Jane holds her free hand over her mouth as we see him open what must be the washer below him and load it with his clothes. Lots of T-shirts and socks.

Finally, he closes the lid and removes the bag from the top of the washer. The sound of water pulling into the laundry room gushes through the walls and echoes from Jane's phone.

With a measured lightness, Norm exits the screen. His footsteps make their way back up the hall and up the stairs.

We sit in stunned silence before Jane lets out a gasp. "I'm going to piss my pants!"

"What is all this about?" Carmen asks. "Why are you spying on Norm?"

"We're not!" Jane half-whispers. "We're trying to find the panty thief."

And shit. Letting Carmen in on our investigation like this is *not* ideal, but I digress. Jane is so keyed up, and Carmen isn't making any moves to leave.

"And you think that's Norm?" Carmen continues, like this is the maddest thing he's ever heard.

“Only one way to find out!” Jane pockets her phone and stands. I follow her lead; my legs are wobbly and cramped from hiding like a sardine behind the table.

We make our way to the laundry room, a curious Carmen stalking behind us. Jane throws open her dryer and begins to unload while I collect my phone.

Apparently, Apple charged me \$10.99 for unknown reasons again. It might be cloud storage that I’m not sure I even need, but frankly I can’t go down that rabbit hole right now.

A new message from Olivia also came in. A link to an article about Lana in a “Top 40 Under 40” profile of business owners in Calgary. She captioned it with: *You one day*.

I heart it, although my stomach flips uneasily. Why couldn’t I have kept my big mouth shut about Lana? If it doesn’t work out, I’ll be so humiliated.

“My pandies are missing!” Jane croaks.

“Your what?” I pocket my phone and turn to the sight of Jane having laid out all her undies side-by-side on the shitty fold-up table in the center of the room.

Jane’s voice drops. “My panties with the panda bears on them. They’ve disappeared.”

“No way,” Carmen mutters behind us.

She holds out her phone toward us for confirmation. On the notes app, she listed all the underwear she was including in this load. And third from the top reads:

Pandies

Jane looks deep in the dryer. “There’s no way. We didn’t see him touch the dryer.”

I search behind all the machines fruitlessly. “The camera was kind of obscured, you think he could do it that discreetly?”

“He saw us in the rec room,” Jane says, staring distantly at her undergarments as she considers this. “Maybe he was being sneaky.”

“Maybe, but that would be really tricky?” I retort. “There weren’t many chances, and we could see the dryer the whole time.”

Carmen is leaning against the wall, watching both of us in utter befuddlement. “There’s no way. The guy’s a weirdo, not a magician.”

I'm not so sure. I mean, he could be both.

"Yeah, and I kind of never suspected Norm." Jane huffs as she spins the dryer hull. "I mean, I once got his mail by accident and when I dropped it off, he complimented the book I'd just picked up from the library. He seemed way nervous to even talk to me, and that's not a man who steals panties."

"Right," I say. That really doesn't prove anything good to me. "And we're sure he was loading his laundry the whole time the dryer was blocked?"

"Pretty sure." Jane extracts herself from inside the dryer.

"We for sure saw those panties go in here?" I prompt.

"Yes, I remember them for sure," she says. "Or was that when we loaded the washer?"

"No, I think I saw them too," I say. "Yes, I remember them cause they had pandas."

"Well, either Norm has sticky fingers, or my panties evaporated into thin air!" Jane screeches, so serious that Carmen and I both whip our heads toward her.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Carmen attempts, holding his palms up. "You're getting worked up, and it might be nothing."

"It's not *nothing*!" I'm surprised to see her eyes are starting to look a little glassy. She blinks heavily, then looks down at her undies spread across the table. "You know what, forget it. I just want to go to sleep."

"I'm sorry," I say a bit breathlessly as she begins throwing her undergarments back into the bin.

She looks at me sincerely. "Thanks, Mona, for trying to help. Maybe we can try this again?"

She looks so scared, and I wish we'd actually caught the fucker. Somehow this outcome is the worst one possible.

"Yeah . . . for sure," I say, voice breathless. "We might have to watch the washers too."

Jane nods solemnly.

We head up the stairs in silence. Carmen is still holding his weird metal dog statue, but I'm too disappointed to deal with that right now. He gives us one last baffled look before splitting off to go back to his suite.

Jane is quiet the rest of the way up, clinging to her laundry basket. I didn't mean to make her worried about getting up in time for work

tomorrow. Suddenly, I'm so mad at myself.

When we reach our hall, Jane pulls out her keys and pushes them into the lock.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

She gives me a tiny, sad grin. "Goodnight, Mona."

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A Norm Moment

When I enter the main floor lobby my annoyance immediately bubbles. Carmen's package box is seriously overflowing, and several other boxes litter the floor. Not only that, there's a bunch of random objects in the box now, like a couple of foam pool noodles and what seems to be the head of a mascot of some kind. It's like he's decided this is simply another storage area for him, just like the entirety of the storage unit *and* what I'm sure is in his apartment. I sigh. I'll have to talk to Carmen about it during his electric inspection on Friday.

Right now, I have to focus on my true mission in this hall.

"Norman Olivers" is a sadly common name. Over fifty profiles populated on Facebook when I searched it this morning. Still, I clicked through them all. Most of them were random dudes not from the area, or who obviously didn't look like Norm. I scrolled until I found the profile of a mid-fifties self-described "Wannabe Sugar Daddy" from Coeur d'Alene. After that, I decided against social media stalking, lest I ended up finding photos of wiry white pubes as a result.

Back to my field investigation, then.

Truthfully, I can't get Jane's miserable expression out of my head. I don't know why this is so incredibly important to her, but clearly it runs deep. And honestly, Norm's raised enough red flags at this point that I think it's

worth checking out. When I went into his suite a few weeks ago, I felt pretty sure he wasn't a serial killer. But a panty thief? Maybe.

My knock lands on Norm's door, overtaking the sounds filtering through the ceiling of a TV blaring some daytime show with an overly hyped audience. The walls here really are so paper thin, it's unbelievable any of us could manage to keep a secret.

I hear movement, but he doesn't answer immediately. I wait and notice the distinct scent of hot dogs wafting from the apartment at the end of the hall, which makes sense since it's close to lunchtime.

It hits at once. If I'm smelling Fighting Couple's hot dog party (or whatever the fuck they're doing in there), and not the usual vile scene of Norm's apartment, then Norm must have cleaned out whatever was causing the smell. And at least that's one problem solved.

I knock one more time. The audience on the TV upstairs screams like they just got told they're about to be millionaires or that they're going home with a free cookbook.

Just as I'm about to give up, the knob jangles and the door creaks open.

"Hey, Norm!" I hold up the grease-darkened paper bag I'd picked up from Sami's. "I brought lunch."

His eyes widen at the sight of me. He's in a black golf shirt, black sweats, and bright white socks. "Sorry, what?" He rubs his forehead with the back of his hand.

I hold up the bag again, hoping it might tempt him the way I'd wave a piece of chicken in front of Ernest's snout. "I brought you a BLT and fries. Sami says that's your usual."

"Why?" He looks mildly horrified.

"I believe I owe you an apology for how terribly things went with the electrician." His tense expression softens slightly, a hint of understanding replacing the terror in his eyes. "So would you maybe want to have lunch with me? It doesn't have to be here."

"Oh." He stiffens. I get the feeling the guy can't do conflict in any way, and perhaps that's the only reason he props the door open for me. "Okay."

I follow him in and push the door shut behind me. I confirm, the rancid odor that overwhelmed me the last time I was here has been completely eradicated. We creak across the wooden floor to his living room. He motions for me to sit on one side of the floral-patterned sofa.

I settle in and take out my sandwich and fries and notice his gaming chair is tucked away neatly under the desk. The surface is tidied, all the half-filled glasses are gone.

I hand him the bag, and he pulls out his sandwich—a steaming, greasy concoction wrapped in paper. I notice the bandage wrapped around his palm. “Hey, how is your hand?”

“It’s okay now,” he says. “I, um, just have to stay off my gaming controller until the stitches can come out.”

I nod. “Oh, that’s a bummer.”

He takes a small bite, then casts his eyes down at the sandwich thoughtfully. “I guess I kind of needed a break,” he mutters.

“I’m still really sorry it was such a shit show with that guy that day.”

“It’s fine.” He nods meekly before holding out his sandwich. “And thank you for this. It’s . . . nice of you.”

“My pleasure,” I smile.

I free my sandwich from the paper wrapper—a chicken Caesar wrap—and we start eating in silence. Norm doesn’t seem particularly creepy right now, just painfully shy. But then again, you can never be too sure. Honestly, I’m not sure what I expected to find here—perhaps the stolen panties framed above his couch? Obviously, Jane’s underwear wouldn’t be sitting out in the open, especially if he was crafty enough to swipe it unnoticed from a dryer. I can’t exactly confront him and ask if he’s the panty thief, and snooping around his room isn’t an option—nor is it something I’d want to do.

But there *has to be* something I can figure out one way or the other.

He shifts to grab a fry and from the bag and his feet twist closer. His bright white socks are like little beacons and—of course! I point to them. “Wow, I can’t help but notice your socks are so . . . bright.”

“Oh.” Norm looks at his feet like he’s only noticing he has them. “Yeah, I guess they are.”

“You washed them in our laundry room?”

“What?” His voice cracks with concern—maybe because of my weird line of questioning, but *maybe* because I’m onto him.

“Your socks. Do you wash them in the basement?”

“Um, yeah.” The tops of his ears redden. Why should he be so embarrassed? It’s just enough to convince me I really have to be onto something here.

“And how do you work the machine to get them so white?”

He stares at me for a second, aghast, before answering. “Oh, um, I use just a little bleach in that hole that says . . . bleach. Maybe that’s it?”

I nod vigorously. “Brilliant! I’m going to have to try that too if those basement machines can deliver like that.” I smile enthusiastically—okay, maybe a little manically. He grimaces and looks a bit like he’s going to shit his pants. “Do you know when you washed those socks?”

“What?” He puts his sandwich back on the table.

“I just, I mean . . .” I stumble for some way to keep this conversation feeling normal. “Your socks look so fresh. I was thinking you must’ve washed them recently.”

He slowly inches his feet away from me as he answers. “I don’t remember.”

“So you usually do laundry at night?”

He’s gone completely stiff.

“Yeah?”

“And do you *like* the laundry room?”

“Um, I guess it’s . . . okay.” He stares straight ahead as he talks now.

“That’s great! I’d been wondering how people are enjoying the building facilities lately.” I look directly at him. “What would you say is your favorite thing about our laundry room?”

Instantly, his hands clench into fists. I maybe went too far—it’s not like he was going to confess. “Mona, I know what you’re doing.” His voice has gone cold. “But you don’t have to worry about me anymore.”

His tone draws a chill through me. I glance at the distance between me and the exit.

He watches me with his dark, observant eyes. “I’ll never let it happen again, okay?”

Oh my god, am I about to get a confession? “What do you mean?”

His eyes cast down. “The day of the inspection, I overheard the electrician . . .” His lips tremble insecurely as he speaks. “I’m sorry. I guess I was too used to it to notice, but I shouldn’t have let it get so bad.”

Ah, right. Jamie had to open his big mouth and say it stunk in here. No, actually, he was agreeing that *I* said it stunk in here.

“Hey,” I start. “Thank you for doing all that, but I should’ve handled it better. Really, I didn’t expect the electrician to be so rude.” I consider that

for a moment, then add, “Though, honestly, I should’ve after the first ten minutes of being in his presence.”

Norm’s lips quirk up a bit at this. “I don’t want to be a bother.” His voice cracks again, and this time I realize it’s not concern about being caught—he’s embarrassed. “I guess I sort of sunk into a gaming hole when my mom passed.” His jaw clenches around his words, stiff with fresh pain. “Things got away from me.”

His mother? I gaze around the apartment, taking in all the little figurines and old-lady furniture. The décor is starting to make a lot more sense.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” I say softly. “So, she liked birds, I take it?”

His eyes follow mine to the china cabinet. “Yeah.” He smiles like he’s recalling a memory. “My mom collected them. When I was little, I actually thought they were pretty creepy.” He looks around himself, as if he’s just now realizing what his apartment looks like.

“At first it was nice to feel like—to have her stuff. And it was during Covid, so buying new things felt too hard. But it’s probably time . . .” His voice fades off. He sounds a little haunted.

Norm is surrounded by his mom’s belongings, and I can’t help but wonder what it’s like to lose a parent in the way he has. Is the grief more open, perhaps simpler, even more pure?

Or is it harder to have a parent like mine, who left nothing but a hole I can’t close? That lingering hope for a chance, only to realize it will never come. I force those thoughts back down, swallowing them before they can ignite the anger bubbling just beneath the surface.

I can feel Norm’s eyes on me, and I can’t help but wonder what emotions must be written across my face. But something in my gut tells me he’s not Jane’s panty thief, though I have no proof to exonerate. He just seems kind of . . . alone.

I suppress the vision of him tediously unpacking each bird from bubble wrap and setting them out all by himself.

“Losing a parent is tough,” I say, my voice steady at first. Then, after a pause and a deep breath, I quietly admit, “I recently lost my dad.”

He nods like he already knows this—or perhaps he sees something in me, a shared understanding I’ll need to recognize now that I’ve become part of this unspoken club. “It’s the little things they don’t prepare you for, eh?” he says. “Like grieving is one thing, but going through expired prescriptions and old recipe books is another.”

“Yeah.” I nod, like I understand, but of course my mom must’ve dealt with all that stuff (or simply left it). My mind drifts to the *one* box my dad gave me when I last saw him. And still, it’s buried deep in my closet, unopened.

Just then, Norm’s laptop dings on his desk. He meets my gaze, his fingers tightening around his napkin. “Thanks again for the lunch,” he says, his voice sincere. “It was nice having a . . . talking to you.” There’s a warmth in his eyes that makes me believe he means it—that he appreciated the company. He glances toward his screen and exhales. “I should get back. Time to log in—our colleagues are waiting.”

His words halt me.

Norm walks over to his desk and jiggles his mouse. The logo on his monitor’s background is for Westmore Communications.

It’s been a long time since IT moved fully remote post-Covid. A long time since Norm worked in person at my office.

I can’t *believe* I missed this.

A memory floods my mind from six years ago, when I was still newish at Westmore and needed some help setting up my laptop. An IT guy—Norm, I realize now, with longer hair that hung over his face—came by to help. It was awkward, or rather, *he* was awkward. Shaky, sweaty. He was wearing too-large jeans and a wrinkled polo. Corbin came to my desk while Norm was working on the installation to gossip with me about some client he was helping our boss Carolyn with, and I didn’t even give Norm a second glance until he interrupted us to let me know he had finished.

After he left, Corbin said, “God, it must be nice to just be the computer guy—working nine to five and not giving a fuck how you look. Imagine if we showed up for a client meeting like that?”

He looked at me expectantly with a smirk on her lips.

I didn’t say anything, but I smiled.

I didn’t think Norm heard. He was far enough down the hall by then.

All these years later, I’d totally forgotten about him, even when he was living in my own building.

It’s like I’m talking to a ghost as I stand. “Hope you have a good afternoon. If you ever want to vent about work, call me.”

“Thanks.” He smiles insecurely before turning to his desk. “And let me know if the . . . if there are any other issues I can help with.”

I pause at the doorway. He's IT. He must have access to everyone's emails. Does he know about my current situation?

As I open the door, Norm answers his cell phone. "Hello? Yep, I'll be working on your data recovery."

Norm's right there, working for the office I love, while I'm about to go eat soggy fries in front of Alice.

On the other end of the line comes the sound of someone freaking out. He's probably trying to finalize some big presentation at the eleventh hour, and his computer crapped out. Those days feel so far away.

I close the door behind me, locking away the sounds of my old life.

I pull out my phone and confirm that the group chat is still a ghost town. Other than Olivia privately asking me how my Lana thing is going (again), there's nothing from my old life in my phone.

But I can recognize Corbin's voice anywhere.

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Email From Carmen to Mona

Thursday, June 10

Dear Mona,

I'm going to have to cancel the electrician appointment tomorrow. I'm booked in the morning, and it looks like I'll have to drive to Lethbridge to meet a guy. Let's give it the old rain check.

Sincerely,
Carmen Thurston

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Fanta See

As soon as I make it to the first-floor hallway, I'm greeted by a chaotic seascape of packages like some precarious modern art display. The package box in the lobby is overflowing, and apparently the wreckage has made it all the way to Carmen's door now.

It's only been a day since I was last in this hallway visiting Norm, yet this is what Carmen has accomplished.

My irritation grows with each step I weave through the clusterfuck of a hall and—

Shit.

I almost lose my footing as I stumble on a sneaky package of Carmen's.

My knuckles wrap furiously against his door, yet I manage to keep the bite out of my voice as I call sweetly, "Carmen, it's Mona! Can we chat a sec?"

A full minute passes. I know he has to be in there. Unfortunately, I've become somewhat cognizant of this man's routine. His breakfast hour at the diner is up, and his rusted Ford pickup truck is still in the parkade.

If Jamie can't finish up the inspections tomorrow, the viewings Lana wants to arrange can't happen. And if all these packages are still here, the viewings won't go well anyway.

This whole arrangement was meant to show Lana what I could do. If I can't wrangle a few unruly tenants, why would she trust me to represent her

business?

This is Carmen's fault, not mine. All his avoidance. All his bullcrap. It all piles up like the packages against the wall. I shuffle one of the cardboard boxes into my arms and return to his door. "Carmen, I know you're in there!" I knock with my free hand hard enough to shake the door and rattle some old dust imbedded in the hall walls. "I have a special delivery for you!"

Finally, a sound creaks behind his door. It nudges open only as far as the security chain allows. He peers through the gap, his gaze wary and uncertain. "Hey there, Mona." He smiles at me, calm and unbothered, as if his composure alone could dissolve my anger. "You can just leave that in the package box."

"Package box is full." I hold the box out to wedge into the gap in his door. "These will have to go in your place."

Maybe it's my expression that shows I'm not willing to back down, but he unhooks the chain and holds out his arms to accept the box. A wave of his Old Spice scent reaches me, and the familiarity of it hits me like a brick wall—it's the same deodorant my dad used. Carmen steps back slightly, dropping the package onto a nearby table. I inhale deeply, steadying myself as I try to regain my composure.

"I'm also going to have to ask you to collect all the stray packages," I continue, with a little crack in my voice.

Carmen shifts from one foot to the next. "Oh, right, sure. I'll get on that when I—

"I need all the packages removed right now." I cut in, voice curling with ire.

His gaze locks with mine, his fingers twitching restlessly against his thighs. For a brief moment, I wonder if I've pushed too far and if this is going to get ugly. Then, without a word, he steps into the hallway and shuts the door behind him with swift finality.

"You know, Mona," he hiss-whispers. "I don't think people around here like how you're getting up in our personal business."

"I don't care about your personal business," I respond as serenely as I can. "I'm trying to keep this building in order for Irene."

"And did Irene ask you to booby trap the laundry room with underwear?" he spits, raising his eyebrows. "Should I tell Irene about that?"

I glance toward Norm's door, hoping he's got those big earphones on, before remembering his gaming hiatus. Dammit.

Behind Carmen's reddening face, I see his suite is cluttered with junk, every surface buried under chaos. Then, on the counter, my eyes catch on something familiar.

"How about I let Irene know you've been messing inside the garbage bins?" I fire back, gesturing toward the garish, fish-shaped pepper mills I spotted in the trash the other day. "Are you the one screwing up the sorting? You know, we got fined for that. Maybe I should let Irene know how that happened."

He holds my stare, his fingers twitching against his thighs. We're in a stand-off. This is risky. I could've pushed some button to set him off.

But after a long pause, he pushes his door wide and silently backs into the apartment.

"Very well, I'll just be a moment. No need to wait around while I tidy." He crouches and manages another box into his arms.

He definitely has something he's hiding in his suite. I suppress my mind's attempts to wander into deranged territory.

"That's not all." I continue. "I actually came here because I looked into your lease terms, and since you've been given ample warning about the electrician appointment, we're going to have to let him into your suite at the appointed time tomorrow, whether you're around or not."

Carmen freezes on the spot with the packages he'd gathered. "Are you saying you're going to break into my apartment tomorrow?" There's a threatening edge to his voice.

"I'm saying I'm going to let the electrician in during his final appointed time whether you're here or not."

His eyes give nothing of his thoughts away, but his knuckles whiten around the packages.

This guy is used to getting his way for too long with Irene's management. He could very well just call her right now and complain and I'd be hooped, but I have nothing to lose if we don't get the inspections sorted.

"I just need another week to get all ready for the guy. If Irene were managing the place she'd let me."

It's the shake in his voice, the sweat at his temple. His nervousness is making me all kinds of nervous myself. He's probably going to go to Irene and complain now. "I understand that, but that time was already given, and

now that we've learned the issue about the wires, getting this done in time is essential to prevent a more serious fire."

His eyes flash and he seems to decide something. "Well, I may as well pull the Band-Aid off now. Come on in, we need to have a proper chat." He waves me over as he opens his door.

It takes me a moment to realize what's happening. Against my better senses, I take a tentative step into his apartment. Immediately, the air thickens with dust and an odd kind of dread.

I don't know what I was picturing his place to be, but every surface is covered in items that are both random and out of place: An old-timey sewing machine takes over the kitchen table. Piles of vinyl records are stacked on the counters. Shelves sagging under the weight of a plethora of trinkets hold up the back wall where a normal person would put their couch.

But it's the tightness in his fists, the fiddling of his fingers, that keeps drawing my attention. I have no move but to swallow my fear and say, "You have such interesting things."

Instantly, I make eye contact with a creepy-ass porcelain doll that seems to be sucking the souls from its surrounding area.

I thought this guy was sketchy, but this shrine to weird garbage—and his nervousness at me seeing it—puts my instincts on high alert.

He smiles hesitantly. "Please, have a seat." He splays his palm toward the one chair in the room that a person could feasibly sit on, even though it's a little stained and holey in areas where I pretend not to notice.

I don't sit down, but he asks, "Can I offer you a drink?" He weaves to his kitchen and pulls open his fridge door. "Lucky you, I have some Fanta." He fishes out a half-full two-liter bottle and starts pouring it into a cup before I can even reply.

He holds it out for me, and I don't want to be rude, so I accept the mug with the scratched Flames logo on it and politely fake a sip before resting it on his counter. It looks flat and smells overly sweet and concerningly bright yellow.

He pours the last of the bottle into another mug and leans against the opposite side of his counter.

Maybe it takes a true man of culture to know that flattened soda while in a creepy apartment is the proper way to serve a Fanta?

"Well," Carmen starts, suddenly looking sheepish. "You got me. I suppose it's all over for me, then."

Again, he shakes his head, clearly stressed. He eyes the console in the corner where a TV would normally go. Instead, there's a tripod set up for a phone camera. A black cloth is stapled to the opposite wall and on top of it is a sign that reads:

#onemansjunk

I don't know what the fuck this is, but I try my best to avoid looking at his IRL "junk" as his hands twitch nervously next to it.

"What is all this?" I ask, though I'm afraid to know.

I feel his eyes on me as I once again make eye contact with *that doll*.

"My business," Carmen says. "It's the only thing I can do to make ends meet right now."

With all his sketchy-ass ways of meeting people and having associates, I was hoping he was simply selling drugs. I stiffen, suddenly afraid to touch anything. This is probably some kind of low-rent porn situation that I don't want to learn more about.

Unfortunately, Carmen keeps talking. "I find it's best to be consistent. Every item I put on the marketplace is photographed there before I upload it online." He points to the little camera area. "I specialize in antiques and collectables, but I'll take pretty much any junk off you for a fee."

The relief is instant. "So . . . you sell used items?" Suddenly his name, #onemansjunk, makes all the sense in the world and is actually quite genius branding (if still on the creepy side of the scale, but he's always going to be fucking like that, I guess).

Carmen is a junk dealer. s

"Those are creepy little freaks, aren't they?" He nods to the dolls, trailing my stare. "I personally wouldn't even give them to my daughter. I've seen too many of the horror films to know what they're capable of, but there are some people that'll pay a pretty penny for them."

"Carmen," I say slowly. "You can't run a business out of your home. It's a violation of your lease."

"It's more like a hobby. There's no need to bring eviction into this," Carmen says defensively. Then he snaps his finger like an idea's crossed his mind. "If there's anything in that corner that you want, I can give it to you. It's worth more than you'd think."

Is this guy actually trying to bribe me? I stare at his proposed offerings but am not sure I need a dusty funnel or a lamp with a lady's sexy torso at this juncture.

But he got one thing right. He could easily be evicted for this.

“Well . . .” I start, suddenly emboldened by this newfound power.

“There’s a reason for the rules, and your packages have been a nuisance for too long and—”

“I know all that. But I’m wondering if you’d look the other way? Please.” He cups his hands together and looks at me pleading.

“I can’t stop right now. Like I said, I have a daughter, and I need to send her mom money.”

His words hit me, stopping short any drive I had left. It’s the desperation in his eyes that cuts through me.

But I can’t let the smell of Old Spice make me go soft. Carmen’s been a nuisance for way too long. Just because he has a daughter doesn’t mean he gets a free pass for bad behavior.

I’m just starting to shake my head when a spark ignites behind his eyes. “Matter of fact, I was rather good at overlooking things myself,” he says. “Like when you snuck two pieces of a broken vase into the dumpster a few weeks ago. I just so happened to notice it was the same one the vandal took from the lobby that night, but I figured it would be best to overlook it all, until I had a reason *not* to.” His smile cuts into me.

Damn it. He knows. And with that, all the power I had over him has dissolved.

I can feel my pulse quickening. I nod, deciding it’s better to skip right to the chase. “So what are you proposing, like a mutual-destruction pact?”

“Wow,” Carmen gapes. “I was just guessing. Didn’t expect you to own right up to it.”

Shit. I’m such an idiot.

“Okay.” I nod. “I won’t say anything, and I appreciate your discretion with my . . . situation.”

“Hot dang!” He claps his hands hard and the sound echoes through the cramped apartment. He angles his head like a proud parent. “You know I was certain you were the understanding type.”

“I mean, I was kind of put into a corner.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “I probably wasn’t going to tell on you, I ain’t a little rat.” His eyes lock with mine, the smirk returning to his face. “I think if it came to it, you weren’t going to tell on me either. You don’t seem the type.”

I can't help my grin at this. He's savvier than I gave him credit for. "I probably wasn't, but I'd feel even *more* sure if you kept the boxes tidier. It's genuinely putting Irene's insurance at risk should there be a fire."

"You drive a hard bargain." He tips his chin at me in appreciation. "I'm saving up for a storage unit so things will be cleared out good."

"And now that we have such a great understanding, can you let the electrician in tomorrow for the inspection?"

He lets out a huff. "Yeah I can probably postpone my afternoon trip to Lethbridge, but in the morning, I wasn't lying about being busy." His expression flattens. "It's my day to visit Miley. I can only see her once a month, and I've missed enough." His eyes drift to a picture of a girl with dirty-blond hair cut into bangs around blue eyes.

My chest squeezes. "How old is your daughter?" I blurt out my question before really thinking about it.

"She's about, well, let's see, she's turning fifteen next month." The words seem to catch in his throat, yet he continues unprompted. "She goes to Western Canada High School."

I nod. "Oh, it's good she's close."

"Yeah . . ." His hands curl around his mug and his eyes become distant. "Right now, she don't got a lot of time to see me and I don't blame her." He shakes his head. "I went through some bad times, drank too much, did some stupid stuff. Missed too much. Do you know how much a parent has to fuck up for a child not to want to see them much?"

His words hit like pellets. It's like I'm not even in the room. I blink and I blink, trying to find the ground again.

"I'm trying," Carmen continues. "I know you think I'm this jackass, but I'm trying." He exhales through the thick air in the room. "I quit my ways over two years ago. Went to AA, got a therapist."

I risk taking a swig of Fanta to clear the lump in my throat. During my graduation, when I saw how drunk my dad was, I was so humiliated. I felt like, if people saw the state of him—if they found out who he was to me—my life would be over. I wanted to scream almost as much as I was determined not to let him ruin my moment. My new life. Even while wasted, he looked so proud when he saw me in my cloak. I'll never forget the look in his eyes when he realized—the officer holding his shoulders to escort him out, because I called security to remove him.

He said: “Mona, I came to watch you. I’m so proud.” I’ve filed away most thoughts of my dad out of self-preservation, but I sometimes let myself remember those words.

I try not to remember *my words* back to him.

The next day, he promised he’d never drink again. And he did everything he could to stay on track, as far as I can tell. For two years he was sober and trying to repair things with me. And I was just about to reach out to him, when he relapsed.

Six months later, I had to meet my mom to pick him up from the police station because he woke up on the neighbor’s couch.

At the time, it was an odd kind of relief that I’d held off on repairing things with him before that. Because I knew already that I *had to* protect myself if I was going to make it.

After his brush with the police, he was sober until he died.

And again, I was going to forgive him. I knew I would eventually. But I let five years pass.

Maybe if I’d seen the sober guy trying his best, it would’ve happened sooner? But I just kept holding out, waiting for the shoe to eventually drop. Waiting for his sober days to outnumber his last good streak. Like it was some kind of list I could check off. Like all of it was measurable and straightforward, and controllable for me.

All those years—timing is a funny little bitch—when I finally met him in what was meant to be the beginning of our coffee dates, I didn’t know he only had three weeks left. He wasn’t supposed to die before we could—

I cut myself off. I hate when my mind goes there—into those pointless what-ifs and guilt spirals. It’s best to stop replaying things that can’t be undone.

The urge to change the subject overwhelms me.

“So, how much would you get for a piece like that?” I’m pointing at this ancient star baby mobile that is hanging from the light fixture in his theoretical eating nook.

Carmen’s gaze follows my finger. “About fifty bucks if I find the right buyer. Those are extremely rare.”

“Fascinating.” I take yet another sip of flat Fanta—an apparently acquired taste.

His voice becomes serious as he raises a brow. “Listen, I don’t want you getting the wrong idea here.”

I almost spit out my drink.

“I know you’re on leave from work and probably looking to make some cash with odd jobs here and there, but in this line of work, you gotta be careful. It can be dangerous as all hell meeting strangers on the internet.”

I didn’t expect this weird fatherly concern from Carmen. Or is it just because I *know* he’s a dad now? My throat thickens, so I throw another sugary blast of Fanta on it. How long has it been since my dad offered to check my apartment windows to make sure they locked properly? Texted to see if I needed a ride home? He couldn’t offer much, but he did that.

“I’m telling you, it’s not a fun way to make a living,” Carmen continues. “There are a lot of what I’ve coined Marketplace Motherfuckers to deal with.”

“What’s a marketplace . . . motherfucker?”

“People message you with bullshit like ‘Is this available?’ then ghost you. Or write just to tell me that I’m asking too much for a vintage toaster—not to haggle, just to let me know, when they could get a life.”

I let out a chuckle.

And Carmen seems to stand taller. “Last week I have this one guy give me this whole long story about why he couldn’t pick up the globe that I was offering for *free*.” He wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “I mean, I feel bad that he was apparently attacked by a bobcat, while his wife stole his truck, but Jesus Christ, he could’ve just ghosted.”

“Okay, but this is compelling stuff he’s sharing. Were there pictures?”

Carmen’s grin spreads all the way to the corners of his eyes. “Matter of fact, he sent me this.” Carmen pulls out his phone to reveal an unbelievably obvious stock photo of an arm in a bandage.

I start laughing in earnest. “How fucked up is this?”

“I tell ya what, people are really weird.” Carmen lets out a chuckle of his own.

I nod. “Clearly.”

His grin softens. “Hey, I don’t want Irene paying the fine that I created, so I’ll pay it off.”

The sudden offer takes me by surprise. “I’m pretty sure you weren’t the only one to mess up the bins. There were items I could definitely tie to other tenants.”

He’s already holding a hand out. “That’s okay, I’ve got some extra cash saved up. Irene’s a good landlord and she shouldn’t have to deal with it.”

He shrugs, then a fond look sweeps across his face. “And I know we’ve got our deal now and all, but I’d still rather not have a reason to be evicted. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that if you wanna keep something, it’s worth a little extra love.”

I grin at this sentiment. “I appreciate that, Carmen.”

His eyes brighten. “Mona, I just realized we forgot to seal the deal about our discretion.” There’s a buoyancy in his voice as he holds out his glass to cheers me.

I proffer my glass in return.

As they clink, I remember the upcoming viewing.

I stand and swallow the last of the Fanta before reminding Carmen of his appointment with the electrician tomorrow.

This place isn’t worth any extra love, because in a few weeks it could be sold.

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Early Aughts Sick Day

On Friday morning, I wake with a pain that seems to wrap around my head and also pound through it with every beat. I should've expected this when I went to bed last night with a fuzzy feeling in my nose. I probably caught some horrific disease when I was rooting around in the trash the other day.

When I get out of bed, the chills start. My left nostril shows no signs of letting any air in. The cold I'd been hoping wasn't real since last night, the one I noticed as soon as I got back from dropping Ernest off with Sami, is here.

Normally, a cold would be something I'd take a few painkillers for, work from home, and collapse after putting out enough fires. But now, the only business on my plate is making sure my new friend Carmen will let Jamie in to do the electrical inspection, which I quickly manage by emailing Jamie instructions to buzz into Carmen's suite and do the final inspection without me.

I try to make toast, but the weakness in my knees is too much. I take a painkiller and feed Alice, who looks at me like she thinks I might be a problem for her relaxing day alone. I tug on a pair of sweats and the set myself up on the couch with an ice pack and throw blanket.

Pulling out my phone, I text Sami: Will be out of commission today. Can you please keep Ernest. I have a bug.

And proceed to pass out.

A few hours later, I burst upward. I'm still curled up on my couch. At some point I'd half woken enough to turn the TV on, and there's some competition show about people making miniatures.

Then another bang hits my door, and I realize the knocking is what woke me.

I ease myself up from the couch, groaning at the stiffness in my limbs, and peek through the front door's peephole. Sami is standing there, rocking back on his heels.

"Hey, Sami," I call, though my voice cracks. "I think I still have a bit of a cold."

"That's why I'm here," he calls back. "I've got some supplies to help with that."

I open the door a little and let him take in all my red-eyed, red-nosed glory. His hair is wet, so he must've just showered after getting off the diner shift. Confusingly, he's holding up the lamp with the naked breasts that was at Carmen's yesterday.

I stare at it pointedly. "I don't know how that will help me feel better, but thanks."

"No, my special sickness kit is in this backpack." He pats behind him. "This bonus was left outside your door."

I open the door wider and take it from him and notice there's a piece of paper taped to it. I tug it off and read: *Saw you eyeing this one. You're all right! Carmen.*

A smirk finds its way to my lips. Sami's eyes are twinkling with some weird reverence for the thing. "I saw the note," he admits. "I think that's the highest honor from the guy. What did you even do?"

"I just, um . . ." I think of the strange mutual-destruction pact Carmen and I agreed to. "Well, yesterday I shared a drink with him."

"That's cool." His eyes sweep over me in approval as I place the lamp on my entryway's bench. I remember then that I'm wearing my grungy sweats, my greasy hair is in a horrifically messy bun, and I've got on the robe that lost its belt.

Usually, looking like a piece of shit would make me feel insecure, but Sami has seen enough of me to make it okay, which is kind of great. At this point, I can just *be*.

"I have some soups and medicines and things. Can I help set you up with them?" He pulls off the backpack.

“This is truly lovely of you, but I don’t want you getting sick.”

“Well, I’ve got a bit of a cold myself.” To prove his point, he takes a big inhale through his nose, which makes a horribly stuffy sound. “Makes sense, I guess, since we’ve been hanging out lately.” His eyes draw to me. He’s right, our chats have been getting longer when we exchange Ernest. My morning coffees have been taking longer too. Yesterday, he told me all about his fancy restaurant days—how the walk-in cooler was designed for staff meltdowns as much as it was for keeping the food cool.

Now that he’s mentioned it, he does look a little paler than his usual shade. “Is it the chills and plugged-nose kind?” I venture.

He nods. “The very one.”

“All right, you’re in the club.” I hold the door open. “Come on.”

We make our way to my living room and Sami rests his backpack on the floor. “Something you don’t yet know about me is that I’m an expert sick-day curator. So if you’d allow me, I’d love to set up the space.”

I take in his serious expression and the concerningly stuffed shape of the backpack. “I . . . I don’t think I can deny you this.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. Where are your mugs?”

“See that cupboard that won’t quite latch closed?” I point to my shitty chipped cabinet. “They’re all there.”

“Great. Just give me five minutes to prep the room. Feel free to cover your eyes if you want the full transformation-reveal effect.” Sami’s dimples tug at the corner of his grin.

“How about I stare at my phone?”

He smacks his hands together. “I can work with that.”

After a few minutes of scrolling while Sami paces from the kitchen and back—I hear the running of the kettle and clanging glassware—Sami finally calls, “Ready.”

I look up. There are four mugs on my basic Ikea coffee table filled with different colored liquids. Beside them are two glasses of water, a giant bottle of Canada Dry ginger ale, a pack of Fisherman’s Friend, a box of Kleenex, and bottles of both DayQuil and NyQuil—all of it laid out like I’m in a hotel.

“This is really something,” I praise him.

He smirks with pleasure. “Let me give you the lay of the land. The NyQuil is a best-before-June-2028 vintage. A remarkable year for the

artificial flavors and—” He cuts off as he starts to cough. “I can’t make it funnier, I’m starting to feel like shit.”

I pick up the closest mug to me, and the warm salty smell of bouillon wafts toward me. The best thing in the world. “Seriously, this is amazing. Thanks for doing all this.”

“Like I was saying, I’m an expert. And I have access to the diner’s resources.” He points to the table. “One of your mugs has lemon tea and the other has Lipton Gator soup.” He snuffles before picking up one of the glasses of water to take a gulp.

“I feel more hydrated already,” I say, picking up my own glass.

He gestures to my TV. “I’ve also determined what you’re going to watch. I’m sorry but it’s the only way to kick this—so first you have Bob Barker episodes of *The Price is Right*, followed by Maury Povich.”

“Oh my god!” I can’t hold back the delight in my voice even in my current state. “It’s an early 2000s sick day!” I grab a tissue and dab it under my runny nose. “I’ve never had one! I mean, I got sick, but I never got to just sit around like this.”

Sami gives me a sad little grin. “Like I said, it’s the only way. But fair warning, the Maury show didn’t age well, or maybe it was never right, but you can’t feel bad about that because you’re sick. It’s our right to stare at the TV for eight hours and feel nothing.”

I cock my head. “Were you working today?”

“Dad’s handling things. Allegedly. I think I’ve bestowed too much power upon the guy.” His brow raises. “He’s living his best life wreaking havoc on the regulars, singing all weird and loud while pacing between tables. If anyone new comes in, they’ll be so freaked out. Good thing it’s always dead.” Sami chuckles at his own joke, but his eyes cast down.

“Nah, they’ll love him,” I say encouragingly.

“Hey, since we’re both playing hooky, and I’m a first-timer at this, wanna hang out and make sure I’m doing this sick day thing right?” With Sami around, it’s like a tiny boost of energy found its way to me, and now I can’t go back to being alone in my misery.

We end up on the couch, sipping on various liquids and throwing salty comments at the TV. The thing is, I love everything about it. I lean back and watch the inadequate assholes try to guess how much a kitchen set is in the ’90s. We’re both way off in a way that freaks us out about the cost of living and the state of the world. But like, in a fun way.

“I remember watching this show eight years ago and I saw a guy win a trip to West Edmonton Mall.” Sami’s eyes bug out. “Imagine that’s what you get after making it so far and winning the Showcase.”

I shake my head. “Someone from Tourism Alberta must’ve blown one of the producers to get that feature.”

Sami’s laugh warms the room. He smiles at me while the family of the winner of the current episode comes out to enjoy the prizes a little too much. One jerk even wiggles his hips like he’s about to hump a Jet-Ski.

Then there’s a sudden knock on the door. Through the wood, Abu calls, “Sami! Mona! Come, this dog is scared of me, I think. He is not trained.”

Sami’s face drops into his hands. “I knew they’d show up eventually.”

I ease myself up, but Sami shakes his head. “I’ll go; you relax.” A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Nobody should have to deal with Abu when they’re already down.”

He makes his way across my apartment, steps creaking on the ancient wood floor. I hear the sound of door’s lock unlatching. “Baba, how did you get into the building?”

“Long story short, come take the dog.” Abu’s voice is bubbly. “I think he’s a weird guy. He just stared at me when I threw him a ball. But don’t worry, he did his business like a professional.”

“Okay, we’re happy to take him, but you can’t stay,” Sami retorts. “I’m contagious.”

The sound of Ernest’s toenails clack across the floor, followed by Ernest’s little body shuffling by until he is pawing at me to pick him up. I take him into my arms as he presses his wet nose into my hands.

“This letter came for you, Sami!” Abu continues.

“Yeah, you could’ve held my mail until I got home.”

“Well, I don’t know what’s what. And remember, this fruit is mostly for Mona!”

“Thank you, Abu!” I call and lean around the arm of the couch enough to see him at the door, handing a giant container to Sami with an envelope on top.

“Anything for you, darling,” Abu calls, a giant smile filling his face.

“This will bring you to good health.”

“Dad, seriously, I don’t want you to catch it,” Sami urges. “Please go take it easy. It might rain soon.”

“Mona, this guy thinks I’m a newborn chicken,” Abu calls. “Cheep. Cheep! Are you happy now?”

I don’t think Sami could possibly look more exasperated, and I’m mostly seeing his face from behind. “You’re not making sense, Baba!”

“Eh! Get on with you,” he singsongs. I can’t help but smile as Sami shakes his head and clicks the door shut.

Just then, another knock sounds. “Baba, what is it now?”

“You want me and Mom to come back with chai soon?”

“No thanks! We’re good.”

“You su—”

“Positive,” Sami’s voice rasps. “Thanks, but we’re good. Please go chill.”

“Okay! Now I go make sure the restaurant doesn’t erupt with small fire. Busy day for me with my son having the man cold. Bye, Mona joon!”

“Thanks, Abu!” I call through my hoarse throat.

As his footsteps fade down the hall, Sami looks at me. “Would you believe that was less intrusive than I expected? And hey, we now have sliced melon and berries.”

I grin. “It’s sweet he’s so caring.”

“A little too caring at times.” Sami’s gaze flits down as he sets the container on the coffee table between our various bottles and mugs.

“I mean, I’m thinking I’ll move out soon.” Sami rolls his shoulders and stretches his arms behind his head. “I mentioned to Irene to hit me up the next vacancy she has.”

I try to keep my eyes from shifting. “You’d live here? In this building?”

“Of course. It’s close to work, just far enough away from Abu—I’ll have to figure out how he got in and fix that—and this place is full of . . . great people.” I shake his gaze off me as he continues. “And Irene’s supported the diner for so long, it’d be nice to support one of the last privately owned buildings around here.”

I try to ignore the pang of guilt knocking through me. “If my family were like yours, I’d never move out.”

Sami seems to freeze on the spot. “I don’t mean to sound like a dick. I shouldn’t complain so much about Abu to you when I know your—”

“No worries,” I interrupt before he can poke harder. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

“Well, still . . .”

“My situation is . . .” I suck in a deep, ragged breath. “I know my dad just passed, but he was kind of away a lot growing up anyway.” I don’t mention that he was still technically living with us when he would disappear on a bender or stay in bed all day. That it feels like I grieved him a thousand times over the years. “Then, when I moved out, I got kind of busy with my life things, so we never really figured things out.” I don’t mention how I avoided going home because being in that house felt like being swallowed whole by the scared girl I used to be.

“Makes sense.” Sami’s gaze is understanding, but still, guilt courses through me.

“It is what it is. I do miss him in ways, but I’m okay.” I force a smile as I reach for a lozenge to coat my dry throat. “The only real trouble is my mom is alone now, and her way of processing grief is to wreak havoc on the world.” I roll my eyes, thinking of her most recent antics. “So right now a little distance is actually okay.”

Tentative silence follows. My heartbeat picks up, and I wonder if Sami is seeing through my words, realizing how selfish I was. “Abu is sweet to bring us fruit.” I tilt my chin at the coffee table. “And I don’t think I’ve ever had someone set up a sick station. It’s more than I deserve.”

“Of course you deserve it.” He doesn’t laugh it off. His gaze is burning against my cheek.

“Thanks, but I mean this whole day. I’ve never had a day on the couch like this.” Never felt so relaxed doing so.

Sami’s eyes widen in surprise. “You’ve never been sick?”

I sigh. “I’ve been sick. But I’ve always worked through it, even as a kid. Normally I would at least try to catch up on emails from home.”

“Oh.” Sami’s face turns toward the TV, though I can still feel his eyes darting my way. “Well, maybe you can have softer days sometimes now.”

Silence falls between us for a few minutes. We both watch the next contestant on the game show, who’s clearly making the most uninformed choices. My gaze wanders to the letter Sami’s dad dropped off. The return address looks to be from the city planning committee. Must be something to do with the petition Sami is working on filing.

“So, I guess your leave is ending soonish,” Sami breaks in. “Are you looking forward to going back?”

I think of Olivia and the rest of the crew. Of feeling like I was drowning with nobody coming to save me. “Yeah, I miss the routine.” The words slip

out of my mouth automatically, echoing the thoughts I've had countless times these past few weeks—but before I've had a chance to really consider if they're still true. I pause, probing at the strange emotions balled up in my chest, then clarify. "It can be a lot some days, and some clients aren't great, but I do enjoy it."

Except, now that I've eased into a snail's rhythm of coffee at Sami's, Ernest's walk, even journaling a bit in the afternoons, it might be a bit of an adjustment going back to the eleven-hour days. But I'm sure I'll be back to my old self in no time.

"Makes sense." Although he doesn't quite look convinced.

"We can't all love every single one of our customers the way you do."

"Hey, I don't love every single one."

"Oh, come on, you do. You love them all so much."

"Not true!" He shakes his head in protest. "In fact, I have days when every customer annoys me."

"I've never seen you act the least bit annoyed about anything, but I'm going to choose to believe you."

"Well, I've never been annoyed when you're around." He eyes me for a flash and heat swells at my temples. "But if you ever hear me call someone 'boss,' it really means 'asshole,' and if I've gotten to that point, I'm at my fucking brink."

"Noted." I giggle into my mug of tea.

"But if I'm being honest, it's usually the newer building folks that grinds my gears. They always want something we don't have. Artisanal coffee, nine types of milk, and a more photographable plate."

"Are those things inherently bad?"

"No," he admits, then his shoulders harden. "But they just don't appreciate the community that was here before. It's all so . . ." He huffs. "It's not the yuppies themselves who bother me, it's what they represent. All these new buildings, the way they want to live these perfect, sterilized lives. They're just a bunch of suits that care about money."

I don't mean to wince. Sami's face drops as he notices. For a second I'm afraid he can read my mind. "Mona. I'm—"

"It's okay," I cut in. "I get where you're coming from." And it's true I do technically *understand* it. Sami might not want anything at the diner or the world around it to change, but refusing to adapt is how animals go extinct.

My gaze again lands on the letter Abu dropped off. “And for what it’s worth,” I continue, “I hope your petition gets enough signatures to slow the construction. It’s amazing you’ve put that together.”

Also true. At least Sami is trying to do something about it, no matter how hopeless his ventures may be.

“Thank you.” His hand grabs mine. It’s so sudden, but for some reason I don’t flinch. There’s a softness to it, and the way he looks at me. A buzz in the warmth from his fingertips reaching mine. He leans closer. “I think you’re amazing too. The way you’re helping Irene, and Ernest, and all these tenants.”

His eyes soften on me in a way that feels like he’s seeing something so clearly about me. It draws a warmth through my skin and makes me feel like I’m glowing. I lean closer to him, the warmth of his presence drawing me in. But as his hand makes its way to my cheek, it’s like there’s a shitty alarm clock buzzing too early through a dream.

The truth is I’m destroying his community.

I pull away. “That’s kind of you.”

He withdraws his hand. I can’t quite look in his eyes.

This is why it can’t be more. I like Sami, truly, but the truth is, we’re fundamentally different. I do think forward progress is okay. I’m not passionate about preserving outdated buildings. I like taking pictures of my food sometimes and drinking artisanal coffee. If he knew what I was really doing around here, he’d know I’m just as bad as everyone else.

Sami pats Ernest, who’s curled up between us in a tight little bagel. “We should take some syrup. Once I’m high enough I might even pull out my reenactment of a JG Wentworth commercial for you.”

I haven’t thought of that commercial in what feels like several decades, and already I can feel it clawing into my brain like an earworm that never left. “Lots to look forward to.”

He settles further into the couch, as his gaze draws to me. “That’s the point.”

I don’t know when I passed out or what exactly happened, but I wake to a dark apartment, Jerry fucking Springer on in the background—YouTube must’ve somehow found its way here when I fell asleep. I’m lying fully across the couch, one of my softest blankets covering me. There’s warmth

—Sami's body is across from me. My right foot is enveloped in the palm of Sami's hand.

I raise myself up to see him pressed against the back of the couch. The arm not touching my foot is bent behind his head as a pillow. His soft deep-sleep breath pairs with his chest rising and falling. We must have passed out head to foot at some point.

I sit up and groggily pick up my phone from the coffee table. My mouth is so dry I can hardly swallow.

The clock on my phone tells me it's 1:13 a.m.

As soon as I shift to grab a glass of water, Sami stirs—then he jolts awake. "What the—"

"It's me, Mona," I whisper. "We must have passed out . . . for hours."

He sits up, his groggy face lit by the TV light. His hand doesn't let go of my foot and it feels more intimate than it should after today.

"How you feeling?" he asks, blinking heavily.

"Okay—a little better actually. I don't remember anything. Did you drug me?"

"We did chug NyQuil, but we probably needed the rest."

Someone on the TV screen does the splits in an inflatable pool filled with shaving cream. The caption reads. "Springer Break #5." I nod pointedly.

"Or maybe it was the ambience in here that conked us out."

His grin is drowsy. "Valid."

There's a silence that is only filled by the quiet buzz of my TV. He suddenly seems to catch that he is still holding my foot and lets go as he eases up. "I should . . . My back is going to hate me if I don't go sleep in a real bed." He gets up a little too fast and rubs his eyes. His T-shirt clings to his stomach, defining the muscles below.

I pull my weary eyes away. "Don't forget your medicine."

"Those are yours. I have my own supply at home."

"Thank you." I put my hands to my chest while Ernest, who must've also passed out, lets out a pointed huff at our chatter disturbing his fourteen hours of rest. "Nobody has ever given me something like this before."

"You've been hanging out with a bunch of bums, then." Sami's lips curl up to the side. We catch each other's eyes. I want to hug him goodbye, but that's, of course, ridiculous.

"Well . . . Good night," I murmur.

"Good night."

After the door clicks behind him, I tiptoe into my room. Already, without Sami here, the pounding in my head feels heavier. I fall straight into bed, clutching the NyQuil bottle like a teddy bear.

I haven't felt this awful in ages.

I haven't had a day this good in even longer.

In bed, my mind wanders to work, to my silent group chat, to Norm in IT.

And then bouncing back to Sami. To Abu, to Jane, to Lana.

Back to Sami. Always.

How he looked at me right before we maybe would've kissed.

And how he'll look at me when this place sells.

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Email from Lana to Mona Bucket

Monday, June 14

Subject: Confidential

Hi Mona,

I appreciate you submitting the electrical reports over the weekend. Ahead of the viewings I'm going to start scheduling, looks like we will be needing a few more pictures. Don't worry about aesthetics, the client just wanted to view these areas ahead of time (list attached).

If you could get me those today it would be much appreciated.

Thanks,
Lana

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Undercovers 2.0

It's been three days since my sick day with Sami, and I'm finally back to feeling like myself by Monday morning. We've been texting all weekend, and yesterday Abu came by to take Ernest from me.

The only outside contact beyond that was the email from Lana that came first thing this morning. I reread it in the elevator, mentally running through all the areas I'm to take photos of. The attachment read:

- Lobby (from each corner of room for full scale and view)
- Front of building from across the street
- Basement fuse box
- Parkade
- Storage area

The elevator reaches the main floor with a jolt and a ding. The smell of stewed cabbage carries through the lobby today—it must be cabbage and sausage night at Fighting Couple's place—and a weird kind of nostalgia tugs at me. I've become so familiar with the rotating smells, the little moldings on the ceilings, the whiteboard that I wrote on that day after my breakdown (that seems so long ago now). Without Irene leaving writing on it, someone has added a drawing of Ernest and Irene with a caption: *Get Well Soon!* I note that Sami's added his petition to the wall next to the whiteboard.

I send a new text to Sami:

ME: I'm back on my feet. Saw you running with Ernest this morning.

SAMI: Come by the diner when you can!

I swipe his message away and start on my task of capturing the lobby from all corners. I'm taking my third shot, which really seems to be a picture of the gross chair—

"What are you doing?"

I startle at the voice behind me. "Jane!" I smile heartily while her eyes flash to the phone in my hands in confusion. She must be heading to work. She's in a ruffled blouse with pink and blue dots and the type of slacks that can be washed in the laundry without wrinkles. "I like your hair." I grin brightly. It's now black and really shiny.

"Thanks, I dyed it yesterday." She runs her hands through it, tousling the strands. "Why were you taking a picture of that gross lobby chair?"

I instinctively throw my hands behind me to hide my phone, then realize how shifty that looks and force my arms to loosen to my sides. "Oh, I wasn't."

"Yes, you were . . ." Her eyes point toward my phone screen. "I can still see the picture you took right there." I hit the button with my thumb to turn my screen off. Jane gives me a strange look, then shrugs. "You know Irene told me she can't even remember when the chair appeared here. She reckons it was this weird-ass tenant she had in the 2000s named Billy who left it in the lobby; says nobody should sit in it too long. You know how fucked up you gotta be compared to the rest of us to have Irene call you 'weird ass?'" Jane shifts on her feet and narrows her eyes once again. "So why *were* you taking a picture of it?"

"I wasn't taking a picture of the chair," I blurt before thinking, then realize I will need to clarify. "It was a picture of the lobby."

Now a different question flashes across Jane's eyes. "Did Irene ask for that?" Already, a curious twist in her expression.

"Not at all." Shit. I can't have Jane going to Irene with questions. In fact, I can't have Jane telling *anyone* I was taking these photos—that could raise suspicions among the tenants.

I have to think fast. My eyes shift around the room.

The elevator dings and Divorced Dad steps out and nods once to both of us before rushing out in his bouncy fucking sneakers. He's off to go get a

coffee from Sami before his shift, no doubt.

When did I manage to learn all these people's routines like this?

An idea hits.

"Okay, you got me." I lower my voice and lean closer to Jane. "I was taking *secret* photos of the lobby—as part of the panty-thief investigation."

Jane's brows pull together in confusion.

I hold up my palms in a hear-me-out gesture. "I've been trying to gather more evidence after we ran into a dead end—and everyone I've looked into so far has not given much away."

Jane nods for me to continue like this might actually be going somewhere.

"So I was surveying possible areas where the panty thief might lurk before he acts. This chair seems a good, subtle place to wait. Right across the entrance to the basement. He might even rev himself up for the crime here."

I force myself to lock eyes with Jane, who unfortunately looks back at me with genuine concern. "Mona, I appreciate all this, but I don't think this is going to . . ." She shakes whatever train of thought she has away. "Maybe we should just do another undercover tonight? I've been thinking about it, and the idea behind it was right, but maybe we missed an angle. Maybe we can set up two cameras—one that captures the lower area?" She pauses, her eyes trailing over me with concern. "It would save you from having to do . . . this."

"Great idea!" I say, because what choice do I have?

"Tonight?" Jane asks. "Monday is my usual laundry night, anyway."

"Yeah."

Jane grins back and her Apple Watch flashes. "I'm off to work but come by my place at six."

We make a plan to meet back up this evening. As Jane leaves, I keep my phone tucked into my back pocket, shifting to give the chair a wide berth.

This time I don't even try to knock on Jane's door. As soon as I'm outside, as predicted, she's waiting to let me in.

But when I enter the apartment, it's like I've never seen it before. All the crochet stuff, paints, and puzzles are put away, the clothes she'd had strewn about are gone, and all the counters and tables are bare and glistening.

There's even a diffuser giving off a lavender scent. It's still a full house as far as decor goes, but it's tidy. "Wow, it looks great in here," I can't help but say aloud.

As I make my way past her white kitchen cabinets—identical to mine—I notice her vintage coffee table is set up with plates of charcuterie and vegetables and a bottle of wine.

Her eyes spark at my compliment. "Last time we didn't do it right. We should enjoy the time while we wait."

"Jane, this is amazing!" I really mean it. It's the nicest thing anyone has done for me since, well, since Sami brought all those supplies on our sick day. But I think of Jane going through all this trouble just because she busted me taking pictures of the lobby, and a pang of guilt draws in. "You really didn't have to do all this."

"It was fun! And this was the kind of thing I always wanted to do when I moved to the city." Her temples redden as she smiles softly. "It's just, finding people to have over is harder than expected."

"Yeah, it is," I say, but I eye her with newfound curiosity. I guess it can be kind of tough moving somewhere with no ties, but still—I feel bad she's been here a year without really seeming to have anyone to hang with.

Jane checks the screen of her phone. "I set up the wash about ten minutes ago with a camera that's slightly lower, so we can see the floor too, in case the thief crawls in."

I nod. That's certainly something we didn't think of last time.

"We have twenty minutes until it's time to change."

She takes a seat on the couch and begins pouring the wine into two glasses. I sit beside her and take the glass closest to me. "So . . ." I start, twisting the stem between my fingers, "what's it like back home?"

Jane takes a big sip from her cup. "The best way I can describe it is cold and small. But apparently they have a Boston Pizza now, so maybe I should've stuck around." Her words are laced with sarcasm, like someone had previously suggested this to her.

I take a sip of wine too—it's citrusy and semisweet. "What made you leave, if there were such big things in store?"

"Oh, you know. A bitter divorce." She lifts the glass, tilts her chin high, and swallows another long swig of wine in a long gulp.

Something about her—those bright, mismatched outfits and her animated, almost cartoonish energy—give her such a green quality. It's hard

to reconcile that image with the idea of her as someone who's weathered heartbreak and hard decisions. "Really?"

She gulps down another big swig of wine as she nods. "I know I look too hot and young for it, but that's the point. I was too young for it all. Trevor and I were together since high school and instead of moving away for college like a normal person, I became a small-town housewife." She laughs once, bitter. "Pathetic, right?"

Jane's eyes flicker to the floor, her fingers twisting the edge of her sleeve.

"We all do things for love," I say—because it feels like the sort of thing you're supposed to offer in moments like this. The truth is, I've never been in love. I've usually had to step back before things got too deep. Or if his laugh was really wonky; or if his apartment was really messy; or when he offered me a drawer at his place for my things. It's for the best, though. My life should be perfect before compromising to fit someone else's needs in.

"No, my ex was"—Jane hesitates, chewing on her lip as she considers her words—"Well, he was a huge dick."

Her face twists, like she's caught a whiff of something foul just thinking about him.

"I believe you." I nod automatically and take a citrusy sip of wine.

"I'm not just saying that as some embittered housewife," Jane hastily adds, like she's trying to defend herself before I've even had the chance to react. "I guess there were signs before I married him, but I didn't have a lot going on, never made it to college, so I chose what I thought would be an easy life." Her eyes squint as if it pains her to remember. "Trevor didn't like me going out, and I hated arguing—I grew up in a house of arguing. So I didn't do shit but watch TV with him and bake, while he constantly put me down."

Once again, I have trouble picturing the version of Jane she describes—quiet, deferential. She said she just wanted to "be" for a while. I guess that means, for a long time, she couldn't. "Oh, that sounds terrible."

Jane shrugs, her gaze distant. "Honestly, it was like a low-grade shitty life but not horrible. He didn't hurt me, not physically. He didn't expect very much of me. It was easy to shut down, just exist. I could've done it forever."

I grab an apple slice from the tray, chewing slowly. I know too well what she means—the way you learn to seal off parts of your mind, to feel nothing

when everything around you threatens to wound. “What made you finally pull the plug then?”

Jane nods like she expected this question. “He wanted kids. It was then that I knew I couldn’t fuck a whole new generation, or myself . . . or Trevor anymore.”

“Hear, hear.” I raise my glass in her direction, smiling. “Wow. That must’ve been really hard to do.” My mom let her whole adult life be dictated by my dad’s issues.

She nods. “It was a small town, and his family owned like ten tent-pole businesses there, so me leaving him was just *so slutty* of me.” She snorts through her nose. “I knew I had to get away if I wanted a chance of starting a new life.”

“And that brought you to Calgary?”

“Yeah.” The pain finally eases from her expression as she grins proudly. “Work is shit, and I’m not saving much, but this is the first place that’s ever been just mine.” She looks around her apartment, breathing it all in. “It’s all me.”

Suddenly all her eccentric fashion statements, the ever-changing hair colors, her random hobbies scattered around the apartment, even the times I heard her crying through the walls—it all makes sense, because it’s all down to the same thing: Jane is currently finding herself. Because she never had a chance to just live for herself before.

I look at her with a newfound reverence. “Jane, you’re very cool. Seriously, to up and restart your life and make it work—not everyone could do that.”

Last month, when Carolyn called me into her office, I was completely frozen. The thought of losing my job felt like my entire world was about to collapse. I remember how desperate I was to avoid being kicked out of Valleyview after vandalizing it—so desperate, in fact, that I agreed to take on this ridiculous temporary-super role. Could I ever really let go, drop everything, and start over? I’ve poured so much into this one version of my life, planned every step so carefully, that I never allowed myself to even consider the idea of pivoting.

Jane tucks her feet under her, leaning into the arm of the couch. “It never would have worked out without Irene. I’d been crashing on my cousin’s couch for two months, paying the same rent Irene is now charging me. None of the places within my budget, even with my new job, had landlords

willing to take a chance on someone without a rental history. I was this close to going back to town and sucking Trevor's dick—metaphorically speaking, of course.”

I take a hefty gulp of wine, my mouth suddenly dry. “It's nice Irene let you have it.”

Jane shakes her head. “She told me she actually didn't think I could afford it with my salary, so she lowered it by like two hundred a month. I don't know if anyone else would've taken pity on me like that.”

I try to hide my wince as my thoughts linger on the box of bills hidden beneath my coffee table. Irene's kindness couldn't have lasted forever, I remind myself, swallowing the familiar pang of guilt with the practiced ease of someone who's grown used to it.

“That was fortunate,” I say. “But now that you've found your footing, don't you want to move somewhere with a few less panty thieves and toilets that actually flush properly?”

Jane pops a grape in her mouth and continues. “Eventually, yeah—but for now, my main goal is to save up enough to buy a toaster oven. Plus, staying on this lease for a while will look better to future landlords.”

The wine curdles in my belly. Jane is going to be screwed when this place sells if my recent market research is any indication.

“And this place isn't so bad, especially now that you've been helping out,” Jane says, her words stirring the uneasy knot in my stomach tighter. “If we catch the panty thief, I might even admit I genuinely like it here.”

I swallow hard and hold out my glass. “Here's to justice, then.” Jane clinks it with her own and we both take a hefty sip.

“I still think Norm's the top suspect,” Jane says. “He's the only one who came close to the machine that night.”

I nod. “For what it's worth, I looked into him—but I don't know. I get the feeling he's not the one. And, I mean, it *would* have been pretty unreal if he'd managed all that while on camera.”

Jane nods. “Well, Carmen was the only other person we saw that night. Do you think he could have done it? Maybe secretly snuck them while I was emptying the dryer?”

A few days ago, I would have undeniably said yes. But I get the sense Carmen's interests are more about selling things off than hoarding things for his own pervy interests. Maybe it's the dad energy I can suddenly

recognize in the guy, but I can't *quite* see him as suspect numero primo anymore.

"I don't know . . ." I say. "He gives off weird vibe, but not like I'm-stealing-your-underwear level? I could be totally off base here, it's just my feelings."

She chews her lips, fingers rapping on the side of her glass. "Yeah, I think our guts know. Like honestly, with my ex—if I'd just listened to the little voice in my head, I could've saved myself a lot of time. I think I knew he was an ass when I first went out with him, but I was horny. After the divorce, I promised myself I'd never second-guess my instincts again." She sighs, looking down at the remaining liquid in her glass. "It's such a problem. Women are told their entire lives that they're being dramatic or hysterical—but we know the truth."

I nod as another piece of the puzzle that is Jane clicks together. "I do get a weird feeling about that guy in the couple on the first floor."

"That guy is a dick for sure." I grin and take another sip.

"He's a crop-dusting bitch," Jane blurts without warning, and I start to wonder if she got started on the wine before I showed up. "He farted in the fucking foyer once and acted confused where the smell came from. Nothing like gagging your way through that just to pick up the mail."

"It's the hot dogs."

"The hot dogs! You noticed that too?"

"Oscar Mayer himself must have taken notice of that shit by now." I chuckle into my own almost-empty glass of wine. "What about Divorced Dad? Across the way. Are you still suspicious of him?"

I realize I've let slip the nickname that's only existed in my head until now, but Jane furiously nods like this is what's written on his birth certificate. "I can't stand him. Sometimes I catch him out on his balcony, just sitting there with his hands folded in his lap, staring into space. And in my head, I'm like—he's definitely up there edging." She purses her lips mindfully. "I mean, it's most definitely not that, but still."

Her phone buzzes on the coffee table. Jane grabs it to silence it. "Looks like it's time to go."

I chuckle. "Maybe we can bring some towels to sit on that futon in the rec room? Avoid the mouse droppings?"

"Let's bring this throw blanket. I can wash it after."

"Great!"

We make our way down to the basement. Jane switches her laundry into the dryer and double-checks her spy setup. Then we huddle up in the dark rec room and wait.

Nobody else is down here this late. We start whispering quietly to pass the time. But about an hour in—right around the moment we discover we have an overlapping obsession with mysterious hotel deaths; and our love for erotic thrillers made during their renaissance in the '90s—I realize our voices have crept up to full volume.

“Should we call it?” I ask. Jane’s laundry has been sitting there for a while.

She nods. We’ve kept our eyes on the cameras, but no one has come down the stairs. And even if there was a thief intent of sniffing out some panties tonight, our raised voices might have kept him away. Still, it doesn’t feel like a lost evening.

“You know, investigation aside,” I start, stretching my arms over my head, “thanks for setting all this up. I haven’t had a fun night like this in a while.”

Jane’s skin flushes. “I mean, me too. I always had a feeling we’d get along.”

I can’t say the same. When *Weird Girl Beside Me* moved in, she was quickly written off in my mind as just another *building person* I’d need to go out of my way to avoid.

I probably should have left it that way.

But it’s far too late to pretend I don’t know these people or care about what happens to them once this place finally meets its end. That’s just something I’ll have to live with—and I know I can. Jane has rebuilt from nothing before. Somehow, we’ll all figure out a way to be okay.

As we climb the stairs, we agree to revisit the investigation next week—with a new bottle of wine in hand.

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Let's All Get Rec'd

And just like that, it's Tuesday afternoon, which means there's only two weeks left until I'm due back to the office. My phone pings with an email from Carlyne (and Bill Cleg!) as I'm in the middle of feeding Ernest his breakfast. It lists protocols for my return, my schedule going forward, and points of contact for who was overseeing my projects. It's detailed, not at all the kind of message I'd expect if they were planning to bring me in just to formally dismiss me. In fact, it's surprisingly friendly, with Carlyne even adding, "We're excited to see you soon."

After a full month of anxiety and creeping guilt, I grasp on to those few simple words. I let them carry more weight than they should, filling me with a fragile sense of worth in a way I'm not willing to explore.

When I first began this leave, I thought the days would crawl by, just a bleak stretch of wasted time until I could get back to my life. But between preparing this place, dealing with all the tenants, taking care of Ernest, and my walks with Sami, the whole thing kind of . . . flew by. The building is all set for viewings to start. And from the sounds of Lana's latest communications, it looks like this place is going on the market tonight.

I need to start getting myself back into the mindset of a working person. I promised myself I'd come back stronger, so I might as well begin catching up now. I ring Olivia, and she picks up almost immediately.

“Hey there, Mona!” Her voice is bright but—am I imagining it?—a little curt. It’s probably because she’s at work and has a million thoughts floating through her head.

“Hey, I don’t mean to bother you. Looks like I’m coming back to the office in two weeks, and Carolyn sent me an update that you were handling the Vesterno account.”

“Are you serious?” The excitement in her voice, I realize, was exactly what I was looking for. “I’m so relieved. I’ve missed you like crazy.”

I smile as I go to my fridge to grab a water. Over the past few weeks, the shelves have gotten messy with random ingredients and takeout containers from the diner. I’ll have to get back into the swing of meal planning. “Yeah, I’m starting to catch up now. Actually, I’m reviewing the campaign packet you prepared—I truly appreciate all the effort you put into it. But I noticed the ad spend files aren’t in my drive. Would you mind transferring them over?”

“Oh . . . yeah. So we were going to fill you in on your return, but Carolyn asked me to hold on to that file. And the client agreed as well.” Olivia’s voice is soft and regretful.

“I see,” I blurt out before thinking. Because what does she mean the client I’d been managing for Two. Whole. Years—fielding their emails and phone calls on almost a daily basis—is now suddenly being poached?”

“I know that was your baby,” Olivia rushes to add. “And I mentioned that to Carolyn, but since we’re right in the middle of a huge campaign and I’ve been handling the day-to-day, Carolyn felt we had to prioritize the client’s best interests . . . is all.” Her voice is pinched; I’m sure she genuinely hates telling me this. But I can’t help but wonder how hard a fight Olivia really put up. This is a huge client for her.

“No, I get it. That makes sense.” I wish my own voice hadn’t lost all its bounce. Because it *does* make sense. If I were the client, I wouldn’t want to switch points of contact right in the middle of a campaign either.

Olivia continues, voice softer, “Mona, you know, after this campaign’s done, maybe we can discuss transferring the info back to your portfolio or —”

I’m such a dick. Olivia’s always been my biggest supporter, and I should do the same for her.

“No, Olivia, don’t worry, I get it. You’ve done amazing work, and this is a great opportunity. I think it’s fair, after everything, for that client to be

yours now.” I nod to reiterate to myself the truth of my words. This is the kind of thing I knew was at risk when my leave first started—it’s the whole reason why I was so scared to take time off. Plus, Vesterno is a moderately evil pesticide company—nothing sexy, but it was mine. “I’m truly okay. So don’t feel awkward.”

I will just have to work a little harder to get back on track. Nothing I’m not used to.

“And you still have Lana Winston locked in, right?” Olivia adds.

I look around my tiny apartment. “Yeah. Right, I do.” Olivia’s right—bigger opportunities are ahead. It’s time to let go of the past and focus on what’s next. I’m coming back stronger than ever.

“God, I’ve missed you.” Olivia’s voice has brightened again. “This place is just not the same without you.”

“I can’t believe how much I miss work.” I nod as the words leave my mouth, as if doubling down will make them stick. And there is a part I’ve really missed—at least the version of myself that had direction, deadlines, a reason to get dressed in the morning.

Alice spins in her tank, a judgmental stare on her face.

My phone buzzes, reminding me of my therapy appointment. “I’ve gotta go but I’ll call you soon.”

“Love you!” Olivia calls out.

I head through the hallway doing a final once-over, relieved to see that Carmen’s mountain of packages and the reek from Norm’s place are still gone. Everything is all set for Lana.

Once I’ve finished with the first floor, I make my way down the dingier stairwell to the basement. The earthy smell has somewhat lifted after the exterminator’s most recent visit last week. I first open the metal door to peek into the parkade, and the sight before me is a miracle. Better than I could’ve hoped. All the old metal junk has been cleared, even the long-abandoned bikes on the rack are gone.

Carmen must’ve tidied it all up. What a guy.

When I reenter the basement hall for a final check on the laundry room, the sound of Carmen’s voice carries through: “I don’t want to hear it no more.”

Followed by Jane's voice as she retorts, "Aren't you tired of being wrong?"

"Guess I'm used to it," Carmen mumbles.

Shit.

Why must there always be conflict between those two? I follow the sound of their voices through the musty-ass hall toward the laundry room. Did Jane straight-up accuse Carmen of being the panty thief?

I lightly step my way further down. The rec room's light is on, which is weird, because other than when Jane and I hide out for panty stings, nobody ever hangs in there. When I reach the threshold, I stop midstride, gaping. It's almost impossible to take in at once.

There stands Carmen in a white old-man tank top, sporting a limp tool belt with old leather work gloves sagging in his pockets. Jane's in a bright pink sweatsuit, holding a clipboard. All the old furniture—even the broken treadmill—have been cleaned out, and it looks like the floor has been vacuumed . . . or leaf blown, considering how much debris there was. They must've been at this for hours.

"Hey Mona." Jane nods at me like this is all very normal. She directs her attention to Carmen. "Here, why don't we let Mona decide? Carmen thinks we can have people throw darts in this room. I told him that's actually fucking twisted."

"It's a very common thing for a rec room." Carmen wipes the sweat off his brow, exasperation sealed onto his face.

"It's a communal space. Why don't we just get some fucking axes to throw at one another at this point?"

"What's going on here?" I try to keep my voice light.

"Doesn't it look amazing?" Jane grins brightly. "I was going to ask you first, but I was down here making the plans and Carmen volunteered to take some of the junk for his next dump run and it all kind of happened."

Carmen puffs out his chest proudly. "Reckon we can throw a little shindig here by the weekend at this rate. One with darts—a very normal communal activity everyone loves."

Jane seems to suppress the urge to roll her eyes, but holds a polite smile.

And shit. It comes back to me. Last night, while Jane and I were lurking for the Panty Thief, she suggested this place wouldn't be such a piece of shit if we simply cleared out the junk and set it up a bit better. I told her she had a point.

I didn't expect her to roll with it.

But holy shit—this is *so much* work already.

Carmen pipes in, "If it's not going to be darts, how about I try and get ourselves a foosball table?"

Jane rubs her chin. "Hmm, might be too big, but let's think about it. For now, why don't we just get it clean?"

Carmen nods and heads out of the room with a pep in his step that make his work gloves bounce against his hips.

"He's actually a really nice guy," Jane mutters. "Definitely not our perp. We should formally add him to the force."

I nod noncommittally at this. "I can't believe how much you've done." I try not to look too concerned as Jane places the clipboard on the pool table.

Jane's smile is full of pride. "Do you think Irene would be okay if we added a coat of paint to these walls?"

I think about the impending sale. I can't exactly have people working down here while people are viewing the place. "Hmm, I'm not sure. Doesn't seem like there's much ventilation down here to be painting."

"Good point." She nods. "I'll have Carmen pick up some masks if we go that route. Does a light green seem nice? Something bright, since there's no windows?"

Carmen returns, awkwardly carrying a giant red bucket heaping with soapy water that's splashing everywhere. "Figure with the three of us, we could get the baseboards clean within the hour," he mutters.

"Great!" Jane grabs a giant yellow sponge from the bucket and squeezes most of the water out. "We were just discussing that we'll need masks when we paint."

"Noted." Carmen grins, putting down the bucket to join Jane, who's kneeling to scrub the baseboards.

"Hey, guys." Freaking Norm appears at the top of the stairs. He's in a clean grey shirt and navy pants. "I looked through my cards and I have tons of extras. And my mom's gin boards. I don't know if those are the kind of games you meant?"

Carmen and Jane both nod at him like it's not weird he just came here and said those words. "That's so great of you. Thanks Norm." Jane smiles. "We're going to paint the room before we set up the new game rack, so hold on to that for now."

Norm's face goes red. "No . . . no problem." He smiles just a little bit and speaks more confidently this time. "I'll bring them by when you're ready." He disappears down the hall.

Our resident shut-in Norm is even contributing to this? It's official, this has gone too far. Jane and Carmen are each wrapped up in wiping the walls in their respective corners. I have to say something. I have to stop this runaway train. I can't have people down here painting while Lana's clients come to view the place. Not only is it a lot of wasted work for a building that is about to sell, it might raise suspicions if Jane and Carmen catch Lana literally leading buyers around the place. This is why I should always keep my big mouth shut.

I have to do something. I have to stop even one more ounce of goodwill being exchanged among these tenants before their world blows up.

"Guys, I hate to say it, but I think we should wait on doing anything more."

"What?" They both turn to me.

"I just mean that the . . . we don't know if there's asbestos—"

"Don't worry, asbestos isn't in this building," Carmen mutters, like he's encountered it enough times to be an expert.

"Did Mr. Chaudhry say how big the coffee maker he has was?" Jane asks Carmen.

"Not that I can recall. Probably just a standard one."

I need to stop this. I'm about to start trying some bullshit about the room not being fire-code compliant—which probably won't work since it was once a rec room anyway, when my phone buzzes.

First viewing scheduled for tomorrow night! Buyer is very interested, so I think it's more a formality. Don't worry, clients will stick to lobby and basement and just Irene's suite. Everything will be all set?

Fuck.

I was so close. Yet somehow the timing couldn't be worse.

But I need everything to go seamlessly for Lana. I need her to want to keep working with me, all the way back to my job.

I tap to hit reply: Great! Everything's all set! Should we start telling tenants, if you're going to bring viewers in?

The reply comes fast: Not yet. These deals can take time to close or fall through. We need to keep everything calm until we know for certain we have a buyer.

Carmen throws the sponge in the bucket and pulls out his phone. “Shit, I just realized, I gotta leave now if I want to make it to the dump.” He angles his head in my direction. “Hey Mona, you mind taking over for the last wall?”

“Sure.” I smile and take the sponge. Then I start cleaning the wall in the rec room for the building that will likely not be ours by tomorrow.

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Boxed Inside

Back in my apartment, I finally feel like myself again after showering for a little longer than I normally would've. When I was cleaning the rec room baseboards, the sponge juices kept dripping everywhere and dispersing micro particles of mouse poop onto my body and soul.

I've settled onto my couch with a slice of peanut butter toast hoping to recover from the rec room ordeal. The whole time I was cleaning, two streams of thought were floating in my mind:

I'm going to have to figure out how to get these people out of the rec room tomorrow evening (apparently that's when they're planning to paint primer on the walls).

We're all going to be moving out soon.

I lock eyes with Alice, who seems to find my plight all very amusing. It's going to be a real chore to move her little bowl into a new place. She'll probably panic the whole time and for weeks after.

Luckily, looking around the place, at least Alice's bowl will be the worst of it. All the rest of my furniture and clothes should be painless and fit into one truckload.

It's my poor neighbors who will have a tougher moving day. I don't have a bunch of plants like Jane, and unlike Carmen, furniture and junk aren't stuffed into every closet of mine.

My throat sticks as I swallow the last bite of toast. But I'll have bring the box in my hall closet.

I should at least open that before then.

I ease out of my couch and make my way to the closet and pull the door open. There it sits, benign, still tucked on the top shelf, poking out from behind the wide-brimmed fedora I've been holding on to lest it comes back into style one day.

The box slides out easily. My heartbeat picks up as I take it down. His writing scrolled across the brown packing paper he'd neatly wrapped it in.

Again, something catches in my throat like peanut butter at the sight of the words: *With love, Dad.*

I see his eyes first. Then, instantly I'm taken back to that day at the coffee shop when he gave it to me. He'd been sitting with it taking over the table. He told me it was something he'd been putting together for a while, and it was how his eyes looked as he gave it to me. So sparked with a glimmer of hope.

I hated it all.

I didn't want to open it there in that coffee shop, so I shoved it under the table. "Thanks, I'll open it later," I'd said. "Easier to carry wrapped."

His grin took over his whole face as his fingers twitched nervously. "Sounds great, kiddo."

I left it on my dresser that night, and for three weeks I was so busy that I forgot to open it. Too busy to meet him for coffee again. To get to the hospital on time before he left.

Then he was dead, and this box became a thread to him. Something that I had left that was still unsaid. It became his last words.

I stuffed it in my closet the day of his funeral.

Now, I rest the box on my dresser. "I guess it's later," I mutter to nobody.

I take a breath and try to swallow out the tightness pulling on my throat as I peel the tape off the end of the box. But as soon as I hear the sound of the paper tearing, it's like a weight presses my chest, constricting my air just enough.

Nope. I let out a breath and slide the box from the dresser and stuff it back in my closet in one swift motion. Then, I shuffle my hat in front of it and close the door.

I lock eyes with myself in the scratched mirror of my closet door for a second, before quickly averting my gaze.

I'll open it later—at my new place. That makes the most sense.

And I have far *more* pressing things to worry about. I have a whole tour of people coming to this building tomorrow while Carmen dresses in whatever he considers his “painting clothes.”

When night comes, I end up tossing and turning in bed. It's because I still don't know what to do about the rec room reno.

And nothing to do with the box in the closet next to me.

“Hello?” My mom answers right away. Her hair is clipped back in some mad updo, wisps flying around her head. The peach-painted walls in the background indicate that she's at home for once.

Finally, we can talk.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Mona, what is it? Are you okay?” My mom sets the phone down so that I'm staring at the ceiling.

“I was just calling to say hi. How are you?”

“Just saying hi? What is this?” My mom's head bobs back and forth over the camera. I guess I should've expected this to be confusing. She looks into the screen more clearly, her face crunching with concern. “Are you at home still today? Are you on a long vacation?”

“That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about.” How do I explain that I miss my dad and want to talk about it with my mom. How do I ask her to be there when I open the box so that I don't have to be alone when I've never asked her for anything like this before?

I guess I just have to say the words. I inhale: “Mom, I am kind of on leave, because . . . well. You know when Dad died we never really—”

A groan comes from behind my mom, followed by some choice Farsi cursing. My mom moves back into frame for a second and carries the phone down the hallway.

“What's going on over there?”

“Ah!” My mom says brightly. “I've put a new hair removal cream on Auntie's kos. It's state of the art and better than waxing. Straight from Iran. But”—her eyes shift—“It's burning a little. Anyway, no problem at all.” Her voice brightens while the camera pans to my aunt (just her face, thank god), who, if I'm being honest, looks like she's struggling to find the will to go on.

My mom twists the screen back to her face. “So, you are taking time off to feel sad about your dad, is that it?”

I’ve been struggling to have this conversation with her, but there it is, neatly expressed with no emotion whatsoever. She knows what I’m trying to say. She’s just not emotionally there with me.

“Well, yeah,” I try, already getting the sinking feeling this is worthless. “Or, I guess, not quite sad. It’s more that I never really processed a lot about the way things are with all of us and so—”

“Are they still paying you?” Her eyes widen with worry. “Mona! You should warn me if you’re fired. I shouldn’t have imported this cream if the money is getting tight.”

And it’s like all the anxiety I’d build up falls like a stack of blocks. Because it’s not going to be anything. I don’t know why I ever thought she could be my mom for once.

“No, Mom, it’s just a vacation. I should be going back on the—”

A loud groan interrupts my train of thought.

“Oh, that means Auntie is good and ready!” My mom’s eyes brighten. “Do you want to come over for kabob? You can borrow this cream.”

“I’m okay!” I grin, but she’s hung up before I even answered.

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Tour de Building

The diner is devoid of customers when I enter. Every table is clean, and the muted TV is playing *Just for Laughs Gags*. Sami is behind the counter holding out an iPad, doing what looks to be some kind of inventory counting on cans of soda stacked on the back shelf, deep stress lines between his brows as he mouths numbers to himself. The sweet scent of something baking lingers in the air.

His expression brightens as soon as he catches sight of me, all the stress fading in an instant. “Hey, Mon!”

I take a seat, slowly releasing the air from the original stool I drunkenly sat in weeks ago. Back then, I was a stranger to this place, but today it’s sort of like coming into a welcoming home, one that I never realized I wanted to be a part of.

A curious twist pulls between his brows. “It’s a little late for coffee and a little early for Ernest—so what is the reason for this rogue visit you’re blessing me with during what many diner proprietors call: poutine hour?”

I grin. “I’ll just have a water.”

“Our specialty.” He smoothly fills a glass with ice water with one hand in pretty much a single move, before sliding it in front of me. “I’m guessing that’s not what you really came for?”

He’s right. But for the hundredth time since the idea for how to get the tenants out of the rec room *finally* came to me (while I was picking up

Ernest's afternoon poop of all things!), the better part of my mind has me second-guessing it all.

"I have kind of a big favor to ask," I start, silencing my conscience.

This is the only plan that could work. I have to try it.

"Oh yeah?" Sami eyes me curiously.

I nod. "But first, are you and Abu having cooking lessons tonight?" I search out Abu, who is normally in the kitchen around this time.

Sami shakes his head. "Abu has asked to take a break because they're, and I quote, sucking all the joy from the short life he has left since I'm always being an imbecile with questions."

"Are you serious?" I try to suppress my grin as I picture Abu saying all that—and it tracks.

"That's what he claims." Sami gives me an exasperated head shake as he pulls out some glassware from the plastic rack on the counter and stacks them neatly on the shelf against the back wall. "Convenient he happens to have a mehmoon to go to with my mom tonight. We'll resume next week."

I giggle as the relief swipes in. Canceling their lessons was the one thing I couldn't ask Sami to do.

Sami finishes out the row of glasses and starts wiping the counter. "So what's the favor you'd like to call in?"

I try to keep my voice bright and casual. "Would it be possible to have a really quick town hall? It's a bit of an emergency."

"An emergency town hall. Well, I'm intrigued." Sami waggles his brows. "When are you thinking? Tomorrow could work since Thursdays are usually slow, Friday could work as well if we—"

"I need to have it tonight—say, six o'clock?" Which is exactly half an hour before the time Lana will arrive with people to view the building.

Sami stops his wiping. "Oh, wow. That seems a little short notice."

I nod, "I know, But you wouldn't have to set up anything! I just need a meeting place."

"I meant it seemed short notice getting people here." Sami's expression drops. "You know how last time the turnout wasn't exactly high?"

"Fair, but this time there's a real topic to discuss. It looks like the residents have banded together to fix the rec room, and I just want to make sure everyone is on the same page before they get too deep into the . . . renovations. I want to stop them spending money on things this early."

Sami nods as he wipes the already clean counter. “Ah, the rec room. That’s been the talk of this place since this morning. Carmen said there was an embargo on darts?”

I nod. “Yes, that’s exactly the kind of thing we need to establish some rules about during the . . . town hall. I don’t want them putting in too much work just yet, until we have the all-clear from Irene.” I can’t quite make eye contact with Sami. Because the truth is, all I need is for everyone to leave the damn room for about an hour. But it seems that everyone is a little too excited about the rec room to stop working on it. To think it’s been ages since the basement was used, and now’s when everyone is *choosing* to pile in there.

Sami nods. “Makes sense, but wouldn’t it be easier to discuss the rec room plans in the rec room? No need to drag everyone here?”

“That’s exactly the point!” I say, my voice unfortunately strained. “It would be impossible to have a productive conversation about the place while they’re standing right in it. I want the ground rules to be established on . . . neutral ground.” I smile as confidently as a politician who sort of said nothing with a whole lot of words. On the inside I’m feeling like a tool.

“I see.” Sami’s possibly suppressing a smirk. If this doesn’t work, I’ll have no choice but to cancel on Lana, lest the tenants see her showing clients around. The whole thing I’d been working for this entire time will blow up when Lana’s client runs into Carmen in a fucking tool belt.

“Okay, sure. Let’s do it.”

“Yes, Sami!” I don’t mean to literally clap him on the bicep again, but the instant my hand lands on his arm, our eyes meet.

“Mona, you know I’m happy to help.” His eyes soften on me with a little too much fondness. When I pull my hand back, he clears his throat and nods to my almost-empty water. “Can I grab you another?”

I shake my head. “I should go get prepped for tonight. I’ll come by after Ernest’s walk.”

“Are you sure? It’s on the house, for my favorite pseudo-super.”

I shake my head. I know he’s joking, but the guilt seems to cling to my skin like the frosting on the cinnamon buns in the display case. I force a grin and finish the last of my water.

Already this building mixer is different from the last one, in that by the time I'm opening the door to Corner Coffee there are already half a dozen people waiting. Jane, Carmen, and Fancy Widow are seated high on their stools, while Fighting Couple share a booth with Divorced Dad across from them. Sami is running around in the background, refreshing drinks and adding little plates of appetizers to the tables.

Who knew that a shitty room in the basement that was basically a mouse bathroom could evoke so much interest?

The instant I make my way over to the lively group, Fighting Couple Guy, aka Marcus, summons me over with this douchey little hand wave. "Hello, Mona, is it?" Marcus asks, without pulling his focus from the withering straw in his glass.

"Yes, that's me," I answer.

"Can you buy new laundry machines? These old ones are making my clothes smell weird." His partner Janine nods while I try to keep a straight face.

"Well, I mean that's not quite in the budget right now," I awkwardly answer. "And the issue might be the detergent you're using?" I resist adding, *Or the hot dogs you're infusing your life with?* "But it's something I can keep on my radar."

Carmen raps his knuckles on the counter. "I believe this town hall is about selecting the paint color for the rec room."

"I've got swatches!" Jane isn't joking. She holds up a literal binder as thick as a phone book with five stacks of Behr swatches rubber banded together.

"The online mailer said this town hall is for any concern—and I've been wanting to talk about the geese since last month!" Fancy Widow calls out.

"What on God's green earth do you have against the geese?" Carmen nudges her. "The beautiful songs they squawk? You want me to make you a record?"

"You're too much!" She slaps him in the arm playfully.

Sami's eyes find mine from the other side of the room. He raises his brows in a suggestively knowing look about those two.

I suppress my giggle.

"So, for the rec room, let's start by sharing everyone's wildest dreams . . ." Jane starts in on all her ambitions for a space that sounds about as nice as a premium lounge at an airport. And this is good. Really. They

just need to keep up the lively conversation for the next hour. So long as they don't actually do too much more work before it sells, it's okay.

The turnout doesn't include everyone in the building. If I'm calculating things right, Uniform Family has two members at work right now, and the son will hopefully be staying in this evening. And there's Never Here Guy in 3A who is never home that I almost forgot existed at this point. So Norm is the only one who might run into the tour.

I send him a quick slack message. Come grab a snack at the diner! We've got plenty and we'd love to have you visit!

After dropping off an orange soda in front of Carmen, Sami makes his way to me. "Look at this bustling mixer you've thrown." He nudges my side and the warmth from his arm swoops through me.

"Sami, you didn't have to do all this." I nod to the plates of appetizers he's set out.

He shrugs. "Eh, that's just a few basic snacks. For a diner of this caliber, it's nothing." He grins softly at me.

"Well, I appreciate it." I nudge him back. "And I appreciate a diner of this caliber for hosting us."

"Now what can I get you to drink?"

"I'll take a soda water."

"Soda water for the Super!" Sami slings his cloth over his shoulders and heads behind the counter.

"Right, everyone," I call out. "Thanks so much for coming. As you know, we've got a few pressing matters to discuss as we look to improve the rec room. I wanted to pause all work until I have assurance we can renovate the room. But really, this discussion is bigger than that. This is about your building, and I'm here to listen. Feel free to bring up anything and everything right now—nothing is ever too small, and I want the chance to hear from everyone." I put on my politician smile again, one that says: "Keep talking. I'm listening." So long as I can keep everyone talking here, and away from the building, and so long as they aren't renovating, they can say any bullshit they fancy—

"I'll start, then." Divorced Dad has the gait of someone who is doing us all a freaking favor. "I think we should find some time to address the sounds the pipes make."

"Yes!" I nod enthusiastically—not entirely sure what he's on about. "This is something I noticed too."

“What sound? The water flowing through them?” Jane counters. “How is that not a waste of time when we have a lot of planning for the rec room to get through.”

“Not all of us enjoy recreation,” Fancy Widow adds.

This is all great stuff. I breathe deep and let the chaos fill me with hope.

Because thankfully, this room full of weirdos can at least just . . . talk. They fill up the next fifteen minutes just trying to establish *what* we’re meant to be discussing, when the diner bell dings. And all chatter grinds to a literal halt as Norm pauses at the threshold insecurely, wide-eyed and pale like he’s thinking of backing out.

This could not be going better. I wave enthusiastically. “So glad you came!”

“Hey, Norm, there’s a seat right here for you!” Sami adds.

He’s pointing to the stool next to Jane, who grins just enough. “You’re just in time to discuss the rec room we’ve been planning.”

The relief that paints his expression is palpable as he makes his way over, temples slightly coloring.

According to the diner’s wall clock, the tour should’ve started ten minutes ago. While the tenants discuss the parkade lines, I take the opportunity to check my phone and see if Lana’s started the tour.

Immediately my stomach drops at the messages from Lana filling my screen.

LANA WINSTON: I don’t have the keys to the basement facilities! Can you pop over and let my tour view the furnace room?

LANA WINSTON: Mona?!

LANA WINSTON: The client is insisting they need to see the furnace room or they won’t close

LANA WINSTON: They aren’t willing to re-schedule

LANA WINSTON: Mona where are you?

And shit. Shit shit shit shit.

I’d forgotten that certain areas are locked without the master set. Maybe I can slip out?

“Mona, what do you think?” Carmen’s voice pipes through, breaking me from my reverie. Crap—everyone is staring at me. I have no idea what they were discussing. “I’ll look into it,” I say, hoping that’s vague enough to apply-all.

Jane literally claps her hands together. “I always wanted to have a rooftop garden.”

“No growing fucking beets, though—I hate them,” Marcus for some reason just has to say.

“Wouldn’t we grow our own things in our own plot?” Divorced Dad somewhat intelligently adds.

I take a step back and look through the window. I just need to slip out for a second, but there’s no way I can without being noticed. Another message flashes on my screen.

Mona are you here? They’re going to leave.

And crap. My eyes dart through the room full of tenants. I have to act now. I make my way to Sami and mutter: “I have to slip out for a minute, can you please just take notes?”

Sami’s brow shifts up. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah I just . . . I need to use the, um . . .” *What* do I need to do? I can’t say I need the bathroom since they obviously have one here, and I don’t want Sami thinking I need to specifically go to my own bathroom if I can avoid anything that leads to him picturing me sharting this early on in our friendship. “I, um, just remembered I left my straightener plugged in and now it’s all I can focus on.”

I haven’t used a straightener in years—my hair is fully curly right now—but thankfully the handy anxiety of forgetting to unplug it still lives in my bones for when I need it.

“Right.” Sami nods hesitantly. “I can take notes. Go take care of that.”

“Perfect! Back in a sec.” I rush out the door and my feet pound the pavement. I make it to the building just as Lana and her crew are finding their way through the front vestibule. “Hello!” I call and wave politely.

Lana startles before pasting her plastic smile on her face. “And this is the manager with the key now!” She barely hides her wince at my obvious panting. “Mona, are you okay?”

“Yes, sorry I missed the messages, but I’m here now.” I put out my hands to the man and woman who stand together in similarly beige-shaded blazers. “I’m Mona.”

“Mona, these are my incredible clients: Robin and Missy,” Lana introduces.

I shake each of their hands. “Let’s get that furnace room opened.”

Twenty-one minutes later, and I’m having what could be a nervous breakdown. My hair is stuck to my forehead, and my mouth is dryer than a bag of cotton balls. But still, Robin and Misty are standing around, casually chatting in the front vestibule of the building.

After leading these beige-clad drones through the furnace room, they insisted on seeing every other room in the basement. They also suddenly wanted to see my apartment, where Ernest ended up stealing the show, before then deciding that yes, they would like to go back to Irene’s place. Every time I tried to leave them and Lana, they seemed to find a new way to keep me from doing so. Asking me if I liked living here, and the demographics of the tenants. If it weren’t for the party I was both hosting and ditching, I suppose their endless questions would be reassuring. Their interest in the tenants probably means Robin and Missy want to preserve at least some of the current leases.

Lana, likely sensing my angst, tried several times to let me go, but she couldn’t exactly tell Missy or Robin to fuck off when they asked if I liked the neighborhood.

Sami has sent me several inquiring texts, and I even got one from Jane, but they stopped coming in five minutes ago, which means I need to get back there ASAP.

Finally, after cracking a joke about ROI that wasn’t even a little drole, Robin finally says something good: “Well, I think this about marks our time. We’ll be in touch.” Misty nods at his side—she’s been doing *a lot* of nodding.

“Thank you so much for coming by!” Lana starts her handshake tour.

And when Robin comes to shake my hand once again, my stomach drops. Because behind his head, I catch a view out the front window. It appears that both Carmen and Norm are making their way up the sidewalk.

Fuck.

I’m going to shit my pants.

Misty takes my hand, the final handshake in our round robin, before they start to move toward the lobby door—where they’ll run directly into Carmen and Norm. So I yell, “The back alley! You guys can’t leave without checking out the hidden gem back there.”

Lana furrows her brows together. “I’m sure they can picture the back alley, Mona.” Her voice is lighthearted, but layered with a terrifying undertone.

“Not this one! Come on, Robin! Let’s go, Missy! I’ll race you!” Then I actually start running.

And Robin and Misty look at each other before jogging after me.

Finally, I get Missy and Robin safely off the premises without detection. I’m not proud to say I spent over seven minutes showing off the fire escape, and discussed where the wires meet the building, and other useless fucking things. When I make it back inside the diner, the place has pretty much cleared out. Soft acoustic music is playing from the jukebox, while Sami is carrying a round tray full of spent glassware to the back, his arm muscles working overtime. Fighting Couple are just leaving, holding hands as they ease out the booth. Marcus grabs his lanyard of keys and stuffs it into the pocket of his khaki pants.

I wave my goodbyes to them and take a seat at the counter. “Hey Sami, I’m so sorry about that—shit, I missed it all?”

His expression is worried. “Everything okay?” He rubs his hair back and it falls over his eyes a moment later.

“Yeah, I just, I was feeling a little queasy when I got home. Maybe I need to drink more water in life.”

“Come and sit. We have water to hydrate you, and I was just making myself dinner.” His voice is lighter now.

I take the stool across from him. “This is starting to be my favorite seat.”

The sincere grin fills his whole face, all the previous concern fading away. “You’re starting to be my favorite customer.”

“Bet you say that to everyone.”

“Everyone except for Carmen. Him I take for granted.”

I giggle. “So what did I miss? Man, I shouldn’t have left.”

“Honestly, not much.” He ruffles his hair, smiling to himself. “I organized a vote on the color for the rec room. They had to have a recount twice before they decided on a lighter green, but I told them to hold off on buying anything until you gave them the all-clear. Then they started wondering where you were. When it became apparent you weren’t coming back as quickly as planned, I gave them snacks and told them to discuss

among themselves any other building issues. A lot of the things were complaints about interpersonal things like noises through the floors—nothing you could work out. I think it was healing for them to be able to communicate with one another like that, though, for what it's worth." Sami's grin is cheeky. "They pretty much left after cleaning me out for snacks. A few were eager to finish tidying the rec room. But some are going to message you a few questions about the garden."

I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for Sami. "Wow, Sami. You're the best." I pause. "And I was such a piece of shit, leaving you to handle that."

"Eh, it was nothing. It's just nice to see neighbors caring about the community. And that's thanks to you."

I look away from the revenant look he's giving me. His voice thickens just a little. "Can I get you a glass of celebratory wine for a job well done?"

"A wine would be lovely," I say as brightly as I can muster.

Sami returns with a bottle and two wineglasses. "So, this is my first time attempting this stew but I think it's a banger. It might be better enjoyed over there."

My eyes follow where he's looking, toward the back booth. We've never eaten at a table together—always on either side of the counter, while he was standing and I was sitting. The soft way he's looking at me brings a flutter to my stomach. It's just a table; it doesn't make a difference.

"Yeah, sure," I say, standing up.

"Just give me a few minutes," Sami says. "I'm going to shut down the kitchen so we can chill. Wine and industrial kitchens don't mix."

"I've heard that before," I joke.

Sami disappears to the back and returns with two plates of steaming stew on rice—quickly enough that he must have had it already prepared. It occurs to me that he's been planning for us to eat together this whole time. "So, I made a beef and eggplant stew that's sort of like a French bourguignon and a Persian eggplant khoresh fusion. This would appall Abu, but you're like the only person who might appreciate it."

The rich scent of the beef stew deepened by red wine and saffron wafts through my nostrils and sends a warmth through my insides.

"Sami, this is amazing of you." I put my hand to my heart. "I have never eaten so well in my life since we became friends. Should I start calling you Chef?"

“Eh. No need for that.” He shakes his head, his eyes darting to his feet. “This is my hobby, so I’m just happy to have someone to eat with. And I figured you’d be hungry after the town hall.” I note the nervous way he raps his fingers on the table.

“Well, this is great.” I scrape up a steaming forkful. It’s so beautiful. I take the first bite and it’s like my tastebuds are being born for the first time. Sami’s watching my reaction to the dish carefully. No one’s ever taken care of me like this. Eventually, Sami will realize I was never worth it. But I’m overcome with a need to make sure he knows how much I appreciate it. Before thinking too hard, I reach across the table and pat the top of his hand. “Sami, it’s like you took a part of my heart and made it into food.”

“Whoa, that’s the best one so far. I should put that on a T-shirt.” His lips twitch. “The whole time I was cooking I was thinking how you’d react.”

I picture him in the kitchen, thinking about me even when I wasn’t there. And again I’m overcome with this feeling . . . a need I don’t quite understand, to make sure he knows. I lean closer. “Sami, seriously, thank you. For everything tonight. The way you’ve kind of been so welcoming and helpful to me, ever since I was a total wreck at your place of business, has been . . . just really . . . cool.”

“Of course.” His voice thickens, his smile a little shy. “You’ve done a lot for me too.” He pauses, then adds, “For the whole community.”

His gaze is too admiring. I’ve not earned this at all. I have to look away. I only wish there was a world where I wasn’t completely destroying a little building he cares about, basically the only place with customers who still come to the diner.

I wish we’d met before all this happened. Before the secrets, before I knew he’d eventually hate me.

But then again, back then I never would have given him a chance. I would have completely missed how amazing he is.

“I’m glad I was craving cheese fries that night,” I whisper, before thinking better of it. But it’s one of the few things I can be honest about with him. “If that’s what led to me eating this stew, it was totally worth it.”

He laughs. “You came in like a hurricane that night. It drives me mad that you’ve been living so close to my world for five years and we never spoke.” Again, there’s a look in his eyes, like he’s seeing the only thing in the world worth looking at.

I don’t deserve it.

I shove another gigantic bite into my mouth to hide my shame. If I hadn't had a complete meltdown, I never would have really seen him. Never would have cared about any of these people. But becoming fond of them doesn't change a thing. It just means everything is going to hurt more.

But I'm used to running past heartbreak, aren't I? I can survive this on my own. I've made it this far.

I swallow the last of my food as Sami tells me about the time the video store that used to be across the street ruined his attempts to get R-rated movies, because Abu paid them off. I giggle and let myself fall into this moment, push away all the things I know are coming. If Lana sells the building to Missy and Robin, maybe it'll all be over tomorrow. But sometimes it feels like there's this other world I'm occupying where Sami and I make sense. I feel it in the small moments like this, when we're eating or walking Ernest. And every time I'm pulled back out of that world it's like being hit by a brick.

I don't want to leave it just yet.

After he clears our plates, he holds out his glass for a toast and our cups clink.

"To your favorite customer," I announce.

"Not true." Sami shakes his head, then lowers his voice. "You're more than that to me."

His eyes run over mine and it feels like I've never been *seen* before.

A rush flutters in my chest.

He sets his glass back onto the table and bends closer. I can't pull back, even though I'm fully aware what I'm doing. What *we're* doing.

And it's automatic, like ink spreading over paper, as he bends closer and I tilt to him. Our glasses are left on the table and our lips lock

I have to stop. It's not fair to him.

Except it doesn't matter when his lips touch mine.

It's brief, just a quick brush. He pulls back an inch, exhaling softly, and I feel his eyes sweeping over me. I realize mine have closed. I hold very still, taking shallow breaths. I feel the warmth of him nudge closer again, and our noses brush against each other. His hands come to my shoulders.

His lips touch mine again. And then press closer. To feel more.

And every step of the way I tell myself I should stop. But then—his hands, his mouth, the way he says my name—each touch pulls me deeper, makes the lie harder to hold.

This is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Like time doesn't exist when I'm with him. Like I'm allowed to just *be*—no masks, no weight, just . . . me. And the way he looks at me—like I'm something precious, like I'm wanted—it undoes me.

My body melts in his arms, and for once, I let it. I let myself disappear into him, into the feeling I didn't know was possible.

I let myself fall apart.

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The Morning After

I wake up in Sami's bed, wrapped under a giant blanket. I nudge myself up onto my forearms and look around at his things. In the corner is a shelf filled with an impressive collection of cookbooks. I grin when to my delight I noticed the spine for *Microwave Cooking for One*. Sami must've taken it from the little library.

His nightstand is overflowing with used notebooks and journals with handwritten, dog-earned pages.

Sami shifts beside me, rising to see what I'm looking at. "What do you write in there?" I ask.

"Mostly things about my customers. Their orders, their favorite dishes, stuff like that."

My eyes widen. "Are you serious?"

He nods and continues, "Their hopes and their dreams. Whether they'd survive a zombie apocalypse. Who among them I would die for. You know—the usual." He wags his brows. "I plan to compile all the data to choose an heir for my restaurant empire. You just earned yourself some major points last night."

I jab him in the ribs with my pointer finger.

He cups my hand. "Okay, it's just recipes." He grins and leans closer to me, nose tickling the shell of my ear. "I should get a real system for them."

“I like your place,” I whisper. His entire home exudes this warm, lived-in charm, the kind that comes from decades of family life layered together. Compared to my own space, even the simple touches—like plants in the windows and art adorning the walls—are enough to leave me impressed. There’s an emphasis on comfort, with lots of thick rugs, warm wood tones, and soft blankets. I burrow deeper into his pillow and add, “I *really* like your bed.”

I guess I always pictured him living in one apartment with his parents, but above the restaurant stairwell is a hallway that splits into two separate units. Apparently Sami’s family rented this place out to various tenants through the years before Sami took over the rental. So at least I don’t have to worry about Abu and Ava coming home and seeing us.

Sami reaches for his phone on the nightstand and reads something. “Abu is handling opening this morning.” He rolls back to me, his warm lips brushing my temple. “But unfortunately, we have to take Ernest out. I’ll make us coffee.”

“You can’t make me leave.” I curl closer to him, underneath the ditch of his shoulder. If I leave this bed, if I leave the warmth of his arms, if I leave the coziness of his apartment . . .

He pulls one of my hands into his own, interlocking our fingers. I point to a scar on his wrist. “What happened here?”

“Kitchen guy things,” he murmurs. I’ve noticed he never refers to himself as a chef.

“I see. And is that callous from knife things too?” I touch a rougher patch of skin on the inside of his thumb.

“I believe so.” He shifts and sits up. “We should get going. Ernest’s circadian rhythm is eerily good.”

“Yes, Chef,” I reply. But as soon I get out of here, then time will start to pass. I’ll be letting everything I’ve set in motion, everything I’d been working so hard for, unfold.

He twists around me to grab my shirt from where it ended up slung over the headboard and hands it to me. I take it reluctantly while he stands up to get a white tee from his drawer. Once we’re both fully dressed, Sami heads into his kitchen to make us coffee and I follow him, sitting at the little bistro-size table in the corner.

That’s when my phone buzzes from the oak side table I’d left it on, new messages flashing across the screen with each second.

Only one person texts me like that. Of course, all the messages are from my mom. I reach for it and hold back the urge to sigh as my screen is covered in a wallpaper of:

MOM: It's a big emergency

MOM: Urgently!

MOM: Mona. Please. Mommy needs you.

The sigh I let out comes automatically. It's probably something minor, but despite all my logic telling me to maintain boundaries, I can't bear to let her spiral. "Hey, Sami, I gotta make a quick call."

"Of course."

I sink into the super-plush navy couch in his living room. Before I can dial, my mom's FaceTime request comes in. I answer and her voice fills the room.

"There you are. It's a big emergency, something bad."

Sami's ears perk as he pours the coffee into two thermoses.

My heart drops into my stomach.

"I'm getting the car oil changed, and this guy is saying we need to change the brake pads because they're not road legal, but they make things up. Should I sue this kir?"

Sami can't suppress his smirk, probably cause he understands she just called the guy a dick. I'm sure the guy on the other end can also guess she wasn't exactly complimenting him in Farsi.

This is something my dad would have helped with. I don't know shit about this kind of thing, but she's about to get into an argument with a service worker again, and the weariness is too much to bear. I'm about to reason with her casually like I always do, but as I look at her face I'm suddenly so tired of it all. A wave of dread overwhelms me as I think about the many years in which this will continue.

"Mom," I sigh. "I don't know much about this."

"But can you check into the laws? I can't afford these prices."

"It doesn't work like that. I'll pay for it, okay?" The words come out almost against my will—from the part of me that has zero fight left. I guess I was due for a financial blow—the streak we were on of her *not* asking me went on long enough.

Sami walks past me to grab Ernest's leash off the hook on the wall. A tiny bit of his shoulder manages to pass through the frame on the screen.

“Is that a man in the room?” She’s peering at my screen deeply.

“No!” Sami looks at me questioningly. “I’m just at my local diner,” I joke, half smiling at him.

“Are you on a date?” I furiously shake my head, begging Sami with my eyes to forgive me. “Yes you are! What kind of date runs away when your mom is asking to see him?”

Before I can make this stop forever, Sami comes closer. Grimacing, I turn the screen just enough to capture his arm. Sami leans forward and says, “Sami Zeker, here, nice to meet you.”

And my heart tightens at his polite mom-friendly smile.

My mom’s eyes light up even more than Sami’s. She switches to Farsi and Sami replies. They break out into laughter, while I stand there hating all of it. Having a guy around who my mom can speak to without me is a whole other layer.

He catches my eye and switches to English. “What shop are you at?”

She mentions the name and Sami says, “Oh, they’re in Crowfoot, right? Yes, I’ve heard of them. They’ve got a good reputation.”

My mom speaks excitedly in Farsi again, but Sami replies in English, still watching me out of the corner of his eye. “Yes well, I have a little restaurant near Mona’s building. We’ve been friends for a while. We just had dinner—” He stops short and winces at his mistake, “I meant, breakfast.”

The dread that floods through me is immediate. Sami and I are going to be over the second it becomes public Lana’s sold the building, but my mom is never going to shut up about this for the rest of my life. I shouldn’t have slept with him. I knew this all along.

“And are things serious? Mona is always working.”

The cheeky grin Sami gives me is a nightmare. Before Sami can answer, my Mom rapid-fires another question: “What do you do for work?”

“I own a restaurant.”

“A restaurant! I love food!” But then her head turns just slightly off-screen, and she yells, “This guy who also owns a business says you can probably knock one hundred off your prices.”

Enough. I take the phone and hang up on her. “Shit, Sami, I’m so sorry about that.”

His eyes search mine, puzzled and a little wary. “Was she selling me out to another business owner somehow?”

I nod. "Pretty much, yeah."

It is kind of a relief when he shakes his head with a dumbfounded grin.

"I'm sorry, I usually try not to expose people to my parents." I pause, then amend, "Or I guess just my mom now."

"Oh, don't worry. I mean, you've endured enough harassment from weirdo man who raised me." Sami's grin is wide.

"That's different." I shake my head. "Abu is a national treasure. And he at least has his life together. With my parents, it's like I was always fixing and figuring things out for them. It just never ends." I exhale—I haven't talked to anyone about this in such a long time. The words come tumbling out. "I just, I never felt like I had a home. I couldn't have friends over. I was embarrassed to go with them. My mom, she always believed him when he said he was better, but I knew the truth." I shake my head at the memories.

"You mean your dad?"

My head flies up. I didn't mean to say that much. "Sorry, I'm getting worked up."

"Don't be sorry." Sami takes my hand and rubs my wrist. "I'm listening."

His gaze deepens on mine. "I know you don't share a lot with just anyone, and I like being that someone, so please . . . rant away."

And it's like his words, his comforting touch, unlocks something inside me I've kept buried for longer than I can remember. "It wasn't just the drinking, it was *everything* he did—every missed event, all the money he wasted. I felt so angry. Like so angry that even when he was sober and working hard to stay that way, even when I had the chance to forgive him, I"—my voice tightens as I shake my head—"I just had to get out of there. As soon as I was old enough to move out, I did, and I never wanted to go back. I worked as hard as possible every day to make sure I wouldn't need to go back there."

Sami nods thoughtfully. His gaze softens. "That must've been stressful."

I wrap my arms around myself. He shouldn't feel bad for me. I'm not the victim here. "No, it's my fault. I know he regretted it. He'd always apologize later. Every time he fucked up, he'd get me a Pez dispenser to say sorry and . . . I just got so mad as I got older. I couldn't forgive him anymore, and I hate that."

"Do you visit your mom now?" Sami asks.

I sigh and shake my head. "I know you're so close with your family, and this makes me sound horrible. But I just can't handle it when she drags me

back into the chaos. I just want to get as far as possible from it.”

“Fair . . .” Sami nods, his eyes still soft, like I haven’t just admitted to being the worst person. “I think I understand why you’ve been working so much when you’re supposed to be on leave.”

His words cut too close to the bone. Because it’s not true. It’s this unwarranted leave that’s making me want to still . . . *work* at the thing I’m paid well to do.

And maybe that’s why I choose to ruin it by saying, “It’s probably easier for you to stick around because you don’t want to leave your childhood.”

The instant my words register—the wounded expression on his face—I want to bottle them back up and make them disappear from this timeline. “Sami, I didn’t mean—”

“You make a good point.” He looks directly at me, face expressionless. “I mean, I guess I probably am stuck in the past a bit. But this community, this place, is special to me.” His shoulders soften. “And I know you’ve seen that too lately.”

“I have,” I concede. “I just wonder . . . there was a time when you went to culinary school. A time when you probably *were* thinking of doing something more with your talents than this. So what’s stopping you from making your own place in the world?”

I need to know he’ll be okay. That even after the building sells, after the last familiar landmarks in this neighborhood are well and truly gone, he’ll be able to move forward. Even if he hates me for it forever.

Sami frowns like I’m missing the point. “It’s not broken, so why fix it? This restaurant, our customers, the people who have been there since the beginning, don’t need me to change. I don’t want them to think yet another place is no longer *for* them just because they can’t afford to live in an expensive ass condo.” The air is getting heavier. Sami gives me a tight smile and attempts to cut through it with a joke. “Although I have considered firing Abu to cut costs. It’s just too bad I don’t pay him.”

I lean closer and take his hand this time. The warmth of it fills mine as our eyes lock. “Even if you fight every development in the neighborhood, it’s not going to bring back the past. There’s a whole slew of people out there who I bet would love to try your real recipes, and it’s like you don’t want them.”

Sami rolls his eyes, his hand slipping out of mine as he fiddles with Ernest’s leash. “Yeah, you’re right. I don’t want to serve the new condo

assholes. There are other places that will cater to *them*.”

“That sounds like an excuse to not even try.”

His gaze crawls across my face, searching. It feels like we’re on the edge of something. So I push, “I can tell how much you love it every time I try something you’ve made. If you shared that with people—if you stopped hiding behind the deep fryer and Sysco food supply appetizers . . .”

Sami’s jaw clenches. “That’s nice of you to say, but we don’t have to knock frozen mozza sticks in the process. They have their place in society.”

“I’m just saying, it’s not selling out to want to cater to the new people in the neighborhood. Your loyal customers will support you the way you’ve always been there for them.”

Sami’s stare is distant, and for a minute I’m certain I’ve pushed him too far. His jaw ticks and he shakes his head. “God, can you imagine Abu with a trust-fund TikTokker trying to film content at the diner?”

I giggle. “I mean . . . kind of? I could see him accusing someone of hitting on him and then challenging them to arm-wrestle.”

“That’s . . . actually exactly what would happen.” Sami’s grin curls into his eyes, the tension clearing. As he gets Ernest’s harness on and pauses at the door, he again reaches for my hand, this time pulling mine to his chest. “Hey, I know change is weird for me, and I know I’m really stubborn, and I can’t just switch it off.” His voice is a whisper. “But I appreciate your faith in me.”

I squeeze his hand back and we head out the door. During our walk, Sami speaks more about all the spots he used to love in the neighborhood—block parties, how the park used to have a community garden, friends’ houses he used to sleep over at—and I ask him as many questions about his life as possible. I don’t want any of it to end.

But once we make it three blocks farther than our usual route, Ernest sits down and refuses to take another step. Sami ends up carrying his tube of a body back to my apartment, before heading home to get ready to work at the diner.

All alone in my apartment, I take a shower. When I get out and look in the mirror, I notice the tan that’s been darkening my skin these past few weeks. It’s like I’m wearing the walks with Sami and Ernest. Like every moment has been pressed into me like a badge.

I brace myself to look at my phone.

Because soon there will be an email from Lana—a follow-up to the viewing.

Instead, there's a message from Jane: Hey! I've been thinking. Instead of doing the harder parts of the stakeout—want to just like hang? I've been feeling less freaked out and don't want to waste more time on that creep. We can watch a movie?

I hit reply immediately. Definitely! My place this time.

Maybe she'll be able to find another place in the area with an equally kind landlord. Maybe she'll be able to forgive me.

I pull up the link to the apartment in the brand-new high rise Lana promised me, once the sale goes through. It's better than what I remember. Completely new with all the finishing touches: marble countertops, heated floor tiles, stainless-steel appliances. I try to picture the life I'll have there. The one I'd always envisioned for myself, someday. The one that I've worked so hard for.

Two months ago, this was my dream: to live somewhere untouched by the chaos of history—neat, beautiful, and peaceful. A place where I could finally breathe.

But now all I see is a place that doesn't have color, or character, even a whiteboard. I try to picture living there and commuting to my office. Trading one soulless box for another.

I feed Alice, vacuum the carpet, make a sandwich. Still no email from Lana.

If the building doesn't sell, what then? Is there a version of this story where Irene could keep this place running?

My mind wanders to a life where I stay living here. One where I visit the diner every morning to see a guy and his family who make me feel at home. A place where I have friends who don't need me to be perfect. A life where I'm not being audited for everything I do.

And maybe I freaked out Missy and Robin enough with my bullshit that they won't bite? That would be okay.

Because when I lock eyes with Alice sitting in her little spot at the bottom of her bowl, it feels different.

It feels like home.

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I Scream for Irene

Subject: We have an offer!

Hi Mona,

Great news! We have an offer.

I'll be with clients all day but wanted you to share the news ASAP.

Congrats Mona! We are able to sell the building all thanks to your hard work!
I look forward to setting up a meeting at Westmore Communications so we can
discuss other ways to partner going forward.

-L

The email comes right as I heave my overfilled laundry bag into the hallway. All the weeks of work around here paid off. I have just gotten *Lana freaking Winston* as a client! I can't believe I pulled it off. I can't believe it's real. I barely have time to register this when I open the door to my suite and Ernest practically trips me up, pounding past me into the hallway, straight to Irene's unit.

When he reaches her door, he starts scratching furiously, his nose blasting little puffs of air through the bottom of the door.

That's when I spot a light coming through the crack under her door. What the hell? I dump my laundry bag and make my way down the hall. "Irene! You there?"

The hollow knock thuds through the hallway and meets the faint sounds of some kind of jock jams from Divorced Dad's suite.

But there's no answer.

I press my ear against her door. The sound of a laugh track comes through. The TV is on?

I knock. "Irene?"

Ernest's tail is wagging harder than I've ever seen.

"Hello!" I knock again. Another laughing sound from a TV show echoes through the door. There's definitely someone in there.

I try the handle. Irene's apartment door opens just a crack. "Irene?" I ask, holding the door ajar. "Everything okay?"

I push just a little more and peer into the room in front of me. Irene is there—slumped sideways in her chair, mouth open, eyes closed, skin way paler than normal.

"Irene!" I call, as I make my way closer. Ernest starts darting around the place—full-on zoomies happening now that he's back in the home he hasn't been to in weeks.

I put my hands in front of her face and check her breathing.

And instantly Irene's eyes dart open. A scream tears from her, so sudden and loud that I actually jump back. My heartbeat pounds in my ears as she waves her hands to regain her balance and straightens in her chair. She puts the glasses that were strung around her neck on. Her eyes dart around the room, still disoriented, as she pulls her cardigan together.

"Irene, what are you doing here?" I ask, still lightheaded with relief that I'm not talking to a corpse.

"What am I doing here? I'm in *my home*." There's a ferocity in her voice.

Ernest jumps up onto her lap and starts licking her face furiously. The ire saps out of her as she gives him a thousand kisses and hugs.

"You looked like you were passed out," I say as I watch these two wrinkly creatures fawn over each other.

"I must've dozed off. Is this what you've been up to? Breaking into my house to party while I've been gone?" Her eyes drift to the talk-show host on her TV. "And how did this asshole get on there?" She grabs the remote from the arm of her chair and turns it off.

"I didn't realize you were coming back. What happened? Are you feeling better?" I try to keep the panic out of my voice. Did Lana even have a chance to talk to her? Probably not, since her email to me only came a few minutes ago. What if Irene has gone rogue?

She lifts her foot, displaying the plastic boot on her ankle. “I’m just here for a break now that I’ve got this new walking cast on.” She crosses her arms defiantly.

“So . . . Lana knows you came back?”

She throws her hands up. “You mean that elder abuser! Never getting me a damn sticky bun. Talking over all my shows.” Irene purses her lips. “Last I checked I’m an adult with free will. There’s ice cream in the freezer—do us a favor and make us each a bowl, will ya? I’m on borrowed time here.”

I do as she says and make my way to the kitchen. Every surface in Irene’s apartment is covered in all sorts of trinkets that don’t seem happy to be there—a disturbed glass frog with a wide mouth as a vase, crocheted blankets with gaping holes, a weird porcelain horse lamp—while every piece of fabric covering the chairs and tables seems to compete for attention. It’s like being wrapped in an envelope of kooky grandmother. There is no way this kind of thing can happen overnight; this took years of bad choices to compound into the final product.

I manage to pull two bowls with rose flowers from the cupboards. I find a pint of strawberry ice cream in the freezer and two spoons in the same drawer that I use for my cutlery at home. I return and hand Irene the fuller bowl, then I take a seat on the small embroidered couch across from her.

She takes the spoon and fiddles with the scoop of ice cream, but doesn’t start eating. “By the way, I came by your place when I got back this morning, but you weren’t home. Where the hell were you?”

“Oh, I must’ve been . . . taking Ernest for a walk.” My cheeks flush at the memory of waking up at Sami’s. I let a spoonful of the overly sweet ice cream melt in my mouth as Irene watches me curiously.

We eat in silence while Ernest stares eagerly at us, apparently trying to hypnotize us into sharing. Eventually, Irene clangs her spoon into her bowl and declares. “I’ve been needing this for weeks. Even ice cream tastes better here.”

“You missed this place that much?” I try to keep the emotion out of my voice. An embroidered picture on the wall behind her reads: “I love coyote watching,” which I didn’t know was a thing.

She looks around the room fondly. “I don’t really feel like myself when I’m away from this building.”

I nod as casually as I can muster. “I guess you’ve been managing it for such a long time, it’s been an adjustment leaving.”

She suddenly shifts the topic, still gazing wistfully around the room. “You know, when you first started renting from me, I was pretty sure you wouldn’t live here very long. Remember you didn’t have enough for the damage deposit?”

Her words jolt inside me. “I’d forgotten.”

“You got it to me that next month.”

“Thanks for that,” I say kindly, though I’m unsure why she’s bringing this up.

She looks at me, assessing. “You seemed all eager about your job downtown. I had the feeling you were about to turn into a total yuppie asshole. Don’t worry, this is a compliment.”

“Oh, good.” I flatten my expression. But I think back to the person I was back then. Irene’s was the only place I could afford that was walking distance to the office. I remember how badly I kissed her ass to get her to rent to me. How much I needed it even though I was determined it wouldn’t be for long.

But of course, there were setbacks.

And I can’t believe how quickly the past five years went by. I was so focused on getting ahead, on creating as much distance between myself and my past, that it all just kind of went . . . by.

Irene continues. “The thing is, I had a feeling you’d surprise me, and then finally these last few weeks, you did.”

“How so? By helping around here?”

Irene nods. “I just never would’ve believed there’d be a day where you’d break into my place and share some ice cream with me. It’s nice to see you happier.”

Her words crawl their way to me with confusing distortion—like I’m hearing them through a carnival mirror. “I’m not much happier.”

“Well, something’s different. You seem more yourself. After all these years, you’ve shown us your true colors.”

She has a point, sort of.

“Mona, I’ve had a lot of tenants over the years, and you can’t take care of a building without getting to know more than you planned to about the renters.”

“Makes sense.” I think about all the things I’ve learned about the tenants against my will lately.

“It’s almost impossible not to have that knowledge affect you. Not to care.” Irene looks almost through me.

And I realize she’s right. When I move out, I’ll wonder about everyone here for years to come. I’ll even fucking think of Divorced Dad, or maybe Carmen, whenever I see the Flames playing, and that’s only after one month of taking care of this building. I can’t imagine what an entire lifetime caring for tenants feels like—how many of them she’s watched come in and out of her life. How much this building, and the people in it, became a part of her.

“Anyway, the very best tenants are the ones that I get to see grow into themselves while they’re living here.” Her eyes reach mine again. “It’s lovely to be a part of that.”

I blink over the tenderness in my eyes. “Irene, thank you for renting to me even though I didn’t have the cash. That was really helpful.”

She throws her hands. “I’ve never been wrong to bet on someone.”

We sit in contemplative silence for a beat until the ping of an email comes from my phone again.

I remember the note Lana sent about twenty minutes ago. Soon, Lana will be presenting the offer to Irene. It’ll be pretty obvious that she’ll have to take it.

It’ll be hard for Irene, but I have to believe this was the kindest way I could repay what she did for me. I tried to make this place shine, so it could find a new owner who saw what she did—who could keep caring for this place, and the people inside it, the way it deserves to be.

I stand and gather my bowl, then put out my hand to Irene. “Can I take that to the sink?”

Irene looks at me long and hard. Something seems to pass unsaid between us. That something is ending. “Mona, I know my management style has been unconventional.” Her voice croaks when she speaks now. “But I hope you can see now how much care was involved.”

I nod. And my voice cracks around the words “I do.”

She nods, settling back into her seat. “Anyway, Lana’s going to cut me off my ice-cream supply when she gets here, so be a dear and refill that bowl before you leave. I have lots of defensive eating to do.”

“Of course,” I grin.

I refill her ice cream. Then I close the door on the lady who bet on me and everyone here.

And let her enjoy her home.

I open the email as soon as I'm back in my apartment. This time it's from Carlyne.

Subject: RE: Return to Office

Hi Mona,

Following up on this message, we are very much looking forward to your return to the office. I also wanted to let you know that I received a lovely note about you from Lana Winston. She's eager to discuss working with the firm.

Upon your return, I and the other directors would like to schedule a meeting to discuss your very bright future at the office.

Thanks again, Mona!

Sincerely,
Carlyne

cc: Bill Cleg

Normally this would be a definite *buy something bubbly and tell all my friends* moment. Yet here, with just Alice's vacant eyes staring back at me, it feels so . . . anticlimactic.

That's the problem. Normally, I'd be feeding off the buzz of the office. Normally, I'd send this kind of victory to the group chat right away. I'd humblebrag and everyone would act fake happy for me for securing someone like Lana, and we'd all go home better for it!

Now, it's been so long since anyone has added me to the thread, that this message from me would come from out of nowhere.

And why was my next instinct to run to Jane or Sami—or even fucking Carmen—over something I knew was at their expense?

Because that's the problem. This victory could very possibly cost my new friends their homes.

I shove those thoughts away for now—no use dwelling on worst-case scenarios. At least Missy and Robin seemed to care about the building and the tenants. I've given this place its best shot at a, if not happy, then at least softer landing.

I type a message to just Olivia:

Guess who's bringing in Lana for a pitch meeting next week!

Immediately the dots that Olivia's typing appear. At least someone will be happy for me.

Before Olivia's reply comes, a knock sounds at my door. I drop my phone and make my way over. When I open the door, I'm surprised to see Norm—he's in his brown shirt and grey work slacks.

"Hey. Norm! Everything okay?"

"Yeah." Norm backs away insecurely—he's gripping a grease-stained paper bag in his hand. "I brought you, um, lunch." His words are almost a whisper.

I get the feeling any sudden moves will send him running. So I hold myself very still and smile at his incredibly sweet gesture. "Thank you so much. Please, come in."

He steps tentatively into my front hall.

I point toward my couch. "Make yourself at home. I'll grab some plates."

Once we're settled in my living room, we dig in. He must have asked Sami what I like, because it's my favorite sandwich with the right dressing. I dunk a fry in mayo and ask, "So how is work going today?"

Norm shrugs as he swallows a bite of food. "Decent, I think. Same old."

There's a weird look in his eyes when he asks, "I guess your leave is up soon?"

I'm not sure if it's a question or a statement. "Yeah, I should be going back the week after next, on June 29." I can't suppress my smile as I think about waltzing back in with a shiny new client. "I can't believe how fast time flew."

"Yeah . . ." There's an uncomfortable edge in his tone.

"When was the last time you went to the office?" I try to keep my tone conversational, hoping I'm not scaring him somehow.

Norm stares at his hands. "Probably five years ago."

I think of all the Christmas parties, all the Stampede fucking cowboy breakfasts. Those communal moments, the trauma bonding, was what made the job so worth it to me. And he's avoided the place the whole time. How lonely it must be.

"Norm, it's been really cool getting to know you lately," I say. "It's nice to have someone in the building who works at the same office."

He nods but doesn't add more as he swallows another bite of food. He chews intently, then grabs a napkin from the generous stack Sami stuffed in the bag. "Are you looking forward to going back?"

I nod automatically. “Getting back into the pace of things might be tough, but I am.”

His eyes narrow at his BLT. “Yeah, I’ve noticed it’s pretty intense.” His voice drops. “IT people can see a lot of the goings-on—almost everything.”

The French fry I’d just bitten goes dry in my mouth. He definitely knows something.

Of course he does. Why didn’t I think of the possibility that he might have seen I’m bringing in Lana as a new client?

“Okay, look.” His voice is steadier than I’ve ever heard him. “I don’t have many friends or anything, so this may come off sort of . . .” His eyes lock right onto mine and he hardens his shoulders like he’s decided something. “Um, so, are you still close with Olivia Chambers?”

That is *not* what I was expecting him to say. “Yeah,” I confirm. “We’re close.”

He winces at this. And I realize it’s possible she’s been a real dick to him, the way I know a lot of people are to the IT guys. I race to her defense. “I know she can seem rough around the edges, but that’s because she’s working so hard to move up the ladder.”

“Look, I feel like I should say this because you seem somewhat . . . because I appreciate your, um, including me, but Olivia isn’t . . .” All his words are muttered. But then he looks up and seems to decide something. “She doesn’t have your best interest at heart.”

It’s so bizarre, what he’s saying, that the words almost don’t register.

“I know about the Vesterno account,” I say slowly. “She was totally honest about that, and I’m okay with it.”

He shakes his head and continues, “Not just that one. She has asked to keep Levin, Eden Watermark, and GBA too.”

I ignore the sound of my pulse pounding in my ears. That’s more than half of my portfolio. I blink and I blink, trying to sift through why she’d do that. “Well, I guess it makes sense if she’s been working on them.”

His nod is patient, like he wants to soften whatever blow he’s preparing for. “She cited several errors she’d caught on all of them and stated she was concerned about your standard of care for the clients. I think Corbin plans on complaining about you too. I found some of their DMs on the server.” Norm’s feet fidget, like he’s resisting the urge to spring from the room. “I’m sorry. I just, I had to say something, I didn’t want you *not* knowing.” He wipes the sweat that sheens his forehead and stares at his sneakers. I get the

feeling Norm hasn't done anything this uncomfortable in a million years. And a vision of him psyching himself up to come talk to me flashes in my mind.

His phone sounds with the distinct sound of a Teams message. His eyes pop at his screen, but he doesn't make a move to leave.

"Hey, is that an IT call?"

He nods. "I'm, um, I'm supposed to log back in at twelve forty-five on Thursdays. I'm sorry, I didn't realize the time."

"Of course." I stand, shuffling my wrapper into the empty bag. "Thanks for lunch."

We make our way to the door. My legs feel like they're made of jelly. I've been so eager for my triumphant return to work with a flashy new client in tow, ready to be a big cheese in the office again. But am I about to lose my whole suite of clients and suffer a humiliation instead, all thanks to my shitty friends?

"Hey, Norm," I say, my hand hovering on the doorknob as he walks out. "I really appreciate you for telling me. You're a good friend."

His face goes instantly red.

After he's gone, I go over every recent interaction with Olivia. Everything I'd shared. She's been my closest confidante through all these years. I wanted her—no, *needed* her—to look up to me, to think I was somebody worth emulating.

By the time I retrieve my phone from the counter, I'd almost forgotten that I'd sent her my latest good news.

I almost laugh at what's on my screen.

A single thumbs-up emoji.

Later, she'll say she got busy but she was really happy to see that news. That's usually how it goes.

So instead of popping open some bubbly or whatever delusions I had of celebrating today, it ends up being one of those nights where I can't sleep no matter how much I crumple my comforter between my legs.

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Too Real Estate

“Hello, Mona?”

Lana answers on the first ring, yet it doesn’t feel fast enough. Not with the urgency that’s kept me buzzing in my apartment all morning.

“Hi, so, you haven’t answered my email. Did you see the plans I sent over?”

After hours in bed staring at the ceiling, I pulled out my laptop and did what I did best during times of stress—make a thorough, color-coded plan. I created a grid for all the bills and repeating services on the property, a graph showing the rate the rents could gradually increase over the course of five years to come up to market value, and a budget for a live-in super who could handle the day-to-day when Irene couldn’t. It’s not perfect, but it keeps Irene owning her home, and the community just that much more intact.

Three cups of coffee on an empty stomach later, my hands are shaking. “What do you think?” I ask again, shifting at her silence.

“Ah yes, thanks for sending that over. Very interesting proposal.” Lana’s voice is distant and bored, not a hint of the urgency I’ve been feeling.

“So, are you going to call off the sale?” Again, I can’t keep the anxiety out of my voice.

Lana’s laughter cuts through the line. “Mona, you know I can’t do such a thing. I’m a realtor, I sell properties. What would my clients think?”

“I get that it’s a little odd, but I’ve thought about it, and Missy and Robin seemed nice. They’d probably understand.”

“Missy and Robin? Mona, the purchaser is Northern Property Management. Their firm is familiar with the area, and their offer was *very* generous.”

“Northern Property Management!” I can’t help it. I actually squeal. They’re the construction company Sami hates the most, the one with the dirty construction sites on either side of Valleyview Apartments. “Lana, they’ll demolish the building and keep it as an empty lot gathering trash for years.” I hate the tremble in my voice—the way emotion creeps in despite promising myself I’d handle this professionally.

“The buyer intends to use the land to build a new apartment complex, one with all the modern amenities expected for a unit in this area. That’s a good thing, Mona.” She sounds almost bored.

“Lana, you can’t let Northern Property Management buy this place. You know seeing this place torn down would break your aunt’s heart.”

For the first time, her voice softens. “I know it’s not ideal, but it’s the best offer we had by a mile, so—”

I interrupt. “There’s no way your aunt is signing off on this! No way.” Because how can she not see how unreasonable she’s being?

“Actually, she already has. Yesterday morning. I wanted to make sure she would accept before I told you the good news.” Her voice lowers. “Look, it’s heartbreaking, but Mona, this needed to happen. I have been temporarily managing her finances, and it’s clear how bad things have gotten. I’m doing the best I can by her, and this buyer is giving her far more of a nest egg than her emotional attachments ever could. Of course she saw that she had to sign.”

I flash back to my conversation with Irene—that sad, wistful look in her eye. It was her form of saying goodbye.

“But the residents, these people’s homes!” My voice is starting to sound whiny—I can hear it. I’ve already lost, that much is clear. But I can’t stop myself from grasping for some loophole, trying to claw my way out of this mess.

Lana lets out an exasperated sigh. “While I of course sympathize with the residents, my responsibility is to serve the client’s best interest. I’m sure you can understand this.” Her cool detachment only sharpens the pain. The subtext is clear: Lana is going to be *my* client now too.

I try one more time. “No. I know there’s another option. I sent you a plan that would work!”

Lana’s candor counteracts mine with its professional monotone. “And if you’d put that together weeks ago, before all this, I would’ve considered it, but genuinely it’s too late now.”

“It’s not too late! That’s the thing, Lana—it’s never too late unless you give up or die.” I choke on my words. “Your aunt can’t just lose her life’s work. You have the power to stop this ball rolling and do the *real* right thing by her.”

Her sigh is almost charitable, like she’s losing patience with a child. “Mona, that’s sweet that you’ve had this er . . . revelation, but it doesn’t change the real world. It doesn’t change business. Of course, the transaction can’t be stopped now.”

“Lana, please. I will go over everything with your aunt myself. I can help her. If she sees this, I’m sure she’d be happy to try to save this place.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end, then a long exhale. “My aunt has endured enough stress over this already.”

“Lana, please I won’t ask for any favors—you don’t have to rent me that new apartment and I will no longer hold you to working with my firm; in fact, I can reach out to my office right now to put a halt to it—”

“Trust me, Mona, you won’t be doing her any favors confusing her with false hopes,” Lana interrupted, with a sharpness to her voice. “And if you no longer support me and my client’s best interests maybe we should—”

“I do support this.” I interrupt this time. There’s no way I’m letting Lana slip away now. Not after everything. “I think I’m just missing the vision? Can you send me the proposal when you can?”

“Sure.” Her voice softens a touch. “And Mona, I know you’ve put a lot of work into this place, but you can relax now. You have a better life awaiting you. Be happy about that. Enjoy the weekend, even.”

“Thanks.” I nod even though she can’t see me. And even though I no longer believe that’s true. It can’t be if this building is destroyed. If all my friends are displaced.

Despite the happy smell of maple syrup, I tense as I enter the diner.

“Hey, Mona!” Sami says, the wrinkle between his eyes smoothing and his lips quirking upward. Since yesterday morning, we’ve seen each other

twice for our Ernest exchanges, both conversations lasted way longer than what would be considered reasonable.

And how many times did I rush past this diner to get to my office in the morning without seeing that grin? It seems unfathomable that I knew he existed, yet never allowed myself to meet him.

My stomach does a flip-flop as I head for my usual stool. “This seat taken?”

“Of course. You’ve got your pick of the lot.”

I glance around, noticing that yet again the diner is completely devoid of other customers.

He places a glass of water in front of me and leans across the counter to bend his head closer to mine. “Are you free Monday night? My meat vendor will be making his delivery, and I added some nice steaks for us.”

“That sounds great.” Though I’m not sure Sami will want to talk to me by then. Not after I tell him what I came here to say.

“But Sami, actually I . . .”

I pause, my whole body physically resisting the words. Once I tell him the truth, it’ll be over—and I don’t want it to be. He’s looking at me with that adorable grin, his eyes glinting with affection. He’s always made me feel so comfortable, like I can totally be myself with him.

It’s like a Band-Aid. The longer I wait, the worse it’ll be. If I confess now, at least there’s a chance he could forgive me one day. No matter what, he deserves my honesty.

I take a deep breath, open my mouth, and say, “What’s the soup of the day?”

He quirks a brow. “We have broccoli cheddar.”

“Great. I’ll take a bowl of that.” I’m not stalling, I just need soup first.

Sami brings over a bowl, and I stir it in a haze, watching the yellow and green chunks swirl around.

I came here with a plan. But in order to initiate it, I have to come clean.

I clear my throat. “Hey Sami, I—”

Abu comes bursting down the stairs. He’s in a nice suit, his hair combed back and gelled, making the thinner areas more prominent. He makes his way across the floor and thwacks Sami’s arm. “Why are you staring at Mona like a creepy type of guy?”

Sami winces and rubs the part of his arm where his dad hit. “Dad, what the hell?”

Abu shrugs and gives Sami an exasperated stare, like he had no other choice. “You stare too hard when you look at Mona. It’s very rude.”

Ava comes bounding down the stairs behind Abu, wearing a flowery dress and smiling at us sweetly, her hair curled and fluffed. “Hello, Mona joon.”

“Hello.” I grin. “You two are looking sharp.”

“That’s because Ava and I have very nice funeral to go to.” He smiles brightly. “It’s going to be a good one. I brought my big belt for the food.”

Sami rolls his eyes. “Dad, that’s . . . A man is dead.”

“What? Only met him twice but he was a piece of shit. The family is rich. I think there will be lobster.”

I can’t suppress the way my shoulders shake at his antics. “Lobster at a funeral? Get me on the list too.”

Abu’s eyes brighten. “Mona understands finances. She’s not dumb.”

I can’t help but giggle, but it fades as the sadness creeps back in. I spent years being too snobby to come into this diner, and now I’m going to miss it so much.

How could I have done any of it?

“Well, thankfully your taxi is here.” Sami nods out the front window as his parents make their way out with a series of jovial goodbyes.

I nod at the CALM THE CONSTRUCTION sign Sami posted on the door. “Sami, your petition . . . The submission date is Monday, right?”

His jaw clenches. “Yep. That’s when the construction permit meeting for this area is.” He lets out a disgruntled huff and slings his washcloth over his shoulder. “Unfortunately, we’re short an astronomical amount of signatures. But maybe next time, I can advertise more, and—”

“Sami, I’m afraid we don’t have that kind of time.”

It’s now. I need to confess. Not for myself, but for him. So he can make the best decision for this place, and for himself.

He stills. “What do you mean?”

I look at the faux-granite grain on the laminate countertop. “Northern Property Management made an offer on Irene’s property.”

“Bastards!” he shouts, then pauses. “But Irene would never sell to them.”

Except it must be painted on my face. Because as soon as Sami looks at me, he drops his face into his hands.

“Fuck, she did?”

I nod once, even though he can't see it. "Sami . . . I, um. Sami, she didn't have much of a choice."

He lifts his head, looking at me carefully. "That's why you've been so stressed?" His voice hardens. "Wait, you knew this was happening?"

It's the hurt in his eyes. The hurt I've caused.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears. "Sami, I'm so sorry, I—"

"Sorry? Please don't blame yourself, Mona." He comes around the counter and pries my fingers from the edge of the counter, which I didn't even register I'd begun to clench so tightly the knuckles were turning white. He holds my hands between his, warm and steady. "You've been doing everything to help with the building. I can't imagine how you must've felt when you found out it was selling."

It's now, I have to come clean now.

I swallow, my throat a dry desert. "Sami, I . . ."

Sami's hands hold mine tighter. The warmth pools and fills me up.

I can't do it. I can't risk it. No matter how sorry I am. No matter how much I want to take everything I did back. Because no matter how much I try to earn it, forgiveness is never guaranteed.

I can't lose him.

I adjust our grip so our fingers intertwine. "I have a plan that could help Irene keep the property, but in order to do that Northern Property Management would have to pull out."

Sami's brow furrows. "They won't do that. All they care about is the land."

I point to Sami's sign on the door. "The city hearings. We should all go to the meeting and make some noise. Gather as many of the people as possible to voice our concerns. If they can't get a permit to build, the land is useless."

"It's a nice idea." He looks down at our hands, frowning. "But Northern Property Management is the *Goliath*. I'm sure they're practically writing their own permits by now." He lets out a huff. "Maybe we should just have that steak and enjoy this place before it all falls apart?"

I've never seen him look this defeated. "Excuse me? What have you done with Sami?"

A hint of a grin cuts through. "I've been spending a bit of time with this girl who used to be really practical, logical, and knew the value of time blocking. Guess she rubbed off on me."

“Well, be that as it may, I think it’ll still be worthwhile. Northern Property Management is huge, yes. But I know big companies like this. They want the easy, low-hanging fruit. If we can get the city to hear us out—even if it’s just a brief delay, I think we could turn Northern Property Management off the sale. They won’t want to get involved with costly holdups when there are easier fish to fry.”

Sami lets go of my hands to put his palms on my shoulders. “See, that’s why I need to hear your logic. It can outlogic my logic.”

I grab either side of his torso and clench the fabric of his apron, pulling him closer. “Let’s show these fucks who they’re playing ball with.”

“That’s a lot of heart there, kid.” His eyes are full of far too much admiration.

But if I can save the building—then it’ll all be okay. And I can finally deserve it.

I have no other choice but to believe it.

Heads turn as our parade of tenants approach the building where the development meeting is being held. Since it’s only a couple of blocks away from Valleyview Apartments, we decided to meet in the lobby on Monday afternoon, just before the meeting and walk over together. We perfected the plan over the weekend. I have broken up the concerns for us to bring up into categories: supporting infrastructure; traffic issues; small community feel; construction impact on business; historic building preservation, etc. I’ve also given everyone a loose set of talking points based on the direction they want to go. It took several hours to gather and prepare everyone, but I’m buzzing with energy and several of Sami’s coffees as we march down the block.

I’m in my favorite navy suit set and nude heels. Something I haven’t worn in weeks. I feel more myself than I have in ages—I’m so back.

We’ve got Carmen in his fucking Wranglers leading the way with Lorna, whose head keeps bobbing as she giggles at whatever he’s saying to her; I bet he’s going to be pouring her a Fanta by night’s end. Sami’s walking behind me with Norm, who looks like he’s finding the willpower to take every step, but his face is set with determination. I can’t believe how far he’s come from the guy I saw during the fire alarm a few weeks ago. Mr. and Mrs. Chaudhry (Uniform Family’s parents) are next in the line. By my

side, Jane is sporting a flowery jumpsuit. Sami even managed to round up the owners of a few other surviving local businesses to round out our procession.

The path we've been walking is familiar to me. It's the same route I take to Westmore Communications, whose office is right across the street.

When we round the corner and stop at the crosswalk, Jane, who took the afternoon off for this, nudges me. "Bet you haven't seen that barista's butt cheeks in a while. Don't tell me you didn't miss him the most during your leave."

I follow her gaze to the coffee shop I used to frequent during my lunch breaks. On the patio, the barista is serving customers, his booty pinched tight in Lululemon leggings in all their muscular glory.

"The view is weirdly taking me back," I say as he leans over a little more than is necessary to distribute drinks to a table. Jane and I both trail him with our eyes as walks inside—only, I stop short as I lock eyes with Corbin. He's exiting the coffee shop with a to-go cup. He meets my gaze with an expression that can only be described as horrified surprise. He breaks my stare and turns to mutter something over his shoulder. Behind him, Olivia and Lisa are walking out too, drinks in hand.

My heart stops as the other two of my best friends' eyes crawl toward me—as they register the group I'm walking with. As they quickly divert their gazes.

Olivia's mouth moves, and it's like I can hear their comments without actually *hearing* them. After years of being part of their pod, I know how they operate. Right on cue, Corbin throws his head back and laughs.

These people—my best friends. Or at least, I truly believed they were. But cutting me off when I was struggling, trying to sabotage me—that's not just *healthy competition*. It's messed up, actually. It's not even hurt I feel. It's shame. Because a few weeks ago, I was just like them.

"Hey, Jane." I nudge closer, the comforting scent of her shampoo crawling its way to me. "Those are my friends I haven't seen in a while. I'll catch up in time for the meeting."

"Sure." But she gives me an uncertain glance. To be fair, the last time I said I was popping out for a minute, I missed the rest of our town hall about the rec room. I give her shoulder a brief, reassuring squeeze, then head to the intersection.

Corbin, Olivia, and Lisa are huddled in a tight circle chatting as I force my feet to keep stepping across the street. When I approach them, they don't seem to notice—even though I know they all saw me heading this way.

“Hey, guys,” I say, a bit louder than is probably necessary.

Their heads whip toward me in unison. Olivia's eyes go wide, but her smile is bright as her eyes flicker from Corbin to Lisa. An unspoken conversation is passing between them. I know this silent language too well not to hear the million screams buried beneath it.

These people haven't seen me in weeks, and the first thing Corbin says is, “Was that the IT guy from our office?” His tone has the lift of a joke, and Lisa giggles on cue, playing her part.

I turn to watch the group of weirdo tenants making their way up the block. “Good memory! That's Norm. He's a friend from my apartment building. In fact, they all are.”

Again, their eyes connect, a silent conversation passing between them. It's almost too predictable, the snide remarks they're likely banking for later.

“Are you excited to come back to the office next week?” Lisa asks.

“Yeah, is your, uh . . . was it your mom? Is she okay now?” Corbin's voice is perfectly chipper as he lifts his coffee to take a sip.

Olivia's pasted-on smile is borderline vulgar.

I can't believe I used to be so desperate for these people's approval that I couldn't even tell them the truth. That I allowed myself to be friends with people who would hold my hardest moments against me as soon as I left the room.

“Yeah,” I say, just as chipper as Corbin was. “She's doing much better. I am too.”

“That's really great, Mon!” Olivia's forced smile is so fake. How did I never see it? “We're glad to have you back.”

The other two nod in agreement like NCPs.

“Although it's going to be a rough return.” I look down at my hands, frowning. “In fact, I spoke to Carolynne just this morning about the state of some of my files. It wasn't a great conversation, as you can imagine.”

I wince and glance up from beneath my lashes. Honestly, the smirk Olivia is holding back is more authentic than any of the smiles she's ever given me.

I nod toward my new friends who are gathering on the lawn outside the building. “It’s handy being friends with IT. I had Norm over there look into the errors on my files that were recently discovered. It looks like many of them trace back to your computer, Olivia.”

Olivia’s mouth falls open. “Mona, I—”

I cut her off. “Better keep your phone handy. I’m sure Carolynne will be following up with you any minute now.”

Olivia is frozen. Her expression flickers—first horror, then sharp, simmering anger. I used to think she and I were the most alike in the office, both of us clawing our way up from humble beginnings, driven by the same relentless hunger. Maybe she regrets letting it come to this. Maybe she doesn’t. Either way, I realize, I don’t care anymore.

“Well, I need to catch up with my friends over there,” I say. “We have a very important meeting. Looking forward to seeing you guys next week—although I’ll probably have to miss Tuesday drinks.”

Before any of them can answer, I turn on my heel and stomp back up the block, making each step loud and deliberate, like I’m gliding just above the pavement. I imagine them watching me walk away, speechless. It’s only after I cross the street and round the corner that I allow myself a glance back. They’re still standing outside the café, staring after me like Bambi caught in headlights.

Jane and Sami catch site of me returning. Carmen yells, “There’s our leader! Mona, come on, it’s time.”

I take my spot at the head of the procession and march up the steps, head held high—ready to take on city hall (aka a couple of public officials, since this meeting isn’t quite big enough to be held at city headquarters).

Two hours later, we spill out into the lobby of the community center like deflated tires, sagging under the weight of defeat, silently gathering to lick our wounds. The vibe of the meeting was polite, but it was made very clear we were wasting our time. Every single one of us was given time at the mic to voice our concerns. Then we were thanked for our feedback by unmoved councillors who kept glancing at their watches.

The coup de grâce came when a representative for Northern Property Management went up to the mic to defend their development permits. Sami

was right: They are a Goliath, and they had prepared counterpoints for almost all concerns at the ready.

“I’ll just say it. That was a real shitty thing.” Carmen stomps his boots on the glossy floor, followed by the rest of our group, who all murmured their agreement at his astute observation.

“It’s not over, guys,” I mutter. “Maybe it went better than we think.”

Sami nods encouragingly, his gaze softening as his eyes meet mine. “Mona’s right. There were enough of us in there that maybe Northern Property Management will decide it’s not worth their time.”

“Did you see that one wanker-type guy with the ugly suit?” Divorced Dad adds.

Jane nods. “All those Northern Property Management fucks were wankers.”

We all laugh—not because it’s funny, but because it’s the only thing left to do. At least we’re in this together.

I look around the group, their weary and defeated faces. I know that no matter what happens, I have to make sure these people will be okay. I want to keep them in my life, even though I don’t deserve it.

“Hey,” I start. “You guys were amazing. Everything you said was so well put.”

“All thanks to your index cards.” Carmen winks. It’s not as violating now that I know the guy.

“Yeah, Mona. Thanks for fighting so hard for us.” Sami’s grin curls into his whole face. He turns to face the group. “I say we have another emergency town hall at the diner to discuss what to do with all the leftover pie.”

Everyone cheers at that. Jane rests a comforting hand on my arm, and I lean into her without hesitation. Carmen nudges Norm, who startles but quickly grins. Lorna nods warmly at Uniform Family.

I’m so caught up in the quiet beauty of this unlikely community that I don’t notice the doors opening behind me.

“Mona? I thought that was you.”

My shoulders squeeze up to my chin at the sound of Lana’s voice. I turn slowly to face her. She’s wearing a beige suit, her red hair in an elegant twist.

My heart drops.

“Hi,” I mutter. “Good to see you.” I give her a small, cordial wave and then turn halfway back to Jane, hoping that I can someone escape conversation without being flat-out rude.

But Lana just has to continue. “I’m here to meet with my clients. What are you doing here?”

Shit. The dread hardens as her eyes sweep over me to the group. Because the clients she’s referring to must be Northern Property Management.

Maybe she won’t recognize the other tenants around me—it’s not like she ever spent time in the building interacting with them. I gesture toward my group and mumble, “Sorry, I’m just in the middle of—”

“Are these the other tenants?” Lana asks.

I will her to shut up. I will her to leave. To be struck by some kind of random indoor lightning that temporarily stuns her.

But it’s too late. All the tenants are looking at us with piqued interest.

It’s like my breath is sticky—like I can’t breathe because all the air is stuck to the walls of my lungs. I will myself to dissolve away from this reality. To stop what I know is going to be . . . not great.

“We were here for the town hall,” says Carmen, who’s still apparently in the spirit of turning others to our cause. “To keep these Northern Management creeps from tearing the building down.”

Lana snorts. “Mona, are you kidding? I told you, it’s a done deal.” She crosses her arms. “Did you seriously gather all the tenants to harass my clients? I’m not sure we can work together if you’re going to undermine me this way.”

“Wait, what?” I’m already cringing into myself as Jane asks, “You’re in business together?”

Lana’s eyes sharpen, and I see it all before it even happens—I’ve interfered with her business, and now she’s poised to strike where it’ll hurt most. “That’s right. Mona’s been invaluable throughout this entire process. She’s been so wonderful getting the building into sellable condition for me to make all this possible. So I’d appreciate it if you’d leave my clients alone now.”

I watch the realization settle on Jane’s face. Then it spreads to Sami, whose features twist with a sudden, uneasy clarity.

“Mona, what the hell?” Carmen calls. “Did you know the building was going up for sale?”

“I just . . .” My eyes flick to each of them. I should’ve told them everything sooner, before we got to this point. I thought I could get away with a half-truth. But now, with Lana’s razor-sharp grin daring me to stay silent, I know I’m out of time.

And really, they deserve the truth. They always did.

A familiar dread—the same one I felt that first day in the lobby with the whiteboard—starts to harden in my chest, settling like poured concrete. “Yes, I knew the building was going to be put up for sale.” The world seems to freeze around me as the truth slowly unravels for the group. I feel exposed. A totally imbecile. I continue despite all my instincts. “And I helped prepare the property for the sale.”

It’s like a dam bursts, and the outrage comes at me at once.

Sami is the first to react. “All the improvements—that was for the sale?”

“What the fuck?” Jane yells. “That’s twisted.”

“The whole time?” comes from Carmen.

I can do nothing but nod. I can’t defend myself. All their anger is deserved.

Norm won’t even look at me. I think back to the first fire drill, when I didn’t recognize him.

Even Divorced Dad’s eyes slide away from me to the floor. He shakes his head to himself, puzzled.

“Why would you do that, Mona? Why wouldn’t you at least tell us?” The hurt in Sami’s eyes sinks into my chest like a blade and stays there, a heavy knot of dread. He has that rare gift—seeing the best in people. “It makes no sense.” Sami’s always seen me as someone better than I really am. But I’ve managed to shatter that.

Now he sees the truth.

I have a hard time taking a proper breath. “I’m really sorry. I agreed to help when I . . . before I knew you.”

“You mean, when you thought we were losers?” Jane nods at me like she’s confirming something she already knew. “But I don’t get what was in it for you.”

My hands shake. I can’t find my voice.

Lana is gracious enough to step in. “Mona and I have been discussing her living arrangements,” she says, then turns to me with a condescending pout, like I’m a misbehaving child. “Though, Mona, I’m not sure my clients at

Northern Property Management will be thrilled to welcome a new tenant who's been so publicly critical of their business."

"A better apartment?" Carmen announces like the town crier. "Well folks, we're all hooped by next month because Mona wanted a better apartment."

It sounds so silly now.

But it's Sami's small nod—the subtle shift in his eyes as he replays every coffee, every walk, every quiet moment I shared something with him—that hits me hardest. Every time I was there, feeling something real for him . . . it *was* real.

But it can't be. Not now.

Everywhere I look, there's nothing but hurt.

The crowd is silent. Sirens start to chime outside, echoing the ones in my head.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to go meet my clients," Lana says, her voice laced with venomous sweetness. I hear her heels echo sharply up the hallway. I'm frozen—unable to move a single muscle.

Everyone else seems stuck in place too. They're all staring at me as though I just unzipped my skin and revealed myself to be a literal pile of shit.

I'm the lowest form of human. The worst kind.

The sirens get louder—peeling up the street outside.

"I'm so, so sorry," I whisper. "I knew Irene was having a hard time, and Lana said she would try to find someone nice to . . ." I fade off. I shouldn't be making more excuses. There's only one thing they need to know. "I didn't know you all then. But you mean so much to me now."

The gears inside Sami's head seem to spin. "Mona, that day of the town hall when you left. When you unplugged your straightener . . . for half an hour . . ."

Sami's face drops at the same rate my stomach does.

Because this time, I don't have to answer.

"That emergency town hall about the rec room?" Jane's words are daggers. "It was all fake, then."

"Guys, I'm so, so sorry. Please. If I could take it all back."

Sami's whole demeanor stiffens like he's decided something. "Right." He squares his jaw, disgust in his eyes. "I'm out of here." He turns on his heel and storms down the lobby floor.

One by one, every single one of my friends begins to follow him.

As the doors open, the blare of the sirens becomes louder. Screeching with a similar outrage.

Then the smell of smoke reaches my nose.

“Wait, is there a building on fire down that way?” Jane calls as a fire truck races down the street in front of us.

“That’s in our direction.” Carmen’s eyes narrow at the street corner.

“Shit!” Sami starts sprinting.

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When There's Smoke

By the time I finish making the final crawl back to the little brick building known as Valleyview Apartments, my knees are like Jell-O and my feet throb from running in my favorite heels.

All the dread—the frantic rationalizing, the desperate hope for a different outcome as I ran those final blocks—comes crashing to a head. A giant anaconda of a hose is crawling from the hydrant on the street to the building's basement window.

Smoke billows out the windows as sharp, burnt rubber bites at my nostrils and creates a haze in the air, like it all could be a dream.

I think of the first residents that moved into the building just over a hundred years ago. Their optimism bright, standing proudly on what would have been the outskirts of a suburban town back then. How beautiful it must have been—how those careful details stand apart from all the glass-and-metal boxes that have grown around it.

All of them are dead now, along with any worries they had.

Firefighters are going in and out of the building carrying equipment and yelling instructions at each other.

The crowd of residents that were at the meeting huddle together on the sidewalk, leaning on each other. Irene is outside, being propped up by Carmen on one side and Sami on the other. With buggy eyes and a wagging

tail, Ernest tugs the leash Sami's gripping to try to make it to me. He's unaware of the monster I am.

The Chaudhrys' son was home but made it safely out with what looks like his dad's guitar. Fighting Couple also look like they were inside when it happened—Marcus in ratty sweats with his hair mussed; Janine with wet, stringy hair and a robe, like she was caught in the shower.

There's a comforting tap on my shoulder. "Mona joon, are you okay?"

Ava and Abu have emerged from the diner to join the thickening crowd. I swallow over the lump in my throat and nod. Soon they will realize there's a barrier between me and the rest of the building residents. Soon they'll find out the truth about me, like everyone else.

They make their way toward Irene, and for a flash, Sami's gaze—his eyes like open wounds—land on me, before quickly diverting.

A few random onlookers peek out of their windows across the street. Some have started coming out of their buildings to cross their arms and chat with each other and disguise the thrill of it all.

A firefighter exits the building with a little orange cat, and Jane runs to the edge of the caution tape to greet him. I watch the relief painted on her face and wish I could hug her. At least Carmen makes his way to help her.

What do you save in a fire? I asked myself that question six weeks ago, when a false alarm sent us scattering across the lawn. It had taken me too long to remember the answer then.

My dad's box.

The urge to run inside—to save it, to open it—is unbearable, but I'm stuck here alone again. All those days it sat abandoned in my closet. My throat dries with every gasp of burnt air. Every ash in the wind could be my dad's last gift to me, floating by.

The tears come without meaning to. I should've known there's never enough time.

Thankfully, fire suppression eventually no longer seems necessary. Firefighters start opening windows to ventilate the remaining smoke from the building. Earlier the firefighters opened Norm's deck door and took out the gas jerry cans I'd seen in his closet way back during that first electrical inspection. I overheard Norm clarify that they were just full of water for the

shutdowns Irene would sometimes have, as he didn't want to have to leave for drinking water.

The group of onlookers surrounding the building has gotten rudely large. My neighbors all lean on each other like they're propping each other up. It's been three hours of anxiously awaiting our fate. It's odd how panic can dull if you give it long enough.

It's pretty clear the fire started in the basement, which is a small relief. There's only the laundry room and the unfinished rec room. I swallow at the thought of all the work Jane and Carmen put into cleaning that place up.

I'm standing with Marcus and Janine. Since they were home during the city hall meeting, they're the only ones who don't yet know of my betrayal, though I'm sure the news will eventually spread.

The daylight has started to fade. A chill has spread through the air, and some of the residents are huddled beneath blankets the fire team provided. Earlier Abu and Sami handed out mugs of tea while Ava supplied muffins. Abu's voice was flat and distant when he offered me my cup—Sami must have told him when they went into the restaurant.

Sami's keeping the diner open for people to wait it out.

Some of residents from the newer condos even came around offering deck chairs and water to the neighbors. Sami offered them tea, too, and I even overheard him joking about giving them the "locals only" pricing from now on. A weird kind of undeserved pride overcomes me to see such an olive branch amid all this destruction.

Now, everyone's formed circles to sit and chat just behind the barriers. Fighting Couple is just ahead of me, bickering as always.

"They've got to be getting us in soon!" Marcus huffs. He's got an angry scab on his forehead from anxiously picking his zit this fine evening.

"They have to wait until it's been cleared as safe," Janine hisses back.

Marcus narrows his eyes on her, mouth set in a sneer. Ladies, if your man ever looks at you like that, run.

So far, I've gathered via snippets of conversation that Fighting Couple came home from camping at Kananaskis around an hour before we left for the meeting. They started their laundry, made a snack (I'm taking a wild guess it was hot dogs), and then the fire alarm started blaring right after Janine stepped in the shower.

Finally, the most in-charge firefighter makes his way out and calls, "All right, residents of Valleyview Apartments. I have some updates to share."

Our weary group huddles closer. “The source of the incident was traced back to a faulty dryer that had a cracked internal vent. It looks like smaller items, likely socks and underwear, may have been sucked into the interior of the unit over several months—”

“Wait! Jane calls. “Did you say underwear?”

Holy shit! Realization dawns on me, too, as the firefighter nods with a practiced sort of patience.

Jane and I lock eyes in an instant, like a momentary escape into our friendship as I mouth “*Panty thief!*”

Her head bobs in agreement and it feels like *something*. But then Jane seems to catch herself and her expression drops to become blank. She turns from me to nuzzle her cat.

“Unfortunately, once the fire ignited it was able to progress quite quickly through the surrounding area,” the fireman continues, arms crossed like a human Smokey the Bear. “It made its way through the basement area and up the stairwell.” His eyes cast down as he inhales through his teeth. Like he’s bracing for the final blow. We all hold our breath. Across the lawn, Irene seems to be full-on shaking. I’m glad Abu is standing with her. “Which unfortunately means the integrity of the entire structure will need to be fully assessed before anyone can reenter.”

The murmured questions pull through the crowd in little waves once again.

“Can you put this in plain terms for a regular guy like me?” Carmen calls out. The low evening sun casts a harsh glow on his face, deepening the stress lines etched into his temples. I think about all the items stored inside his apartment. His livelihood—his means to support his daughter—tucked inside a building he can no longer access.

Jane huffs. “So, we’re fucked.”

And Sami puts a hand on Carmen’s shoulder. “Yeah, it means you all can’t go back in for a while longer now.”

The fire marshal continues. “While we complete the investigation and clear the structural integrity, this building must be deemed uninhabitable.”

A groan sweeps through our crowd in unison, like we’re all one single disappointed beast.

“But my tenants, where are they supposed to sleep?” Irene demands from her little chair with her tiny little dog curled in her lap. “They can’t all stay with my niece through marriage.”

“Yeah, I have, like . . . nowhere to go,” Jane calls. Worry lines seep into her brows.

Another firefighter comes toward the crowd. A short-haired brunette woman. “There are a few options we can provide—and our teams can help facilitate hotel bookings. It’s important to know if you have a renters insurance policy.”

“What about insurance for my work I’ll be missing out on,” Carmen calls.

“And I have nothing to wear to work. I’ll be fired if I wear this every day.” Jane looks down at her bright floral jumpsuit.

“My work computer is in there,” Norm mumbles.

“I have an extra room,” Sami calls, but his jaw ticks and he carefully faces away from me. “I’m sure I could fit two of you if someone is willing to couch surf. Right, Dad?”

Abu nods. “Of course. We have to stick together, friends.”

I make my way to the group, my heartbeat pounding in my ears as I call out, “Hey, guys.”

The sea of concerned faces once again turn to anger as they lock eyes with me.

“I’m so sorry this is happening. Norm, if you want, I can help pick up a new laptop from our office.” The group is silent, avoiding direct eye contact. Like I’m a ghost. “Jane, I have some extra clothes at my office—”

“That’s okay,” she interrupts. “We’re good.”

“Yeah, no worries. I’ll figure it out,” Norm mumbles. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and angles away from me.

I feel wetness pooling behind my eyes. “Guys, I know things are weird and everything, but I really do care about you.” The whine in my voice crumbles through my words. “I want to help.”

Carmen’s voice cuts through the crowd. “Mona, I think we’ve had enough of your *help* to last us a little while.”

He practically radiates frost, every inch of him steeped in disdain.

A shiver crawls up my neck as their pain sinks into me, quiet and undeniable.

Shame is an old friend to me by now. Still, the cold burn of it feels fresh as I start to back away.

I turn my back on the smoking building, on my friends, on the place where I finally felt at home. Leave it all behind.

Once I'm far enough down the block that I'm out of sight, I pull out my phone. I only have one place left to go.

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Classic Post-Fire Malaise

It was the worst of times: Three days after the fire; after I biffed everything good in my life.

I'm holed up in what would be considered my old bedroom, although the only thing recognizable about it from my tenure here is the pink carpet filled with old snags that seem to press into me when I walk the ground, cruel in their unpredictability, and the single bed with the terrible mattress.

Since I've left, this room has become stuffed with dusty exercise equipment, a box of my mom's weird-ass wigs that she thinks are "fancy" for some reason (even though every occasion she wears them, someone is deeply unsettled), some holiday decorations, and a whole-ass porcelain sink from when my mom had the basement salon working.

The clutter doesn't matter, since I've been spending most of my time in bed looking at my phone. Alice sits on the late '90s bedside table. After I called my mom to ask if I could stay awhile, I did in fact remember Alice existed and asked a firefighter to rescue her. She loved the fanfare of being carried out in a burly firefighter's arms, so we've agreed not to talk about the moment when I forgot about her.

When I first returned to this home that holds so many of my old wounds, I drafted several texts to Jane and Sami but deleted them all before hitting send. Now, I've unfortunately found my way to some earwax removal TikToks and it's been sucking up a good part of my waking hours.

“Mona!” My mom doesn’t knock as she clicks open my door. She’s in a horrible leopard-print blouse and her perfume has a strong musky bite to it. “You’re still lying in bed? What is this type of loser life?” Her brow angles at me in disapproval. “You should come out with me.”

If I could have gone anywhere else, I would have. But I have no real friends anymore, nothing left that I can call my own. I had no choice but to return to the childhood I’ve spent my entire adult life trying to outrun.

And to deal with this lady as my roommate.

“I’m just a little tired,” I reply. Ever since I got here, I’ve been so exhausted. It’s like all my years of running on a treadmill have finally caught up with me. I’ve not been able to sleep.

“Well, you need to get more healthy in life.” She tuts. “Come with me and Auntie to get a burger.”

“That is . . . not what I expected you to say,” I mutter, rolling over to bury my cheek in the pillow. “But I’m good. I’ll have some Cup Noodles when it feels right.”

She claps her hands together so hard, it’s probably fairer to call it a slap. “No, Mona! You need to go outside. Come on, do your hair up and get up now.”

I inhale long and hard, the dust from the Bowflex mixing with her perfume. “Mom, I just want to relax my last few days before work. Besides, I have nothing to wear.”

When I first got here, I ventured to Supershops for a package of underwear, some sweats, and toiletries, but mostly I’ve been borrowing my mom’s clothes. And if I didn’t want to leave the house already, the thought of someone seeing me in my mom’s neon sweaters and bedazzled jeans is enough to keep me tied to the bed.

“What’s wrong with what you’re wearing?”

“If you’re asking, I’m not sure how to answer.” Currently I’m sporting her red leggings that feature rhinestones up the sides. “I really would rather stay in. I have to go back to work next week, and that’s going to be a lot.”

The truth is, I’m not sure how in only three days I’m going to walk back into my office and do my job again. Part of it is my former friends—I’m going to be siloed from the office culture, constantly having to watch my back from now on. But also, it’s the job itself. Going back to doing something that’s sometimes hard to rationalize; I have to convince myself I

care deeply about a product, no matter what it is, so I can convince others to care about it too.

And I can't bring myself to care about *anything* anymore. All these years trying to get promoted feel like I was chasing a carrot on a stick. I didn't really care about the work itself, so what was it I wanted? To be successful, admired, for people like Olivia to tell me I'm worthy? I no longer care for witnesses to validate my life.

My mom stares at me, contemplating my pitiful pose curled up on the mattress. "Okay, then. That was a long vacation, after all."

Right, I never even told my mom the technical truth. She tilts her head, assessing. "You will probably be very busy when you get back."

I'm so tired of holding up this façade.

Just as she turns toward the door, and before I realize what I'm doing, I call back, "Mom, I need to tell you something."

She halts mid-step and twists to face me. "Yes?"

I take a deep breath, briefly closing my eyes. "This wasn't really a vacation."

Curiosity twists her brow. "What was it then?"

"It was sort of a . . . disciplinary leave."

"Discipline?" Her forehead creases. "What did you do for such a thing?"

I'd always imagined that telling my mom I'd failed would be the worst feeling ever, but instead I'm strangely hollow. "I was rude to a big client. He said something that reminded me of . . . Dad, and I just . . ." I inhale as she drags her eyes slowly up to lock with mine. "Mom, when Dad died, I tried to shut that chapter away. But I've really been struggling with it." The words feel sluggish as they make their way out, even as my heart begins to pick up speed.

I had to keep my pain from her because I knew she couldn't carry it—not when she was drowning in her own grief. The few times I tried, she always found a way to sidestep it. But now, I've left her no room to look away. And as I wait for her response, I realize I'm barely breathing.

Her eyes drop to the floor. She doesn't say a word.

Disappointment tears through me, but I force myself to press on.

"Growing up with him, with his disease, I just never felt like I was . . . like things were stable or that I could relax." She's gone completely still.

"That's why I got out as soon as I could."

She nods slowly, but still doesn't speak.

“I worked and I struggled, and I was so determined to have a different life.”

She suddenly blinks, as if coming out of spell. Her eyes go wide. Finally, she whispers, “We were so proud of you. Everything you did we couldn’t believe.”

What he did never felt like pride. “At my graduation, why couldn’t he just show up for me sober? Why did he have to ruin everything I worked for?”

She presses her pink frosted fingernails to her temples, massaging them in slow circles, like these memories are physically hurting her mind. “He was so proud of you those times. He felt like you had done so much with such a hard time getting there . . . but he felt very guilty too.”

My mom is stiller than I’ve ever seen her, her body taut with tension. Yet in the corners of her eyes, tears begin to shimmer.

She takes a tiny step closer to my bed and lets out a small breath. “Your dad was a very difficult man. I used to wish I never loved him.” Now the shimmer in her eyes lets loose. A big, fat tear falls heavy as she sits on the bed. I sit up automatically to put my hand on her shoulder. “I sometimes wish I had given up, but I always believed he would get better. It was always so difficult.” She leans into me as soft sobs escape her, each one trembling against my shoulder.

I try to take a breath as the threat of a sob presses my own throat. “I stopped believing in him, Mom. I didn’t want to be near him; I wanted space. And now I keep replaying his final hours—his final *years*—wondering what I missed. But more than that . . . what *he* missed too. And I just . . .” I pause, the weight of it catching in my chest. “It hurts.”

It’s like all the pain shatters all at once, and the sobs come rushing out in a sudden burst. I wipe at my eyes, overwhelmed and breathless.

“Mona,” my mom coos, pressing closer into me. “He loved you. He was so happy you were happy and he understood. When he died, he—”

“But I *wasn’t* happy, Mom.” I inhale. “That’s the thing. It’s been exhausting, always feeling like I had to be perfect. Like if I wasn’t, I’d somehow prove I was just like him . . . or worse, that it was who I really was deep down. I tried so hard to be different from the way I grew up. I chased success, control, anything that might finally make me feel worthy of respect. But I don’t want to be that person anymore.”

Another sob breaks loose from somewhere deep inside me, raw and uncontainable.

Mom rubs my back and whispers, "It's okay."

I wipe my eyes and look at her. "I don't want to be that way anymore. I don't feel like myself anymore." I stare at my socks, the plain white ones I picked up from Supershops. "And I don't want it to be the same with us. I want to talk to you and not feel like it's so stressful all the time."

"I ask you too much," she whispers.

Every fiber of my being wants to resist putting blame on my mom, for burdening her when she's so fragile. But I can't bear getting this far and not emptying myself completely.

"You're always . . . you call me all the time arguing with someone or asking for help that I can't give. But I can't tell you about *my* problems. It's like my lifeboat is sinking."

Her sobs pour out in raw waves. When they finally subside, she nods slowly, gasping for breath like she's just surfaced from deep underwater. "Mona, I'm so sorry. Parents should help their kids. Not the other way around."

"It's not that I don't want to help you. But when you argue with strangers or blow all your money on something ridiculous, it feels like you . . ." I pause, trying to find the words. "I know you're sad about Dad, but your anger with the world. Your grief. I think it would help if we both started talking about *that* more."

"Okay." She drags her hand across her red, swollen cheek. "I think so too." She nods like she's confirming something to herself. "Do you want to hear about the last few weeks with him?"

No, the part of my brain that's been in charge these last few years screams at me. It's how I've managed to keep myself going all this time—to shove away the things that hurt, focus on what I could control. But the smaller, wounded child in the back of my mind finally finds the voice to say, "I would."

Instead of going out with my aunt, Mom and I share an unexpectedly amazing burger together. I'm still stuck in those awful leggings and instantly regret it the moment we step into the restaurant. But with every juicy bite and fries dipped in mayo, the world around us fades away.

We trade stories, weaving memories back and forth, filling in the blanks that somehow connect and deepen what we know about each other. The hard memories surface, but so do the laughter-filled ones. The ones she clings to most, and the ones I wish I could erase.

As the last fries disappear, a comfortable silence settles between us, a quiet understanding passing without words. For the first time in a long while, it feels like we're really seeing each other again.

And when it's time to leave, she pulls me in for a hug.

This time, I lean on her shoulders.

The next morning, post-shower and pre-coffee, my phone that's been lifeless these past few days suddenly springs to action—the sight of an incoming call jolts me with surprise.

My stomach lurches when I check the caller ID. I hit accept. "Irene?"

"Mona, so delightful to hear your kind and caring voice." The sarcasm is unmatched.

I wince, knowing I deserve it. "Irene, how are you?"

"Oh, you know. Just peachy. The place I've called home my whole life has burned, and now it looks like my insurance company isn't as nice as I'd always believed they'd be based on their brochures."

"What's happening? Are they not willing to pay out?"

"We'll see." Her voice tuts. "They're really trying to find a way to pass the buck, it seems."

"Yeah." I nod, even though she can't see me. "That sounds about right. Man, I'm sorry you have to deal with this on top of everything." The idea that a big company, probably run by some clone of Bob Wolch, is treating Irene this way infuriates me.

"Well, in any case," Irene sighs, "it does look like the building is going to be out of commission awhile longer, with all the damage."

"That's too bad." Thoughts of all the tenants and what that means for them bounce around in my head. "What are you . . . I mean, are you still going through with the sale?"

"The sale!" Irene hoots. "That's the funny part. Even though the buyer planned to tear it down anyway, now that the property isn't in the same condition as when they made their offer, they've found a loophole. They

want to lowball me, and they know I may have to take whatever I can get if insurance keeps up their good work.”

Fuck. That sounds exactly like the kind of move a big corporate fuck like Bob would pull. God, I can’t believe how much I hate so many of the people I’m supposed to work for. “Irene, that’s just awful. You don’t deserve this.”

“Mmm. Yeah, it’s going to be a real pain in the caboose. Almost like that water shutoff last month wasn’t such a big deal in retrospect.” It’s the cheeky twang in her voice. All those weeks ago when I wrote on the board, she must have known. I’ve given this lady a lot less credit than she was owed. A habit of mine lately.

“Irene, I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault. Well, not *this* time.”

I close my eyes and rock back on my heels. “I meant I’m sorry for it all. I shouldn’t have helped Lana without talking to you first.”

She harrumphs. “That’s right. You shouldn’t have. But it is what it is, and I hear you had your selfish reasons.”

A familiar pang of guilt swirls through me. “Irene, I mean it, though. It was wrong of me and I—”

She cuts in, her voice hard. “Honey, this is boring, and I was stuck alone with a cast for weeks.” She feigns a yawn. “I’m calling because the fire department has allotted a time for everyone to gather their things without the building collapsing and causing you to die a horribly painful death, or whatever the fire marshal said. All residents can come by tomorrow evening anytime between five and eight.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “*All* of us come at the same time?”

“That’s right. That’s when the guy can walk you through safely.”

Instantly, a strong cocktail of conflicting emotions swirls in my chest at the thought of seeing everyone again.

“Yeah, I imagine most will be there at five. I just wanted to know if you’ll be able to come, or if you need to schedule a different time in case you have a conflict, or if your fear of the others doesn’t allow you to make it with the group.”

I lock eyes with Alice.

No matter how scared I am to face them, it’s better than not ever saying goodbye.

“I’ll see you then,” I croak.

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A Quite Moving Day

My mom had to go into work to thread a bunch of women's eyebrows for some bridal party this evening, so I ended up grabbing an Uber. The driver was objectively aggressive, which did little for my nerves. When we turned onto Memorial Drive, the driver honked and flipped-off some family in a Subaru. Twice! And when he vented to me about the assholes on the road, I felt it best to agree with everything he said from the backseat of his car. I even added one: "*Yeah, this city is fully of shit drivers.*" For good measure.

I was carrying a couple of cardboard boxes to pack my clothes in. Showing up to Valleyview Apartments in my mom's bedazzled Britney Spears T-shirt wasn't exactly the vision I had for this day, but it was better than any of the silky blouses on offer.

I'm a little bit early when we pull up in front of the building, but already most of the residents are settled out front, hoisting their own boxes and suitcases. Norm looks like he got a much shorter haircut. It suits him. He and Carmen stand together, while Divorced Dad and Fighting Couple perch on opposite sides of the front gables like British guards. Behind them, all three of the Chaudhrys converse with a firefighter.

My driver taps his fingers against the wheel as I struggle to remove all my boxes. As he pulls away, I tap my phone to give him his five stars and tip.

Right. I look at the gathering crowd as I pocket my phone. All of them seem to be in lively discussions. No one's glanced in my direction.

It's definitely time to face the music.

I make my way toward the small group as one of the mustached fireman I recognize from the first drill starts going over instructions about safety and warning people not to open their refrigerators since the power has been out for days.

I can't help it as my eyes drag toward the diner. There's nothing to see, nobody perched underneath the familiar Corner Coffee & Food sign. Sami's not changing out the communal water bowl for the neighborhood dogs, or putting out food for the crows in hopes they'll one day give him a button, or any of the other thoughtful little things he does. In fact, through the window, I don't see any silhouettes. The lights aren't on. I bite back my disappointment. Obviously, he's not going to come here today.

As I merge into the group that's forming outside the front entrance, Carmen nudges Norm. "I'm not looking forward to what remains of the clam chowder I had for lunch the night of the fire."

Norm shakes his head. "I had just cleaned my fridge, but there was still milk inside." He angles his head and spots me standing behind him. His easy expression falls in an instant.

"Hey, Norm." I wave awkwardly. "I like your haircut."

"Thanks," Norm mutters, keeping his jaw tight.

"*That's* what's different about you!" Carmen smacks his back. "I thought something was a little funny but didn't want to ask. It looks very sharp."

"Yeah, I cut it for work." His hands clench into little fists around the bottom of his shirt. "I've been going into the office these past few days since I don't have my laptop, and you know how it is with the corporate folks." His eyes flash to me. "If I can get my computer today, I'll work from my Airbnb."

"You've been going in?" I can't help but interject. "Wow, that's great." My tone is too bright, and it only seems to spur more cold looks my way. "How has it been?" I press on.

At least now Norm is looking at me full-on. "It's . . . actually not as bad as I thought. I might do it more often." He shuffles his brown leathery shoes against the cracked pavement.

I nudge closer to Carmen, who looks like he's been getting a lot of sun. "It's good to see you too. I'm sure you're looking forward to getting all

your stuff back.”

Carmen exhales sharply, his urge to complain apparently outweighing his anger toward me. “It’ll be a pain moving all my crap into the new storage unit, but I supposed it’ll be for the best, long term.” He rubs his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “My sister said she don’t want me bringing none of my clients by while I’m staying with her. Ah, shit—” He stands straight and grins toward Fancy Widow, who is wheeling an actual old-fashioned trunk up the path. “I’ll go see if Lorna needs any help. I’ll catch you later, Norm.”

Even though he wasn’t talking to me, I call out, “It’s good to see you doing okay.”

He hesitates, not fully turning. “Take care, Mona.” He waves over his shoulder. Carmen never looked at me once.

With Carmen gone, Norm starts easing away from me toward the Chaudhrys. Once again, I’m alone in this sea of people.

I deserve it.

I glance around at the pods of people. The Chaudhrys look pretty immersed in conversation, and Fighting Couple sound like they’re having another spat, which, oddly enough, is kind of comforting. (Unfortunately, the feeling fades quickly when I’m personally victimized by overhearing something about pube trimmings on Janine’s sister’s bathmat.)

I’m officially here alone.

I scan the crowd in both directions, but still no sign of Jane. Maybe she had to take several buses to get here? All day I’ve been building up in my head all the worst things she’d say to me—but now I worry that losing her home might’ve pushed Jane to do something drastic, like reach out to Trevor. Honestly, I’d take a million of her insults without blinking if it meant knowing she’s okay.

The firefighter begins instructing us all about how to collect our stuff—how many rounds we can make, what size items, where to leave trash since the parkade dumpster area is blocked off. I learn that some tenants plan on keeping their bigger furniture here in hopes that this is only temporary.

We’re brought in a few at a time. I linger at the back of the line, letting everyone take their time. The sunlight fades, and the crowd gradually thins. When it’s my turn, I’m alone. I follow the fireman into the lobby. None of the fake-cinnamon or cabbage smells of home greet me. Instead, there’s a

slight smoky dinge to the air and a dark dusting of soot on most every surface.

The whiteboard in the lobby has been wiped clean. Someone removed the cum chair and the little library cabinet. They were probably smoke damaged, but still, a feeling of loss sweeps through me. Their removal feels so final.

When my eyes drop to the floor, it's a mess. Stains and ashy footprints from boots stomping through mark up the ancient unmarkable carpet.

This poor building.

A sudden, overwhelming urge hits me—to remember this moment. I don't think I'll ever see this building again, and it feels too important to leave without marking it somehow, without carrying a piece of it with me.

I pull out my phone to take one final picture of my beloved lobby when I hear, "You investigating the panty thief again?"

I turn and lower my phone. Jane is standing by the open door in a plain grey dress. Her hair is tied in a nondescript low bun. It's dyed the same color as when I last saw her, though the inky black shade has started to fade.

"Jane!" I can't help but move toward her, overwhelming relief that she's okay overtaking my better judgment. "It's so good to see you! Where did you get those clothes?"

She takes a small step back and crosses her arms. "Nothing exciting. Someone I work with lent them to me."

"Wow, someone from *your* work?" I joke, trying to keep things light. I'm just glad she's talking to me at all.

She raises a brow. "Yeah, I let them know my situation and I guess some of them are nicer than I once thought. Or my creep radar isn't as good as it once was." She sighs, glancing around the messy lobby. "Anyway. Lots for me to do now. But I was just wondering . . ." She pauses, chewing on her bottom lip for a moment. "That day I caught you taking pictures of the chair, was that really about the panty thief?"

My eyes dart to my shoes. I hate making her feel like our friendship wasn't authentic. "Jane, I'm so sorry for so much."

She nods like this confirms every bad thought she has about me. "That's what I figured."

Her words hit me like pellets. "I'm sorry I lied. But I really enjoyed hanging out together," I plead. "I wish you we could still be friends."

She's already backing toward the staircase. "Me too. But I guess we're all going to be starting new lives again now, so I'll be off."

I wait in the lobby for her footsteps to disappear before I dare follow.

As I leave my apartment, boxes of clothes in hand, I notice Irene's door is open.

I put down my stuff and walk over. I don't see anyone. The plants that were once scattered throughout her apartment are now gathered neatly in milk crates by the door.

I rap my knuckles against the wood.

From the back of the apartment, she yells, "Oh for crying out loud, I said don't rush me! You try packing your entire life into a bunch of Tupperware containers!"

Her bedroom door flies open. Irene emerges in a matching pink sweatsuit, face flushed. She's on two feet, the boot gone.

"Irene!" I call. "Your cast is off."

"Yes. Exciting how that can happen after six weeks, isn't it?" Her lips are pressed tight. "What can I do you for now? Did Lana ask you to riffle through my silverware because I'm too old to eat solids? Or maybe you're looking to kidnap Ernest for the ransom? Because he's out with Sami, so you'll have to wait."

My chest leaps at Sami's name, just as quickly as it drops.

"Irene," I say softly, "I understand why you're upset with me. I want to formally apologize for all of it."

"Those are pretty words." Her eyes cast downward. "If you'd brought ice cream, though, that would've been better."

I can't stand seeing this proud, boisterous woman looking so defeated.

"Irene, I truly mean—"

She hacks a short laugh. "Mona, please stop apologizing. It's very annoying."

I can't stand walking away from her without her knowing how much it tears me up to know how I hurt her. "When I first agreed to help Lana, I thought I was helping you too. I should've realized—"

"Goddamnit, I *accept*." She throws her hands above her head. "Truth is, I understand the reasoning behind it all. Things weren't good here, and Lana

was right about that. I really did have no option but to sell. All you did was clean things up around here. No one signed those papers but me.”

I fight the urge to go to her, to offer her support. I hate that she’s blaming herself. But the fact that she might be willing to forgive me—that alone fills my heart with a flicker of hope.

“It still stings knowing you worked with Lana and never spoke to me about it.” Irene looks down at her orthopedic slippers. “I’d been your landlord for years and Lana just met you, but you trusted her more than the lady who put a roof over your head and looked past your questionable fashion choices.” She squints at my mom’s Britney T-shirt. “Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I’ve lost my senses.”

I nod furiously. “You’re absolutely right. I should’ve respected you more.” I pause, considering my words, how generic they sound. I want her to understand how much I mean it. So I add, “You know, doing this job for even a few weeks—I realize how truly hard it is. What an amazing landlady you’ve been to all these people.”

Her lips twitch at this. “Well, thanks. I’m sure when I’m alone at the retirement home with a room the size of my asshole, those words will be of great comfort.” She shuffles toward a pile of shoeboxes that seem to have been repurposed for knitting supplies. “Now I should get a move on.”

I glance around her apartment—chaotic and worn with age. She grew up here. Some of the ancient furniture pieces probably belonged to her parents. It breaks my heart to think of her walking away from an entire life built within these walls. Everything she’s seen and done taken away from her that fast.

“Irene, I want to help you.”

“Oh, good god.” She rolls her eyes. “We talked about this.”

I put up both my hands in a placating gesture. “I know. And this time it’s you in the driver’s seat. But I’ve had my fair share of run-ins with corporate assholes—hell, I used to be one. Maybe I can help you turn the tide.”

She finally backs away enough to let me past the threshold, and she shuffles to her favorite chair. “Okay, I’m listening.”

The firemen eventually collect us from Irene’s unit and help us carry the rest of our things down the stairs. The streetlamps are on. Irene’s ancient car is parked on the street, so I help her load it up. I’m halfway inside the trunk

trying to Tetris the boxes into place when footsteps sound on the pavement behind us, along with a familiar wheezing sound.

I peer up and find Ernest straining against his leash with all his might, eyes bugging out as he leaps on his hind legs toward me.

Sami laughs breathlessly. “I don’t know what’s gotten into the guy. He was like a horse to a barn as soon as we got up—” Sami cuts himself off at the sight of me. His expression freezes.

A tight drumbeat pulses in my chest, and a flush creeps up my temples. I focus on the tube bouncing against my legs, petting the soft fur of his head.

Meanwhile, my heart pounds and my temples warm. I focus on petting the lump of dog that is now on my lap.

“Thank you, Sami,” Irene calls, yet she’s focused her knowing little grin on me. “Would you mind helping Mona with her boxes? She left them in the lobby.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I say quickly. “I can handle them. Plus, the firefighters are around.”

Sami’s jaw ticks. He keeps his attention directed at Irene as he says, “No problem. Those ones right there?” His thumb points over his shoulder toward the entrance.

“Yeah.” I stand. “I’ll help. Irene, I’ll call you to go over things soon.”

“Of course, dear.” Her grin is still knowing as she settles into the driver’s seat. Ernest sticks his head out of the passenger window and gets in one last scritch under his chin.

Sami’s already bounding toward the lobby. I chase after him. “Hey, Sami! You really don’t have to.”

“It’s all good,” he answers, but his tone is flat as a pancake. He’s already stacked two of my boxes, hoisting them in his flexed arms. And I’m brought back to that first night when I burst into the diner. How I wish I could go back in time.

I pick up one of the boxes. “Sami, I’m really sorry. There’s so much I wish I could take back.”

“Same,” he mumbles as he makes his way outside. He’s moving so fast I’m forced to chase after him. “Sami, please, can we at least talk?”

Sami finally stops short. He carefully places the boxes on the lawn next to the sidewalk. “Look, Mona. Could we skip all this?”

“Skip it?”

He rubs his chin, the scratch against his stubble audible in the quiet. “I’m just . . . I’m dealing with things getting harder and harder for my business, and a lot of my customers—my *friends*—are fucked, and my parents are stressed, and that means Abu’s heart is . . . well, you know.” His face crumbles. Deep lines crease his forehead, etched there like the days have been pressing down on him one by one.

I’ve been so focused on getting Sami to forgive me for what I did, I didn’t think about all the other ways he’s hurting right now.

“Okay,” I nod. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I need to back off.”

“Great.” Sami’s expression evens out. He looks at the boxes on the lawn. “Here okay? Or can I bring them to a car?”

“Here’s great. I still need to grab a few more things before I call an Uber.” My mouth is suddenly dry. “I’ll have to track down a firefighter for that, so I guess . . . I guess I won’t be seeing you again.”

His head dips, his eyes briefly closing. “Good luck with everything, Mona. I’m sure you’ll land on your feet.” He raps his knuckles on the pile of boxes, then moves to cross the street.

But before he steps onto the tarmac, he pauses. I don’t allow myself to hope.

“You were right about me, though.” He doesn’t turn to face me. I watch the tight hunch of his shoulder blades as he stares ahead at the diner. “I shouldn’t have clung to the past so hard. I should’ve listened about appealing to new customers. Made some changes while I still could. Maybe it could’ve saved things.” He lets out a huff. “Anyway, back to it.”

I watch as he makes his way to the empty restaurant and out of my life for the last time.

My mom is still not home when my Uber driver drops me off with my big boxes of clothes and toiletries, and one more small box I rescued from deep in my closet. I bring everything to my room, and then sit on my bed with my dad’s box, running my thumb over his handwriting.

The flap of paper is still hanging open from when I removed the tape during my last attempt to open the package. But every time I move a finger to rip the paper, I hesitate. When I finally lock eyes with Alice, she blows a tiny, disappointed bubble at me, and I know she’s right.

I *meant* to open this package a million times before, only to stop myself. Then it nearly went up in flames. I now understand that we don't get forever. I need to rip the Band-Aid off before my chance slips away.

I pull at the paper, a strange certainty hitting me before it even tears. It's like something takes over, and I tear it open without hesitation.

Pez.

A whole bunch of them. Still in their individual boxes.

My heart stops.

It almost feels like a prank. Like my dad is playing some joke on me from beyond the grave.

Princess Peach, Darth Vader, a random bunny, Woody from *Toy Story*.

I look from Alice's bowl back to the box in disbelief. For five years, he didn't have any reason to give me a Pez dispenser. But every time I saw him, he did anyway, saying: "It's interest owing." And suddenly, all his words—all his apologies—seem to hang in the air around me, enveloping me like water.

I stare into the abyss of Pez and notice a piece of paper is buried among them. I tug and pull out a Mylar envelope. On top is written *Mona. All the moments I treasure and the ones I wished I'd done differently.*

I pull the pictures out slowly. There's a photo of me from the kindergarten play he slept through; I remember the way my little heart crushed seeing his empty seat next to Mom's. A snapshot of nine-year-old me sitting on top of a toboggan; he was too hungover to pull the sled up after one run. Photos from my graduations and Christmases—me in my itchy stockings and felt dresses. (Not pictured: when he passed out under the tree in the middle of wrapping presents when I was seven, ruining the Santa myth.)

The photos continue into my teen and adult years.

But when I reach what should be the end—the years when I stopped talking to him—it doesn't stop.

Next he has a printout of my corporate headshot, my updates on LinkedIn about my promotion. The next is a newspaper clipping of an ad I ran during my first solo campaign.

All the moments of celebration that I *didn't* include him in.

All those years when he was sober, but I still didn't see him. The moments when I couldn't forgive him—and neither could he.

I hold the tears back as I look again at the box. He had been quietly collecting all those Pez dispensers for years. He was so sorry.

But I was so mad.

I never even got to say goodbye to him. Those last few weeks, when he was trying to reach out to me and have coffee, I could've told him that I loved him. That I knew he was trying his best. When my mom told me he was in the hospital, I couldn't even leave work.

It hits me like a fresh shock: He's *never* coming back. How can a person just be gone? How can it end without ending? Without there being a goodbye?

Burnsland Cemetery is not even a ten-minute walk from my mom's place, but it feels like crossing a desert.

I haven't been here since the funeral. I turn down the second sidewalk where he's kept, and without a doubt I know which one is his. Its grey stone and arched shape have imprinted in my brain.

I feel like the stone is staring at me as I complete my approach. Accusing. Disappointed. Sad.

I take a deep breath. The dry tears tighten my cheeks as I begin to speak. "I wish things were different too," I start. "It wasn't always okay, how I grew up. There will be memories I'll struggle with for as long as live." I pause, resting my hand on the cold stone. "But I knew you loved me. I knew how sorry you were, how much regret you lived with. I understood how hard it was for you too." My lungs constrict.

I gasp, letting the cool evening air calm me. "You really did work so hard to get sober, to try to stay sober, and I wish you'd known that I knew that. You didn't choose the disease, but how you fought it, I admired you. I just . . . I always thought there'd be more time to tell you."

I pull out the Pez dispenser I'd been carrying around in my purse for six weeks. I knew what it meant when I bought it that night; I don't want to live with regret anymore. I don't want to hurt people to get ahead. I don't want to keep running from my past just to feel like I'm worthy. I don't want to do something I hate just to feel like shame can't reach me. Yoshi stares back at me.

I think I've know what I needed to do for a while, but seeing my dad's box, being here . . . It all feels so obvious now.

“Dad, I’m quitting my job.” And even though I’m speaking to a man who can’t answer, saying these words here feels more final than the idea of emailing my boss. (Obviously, I’ll need to do that next.)

I leave Yoshi on top of my dad’s headstone. “I hope you’ll forgive me too,” I whisper.

And as I walk away, seeing all these markers for lives lived, knowing my dad could’ve done better, but so could I, so could everyone—I finally feel the weight of all my mistakes ease, just a bit.

All we have is the time we’re given. There’s time enough to make mistakes. But if we’re lucky, we get enough time to make amends.

And so long as I’m here, it’s not too late.

Buried between piles of blazers and work trousers (all now dreadfully wrinkled), I extract the shoebox Irene gave me before I left Valleyview Apartments. It’s scuffed up and smells faintly of mothballs and old paper.

I open the lid and find several paper envelopes—the kind pharmacies used to deliver photographs in after developing them. I pull dozens of photos from each and spread them out across my bed’s comforter.

There in glossy color is Valleyview Apartments, a younger, slightly fresher version—brickwork still sharp, windows less dirty, the grass out front neatly trimmed. The photo is centered on a group of kids in bell-bottoms holding balloons on the front lawn beside a birthday cake on a folding table. I flip to the next one, which seems to have been taken on the same day. A pretty middle-aged woman in high-waisted jeans is standing at the entrance to the lobby, a party hat sitting between her curls. I recognize her instantly: Irene.

There are inside shots too—the old rec room in the basement with its wood paneling and a dartboard (Carmen must never know). A giant Christmas tree in the lobby.

Next are photos from around the neighborhood. A sign for Barry’s Video & Games. The florist shop Sami had told me about, with giant bouquets in the windows and a hand-painted Open sign. A snapshot of a young couple, holding hands in front of a café with a Persian name in neon cursive. Their son, with dark brown hair and a cheeky expression, like he’s just about to start laughing. Sami. He’s standing in front of them with a juice box. The

café theme clearly hadn't lasted long. But that look in his parents' eyes? Pure pride.

And then, tucked at the bottom of the box, I find older photos—black-and-white, edges worn soft. The building looks brand new, almost proud of itself, with neat flower boxes under the windows and a hand-carved wooden sign above the door displaying its name. On either side, you can see the outlines of neighboring buildings, built in the same style—structures that are long gone now.

I sit on the bed for a long time with that shoebox open in front of me. It's a little overwhelming. I thought I knew this building—but this feels different, like Irene handed me the memories closest to her heart.

Later that afternoon, I take the whole box to a copy shop. I carefully photocopy every photo, then buy some plastic sleeves to preserve the real ones.

That night, I stay up far too late piecing everything together. It feels like the good old days, when I'd pull an all-nighter designing a presentation for a particularly demanding client.

I chose music that didn't feel manipulative, just . . . honest. I put the photos in a sequence that tells a story—not just of a building, but of time. Of care. Of belonging.

Then I built the website. A clean, simple GoFundMe page. I title it *Help Rebuild Valleyview*. I write a few paragraphs about the fire, the displaced tenants, a community in limbo. But mostly, I let the photos do the talking.

Before I can second-guess myself, I post it.

And then I share the link on Instagram. I'm social-media friends with a lot of my former clients. I'm hoping at least a few of them will repost. Supporting a feel-good local story is always a good look for a company's image.

I find a community Facebook group, and a neighborhood subreddit where everyone usually just complains about parking, and post the link there too.

I open the Valleyview Slack thread on my phone. I hover my thumb over the chat bar, then swipe the app closed.

I sit back and stare. For the first time in days, my heart feels full. Not hopeful, exactly—but grounded. Like I've done something right.

Or at least something true.

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Sami's Sammie

Two months later . . .

It's the last week of August, and summer feels like its on borrowed time. For the first time in months, I make my way to the street I used to know so well.

I never come here anymore. My new month-to-month rental is well north of the river, in a building with one broken elevator, a screaming child, and a guy who owns a literal punching bag. But it's in my budget and close to my new job, and all mine—for now.

My mom did offer to let me stay and save some of that money to get ahead, but things are going so well with us now—other than the constant stream of aunties she hosts who seem to compete for who can scream the loudest in Farsi—that I had to leave to keep things healthy.

I'm holding a manila folder cupped against my chest like a small trophy.

As I make my way up the block, a weird sort of nostalgia tugs at me. Most things are the same, but a few more orange construction fences have sprouted up. I shift my folder under my arm to give the latest addition the middle finger. (It's what my favorite diner guy would want, after all.)

“What the hell, lady!” Shit. I didn't realize a construction worker was leaning against the fence drinking a can of Monster when he caught my stray finger.

“Sorry! Thought you were my ex!” I call back. The guy shakes his head and goes back to guzzling his drink.

Irene’s waiting for me in front of Valleyview Apartments—the entrance still covered in tape with a big sign declaring it illegal to enter. As I approach, Ernest starts to go bananas, squealing and wagging his tail so fast I’m slightly worried he might go airborne.

A jittery buzz builds in my chest as I make it closer to the building, closer to the diner. By the time I reach the park, I’m practically vibrating.

“Mona,” Irene greets me. She’s wearing a floral top and sweatpants, and her hair is longer. She looks good, though. “I hope the big envelope means good news.”

“Hey!” I say. “How’s it going at Sami’s?”

Irene ended up taking the spare bedroom above the diner, and from what she’s told me, the family has been more than gracious giving her both space and plenty of food (especially ice cream).

“Oh, they’ve been lovely landlords,” Irene says. “Though the noise has been getting worse lately, with the dinner crowd.”

Finally, after a bit of pain, we were able to get insurance to agree to a settlement that would cover the repairs (which hopefully will start next week) and leave some breathing room for the months of lost income.

Finally, I look at the diner across the street. A new sign has been pasted above the entrance—light blue and white with a cleaner font.

CORNER COFFEE & (NORMAL!) FOOD

I can’t help my grin. Through the window, I spot the silhouettes of patrons gathered in the front booth, and two more at the bar. For an afternoon, I’ve never seen it so busy.

“Looks like business is good,” I say wistfully.

“Thanks to you,” Irene says. “Our little scheme has brought all the young people out. Apparently old things are cool again, so long as you have a couple of exposed Edison bulbs.”

I snort. After a few brands I used to work with shared my original video about Valleyview, influencers started to repost it too. But apparently the real draw wasn’t a local landmark in need of saving, but the photo of young Abu standing with his arms crossed behind the counter of his café.

#classicdineryyc had quickly gained traction.

“Now stop holding me in suspense, I’m an old woman and I don’t have much time left,” Irene prods me.

Rolling my eyes, I hand over the envelope. These past two months, I reached out to all my old clients and asked for donations. There were plenty of nos—especially from Bob Wolch types—but I was able to convince a few Canadian-owned businesses that helping a local community was a great look for their brand aesthetic.

I don’t wait for her to open it before blurting, “We have enough!”

Irene forgets the envelope and throws her arms around me, pulling me into her flowery blouse. As she pins me to her chest, I feel wetness against my hair. “You’re the best gamble I’ve made yet,” she murmurs. “Thank you.”

I hug her back. “Thank you for taking a chance on me.”

We’re extracting ourselves from each other’s arms when I hear the door to the diner across the street jingle. I turn and see a guy in a backward cap dropping something in the crow trading post he’d set up. And my stomach flips.

He’s in a new blue shirt—matching colors with the sign. He looks . . . well rested. He probably isn’t wiping clean tables these days, now that business is busier. He brushes his hands off on each other then turns around.

That’s when we lock eyes.

The grin falls off his face.

And my chest falls, knowing I’m the one that caused it to. I shouldn’t have come here.

“I should get out of here,” I tell Irene.

Her eyes droop, and she puts a hand on my arm.

Behind me, I hear his voice. “Mona?”

And that’s all it takes. It’s like an instinct. Like a magnet. I turn halfway around. He’s jogging toward us from across the street.

I wave to him. “Hey, Sami. I like the sign.”

“Thanks.”

This whole time I was speaking to Irene, I was sure never to ask about him, never harass her about the residents who might not want me knowing anything about them. Sami hadn’t tried to contact me, and I respected that.

But now, standing in front of him, everything I’ve been holding back rises all at once. I still miss him—so much it aches.

“I’m going to grab a coffee,” Irene says, moving away from us. She gives me, then Sami, a very pointed look. “You two take your time.”

He folds his arms, hands gripping his elbows—a strangely uncertain gesture from the guy who was usually so effortlessly at ease.

“Business looks good,” I say, nodding across the street.

His grin would barely register if you didn’t know him. “Yeah. I got some great business advice awhile back from this top marketer who really knew her stuff.” The grin tugs a little wider. “You may appreciate one menu item on the daily special.” He directs his gaze to the sandwich board in the window.

It doesn’t take long scanning the sign before I clock: *Sami’s Sammie*. He added the kotlet sandwich he made me during that mixer. “That’s amazing!” I smile.

He leans slightly closer and cups his hand over his mouth to mock whisper. I hold still and pretend my heart isn’t rapidly beating at the proximity to him. “It turns out catering to the condo fucks is actually pretty fun. They think basic diner stuff is vintage and that my Persian dishes are fresh. I can do anything, so long as the food is good.”

“That’s way harder than it looks for those of us who aren’t amazing chefs, Sami.” I can’t help my smirk. “But I should let you know, your adviser isn’t a top marketer anymore. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s not even corporate.”

His eyes run over me. “Yeah, Irene mentioned you’re working for the heritage society now. I wasn’t sure if this was for your job or like a side project.”

So Irene had been updating Sami on me. That kind of explains why he’s giving me the time of day. “It was a side project, but it did help me get my new job. I mean, I’m still doing marketing, but for fundraising for restoration and local initiatives—and I love it.” It’s true, I love strategizing and working with various nonprofits; I love helping older businesses that occupy a part of history and making a *true* difference; Most of all, I love meeting different people and hearing their stories and memories around a specific street or location. I’d come across this kind of job posting way back when I graduated, but the pay and position wasn’t something I’d ever have considered then. But now, it’s perfect. My days involve sitting in on town halls, promoting local businesses, and maintaining the heritage society’s

newsletter and social media. I continue, “You might have heard, I’m all about the mom and pops these days.”

His smile softens. “I’m happy for you.” Then his eyes cast toward the restaurant window.

“Do you need to get back?” I ask.

“Yeah, I probably should.” He points with his thumb toward the diner over his shoulder. “I hired a server and someone to work the kitchen, but Abu keeps leaving his chamber and bothering them.”

My heart pounds as he takes a step back, away from me. “Sami, I . . .” He angles his brow in my direction. I don’t know what to say. This is probably the last time I’ll see him, and I’m glad we’re parting on friendly terms. But I don’t want it to be the last time. I wish I could come home.

I inhale. “I know I’m not supposed to say it, so I won’t. I just wanted to let you know, what happened with us—I know I didn’t tell you everything, but what happened between us was real.”

“I know.” His eyes cast down, and I follow his gaze to the pavement, scattered with grey debris.

Autumn is coming soon. Sami will move on with his life. And if I don’t take this chance to tell him how I feel, I’ll regret it.

Even if all I regret is not trying.

So I continue. “I was falling for you, Sam. I didn’t mean to, but I was. You and your family and this place, Valleyview, it all was starting to mean so much to me. And I shouldn’t have done what I did, but it was still real.”

He inhales sharply, finally looking up at me, his dark eyes brimming with emotion. “Mona, I’ve thought about it a lot. I know we weren’t friends yet when you decided to help Lana, so I get it. I do.” A gust of wind filters through my shirt as he continues. “I just couldn’t understand why you got so close to the people you were screwing.” His eyes pierce me before widening into a panicked glint. “Screwing over, I meant.”

“I never intended to,” I admit. “I didn’t reach out to anyone here—I didn’t want to get too close. And when Lana told me the sale was inevitable, I figured if I helped her, I’d get a softer landing.” I shrug. “But then, for the first time, I had to actually talk to people. I started to care about all of you. And I couldn’t go through with it.”

He nods. “I get it. A lot changed those past few weeks.”

My heart swells thinking of it all. “Still, I am really sorry I let it get that far after. For everyone. Especially when I was—once I was, um . . .

screwing you.”

He lets out a single, rueful chuckle. “I appreciate it. And for all you’ve done. For Irene, for the building. For me too.”

Something inside me releases.

“So we’re good?” I put out a hand to shake his.

He eyes it and hesitates before his warm hand wraps around mine comfortably. “We’re good.”

Once our hands shake, he doesn’t let go. And I don’t want him to.

“Mona.” His gaze crawls up my arm to my face. “I don’t want to go back to the world where I don’t know you anymore.” He inhales. “I spent a couple of months there, and it wasn’t pretty. I even started catering to the condo guys. That was a joke.” His eyes flash at me before casting down. “But after everything, I wasn’t sure if I could reach out or . . . Then when you were helping Irene and she mentioned you seemed happier. I was glad, and I didn’t want to mess with you, but now seeing you . . .” He sucks in a deep breath. “I mean, I’ve been spinning a little.”

I step closer to him, both of my hands gliding up his arms now. “Sami, I don’t want to go back to that world either.” His arms cups my elbows.

“That’s good, then.” His pupils dilate. “So that means you’ll stop by for a coffee or something? I don’t know if you’re seeing anyone, but maybe one day we can go for a walk or have dinner or . . .” He looks so nervous. “I never got to make you that steak, and I kind of miss watching you eat my food, and I made this whole menu and all I could think about was if you’d like it, and—”

I lean closer and he shuts up. The minute our lips touch, a surge of warmth runs down my back. Sami pulls me closer, deepening our—

Across the street, the sound of a bunch of glasses crashing to the floor breaks us apart.

We both turn to see it: through the front window of the diner, Abu is scrambling to clean up what looks to be a tray of broken mugs. He looks back at us and quickly diverts his attention, pretending to be deep in thought, mouthing something to himself before turning and feigning surprise at the sight of me.

“And the Oscar goes to . . .” Sami sighs. “Well, shit, like I said, he’s out of his hole. I’ll have to go yell at him in a minute.”

I wave toward Abu.

“I have to get going too. But I’ll be back tomorrow to bring a few things to Irene.”

Sami holds my hands between his. “Good. If you don’t, Abu might shit on the floor, it seems.”

Try as I might to be casual, I can’t contain my grin. “So I’ll see you?”

“Only if you promise to behave yourself in my place of business,” Sami says, squeezing my fingers.

“Oh Mona, what did the other guys say?” His voice lighter. “When you told them the news about the building, I mean?”

And just like that, my grin is tamed. “Oh, I don’t know if telling them is such a good idea . . . I think Irene should get this one.”

“I don’t know, I think it’ll go better than you think. It’s worth a shot, isn’t it?”

“I’ll think about it.” I grin.

It’s when I’m back on the sparsely filled, moderately sketchy train (if I choose to worry about the guy in the neon-yellow jumpsuit staring straight at me with wide fucking eyes!), that my mind drifts to the other residents. (I’m choosing to ignore the man, until he pulls out a weapon, or anything else, from his pants.)

A couple of hours ago was my celebratory visit with Irene and Ernest (I stopped at the convenience store for ice-cream bars). And a few minutes after my second visit with Sami (the visit was overtaken by Abu, but he’s going to come by tomorrow evening and leave the diner to his staff so we can have a proper hang).

I pull out my phone and find myself opening the old Slack. Scanning the messages.

The last ones were filled with my instructions for the city council meeting we were so proudly rallying for. Even Carmen had joined the thread to help prepare for it.

They were *so grateful* for my help. And then it all went to shit.

After their hopeful messages, the Slack went silent. I wonder if they made a new one that doesn’t include me,

But these aren’t my corporate friends. It’s not that I wasn’t “good enough,” it’s that I hurt them. I start typing and then delete my words several times.

Finally, I just write: Good News! The building is going to be repaired!

I stare at my message floating on the screen for a good while with no reaction, before finally putting my phone away.

(Is that guy moving closer? I swear he was two seats back last time I looked. He catches me looking and I quickly avert.)

My phone lights up with a message. And then another.

JANE BRANDO, 8:09 P.M.: Mona! That's great. Thank you for all you did.

JANE BRANDO, 8:11 P.M.: How's Alice?

CARMEN THURSTON, 8:13 P.M.: HOT DOGGGG I'm going to be back

Another message comes in as I'm reading.

LORNA FRANK, 8:13 P.M.: Me too. But the Geese must've been having a field day.

JANE BRANDO, 8:16 P.M.: Did you already watch that sexy thriller with the creepy priest on Netflix? Bunch of assholes.

JANE BRANDO, 8:16 P.M.: Sorry, it's been awhile. That was meant to be a DM.

NORM OLIVERS, 8:18 P.M.: Thanks very much, Mona. I can't wait to come back and see you guys.

JANINE CHEN, 8:19 P.M.: Happy for you all. Marcus and I have split. We won't be back.

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The Best Building Mixer of All

And four months after that . . .

I pull the door open—the bell dings as I step inside—and it’s like slipping into a warm bath after a long day.

Every time I come into the diner now, I feel refreshed. The layout is the same, but so many little things have changed over the past six months that it’s hard to tell what remains.

I take in the clean wooden tables, set with tablecloths and vases of fresh-cut flowers. The classic smell of the deep fryer melds with something savory and herbal.

Kelly, one of the servers Sami hired for busier evenings, waves at me between polishing wineglasses. “Hey, Mona. You’re the first one here, obviously.”

I shake my head. “It’s always like that.”

Kelly nods to one of the glasses in her hand. “Would you like a glass of white while you wait?”

“That’d be great. Thanks, Kelly.”

She leaves my wine on the counter and takes off to greet a young couple in matching dark-rimmed glasses who just walked in.

Sami bursts through the kitchen door a moment later, the door flapping in his wake. “I thought I heard your voice!” It’s the grin that tugs across his

whole face when he first sees me that never gets old. “Come, sit at the counter. By the way, remind me later—I made this dip I want to watch you try.”

“Sami, *please*.” I take a seat at my new stool. (The old one is available online at #onemansjunk, Carmen’s new—officially licensed!—shop.) “I told you it unsettles me when you watch me eat.”

“But the folks in marketing.” He winks. “They need to know.”

I place an unimpressive package on the counter. I wrapped it using a brown envelope I stole from the office earlier, after I decided that this was, in fact, a gift.

“What’s this?” Sami asks.

“Something I made you. Happy birthday.”

He holds his hands to his chest. “Oh my god, Mona, you made me a thing.”

I shake my head furiously. “Don’t get excited! I’m still pretty shitty. But I thought it would be cute for the diner.”

He tears into the envelope and slides out the textile. Then he stares, expression blank.

“If you don’t want to put it up, or . . . the loom really is a bit fucky.”

He starts to laugh. “Mona, this is without a doubt the greatest thing anyone has ever made or done in this place.”

He holds it up to the wall behind him, testing a place to put it. The words turned out clear enough at least:

I’m sorry for the way I acted at your place of business last night

“Look at that. It’ll be a permanent fixture right here as soon as I dig out my hammer.” He rolls it up and places it gently back in the envelope. “This is so random; the patrons are gonna love it.”

A few more strangers file in, taking up the back corner booth. Kelly rushes to bring them menus.

I raise my eyebrows at Sami. “I notice you didn’t close to the public for the party?”

Sami follows my gaze. “I considered it, but I didn’t want to alienate the new neighbors on the street, you know?”

I can’t suppress my giggle. “I do know.”

A crash rings from the kitchen. Sami has hired a few new crew members back there, but they’re still finding their stride as a team. “Shit. I better go see how everyone’s doing.” Sami rushes to join the chaos in the kitchen.

I don't notice Irene coming in, until she jabs me in the ribs as a greeting. She's curled her hair into tight ringlets for the evening. "I can't believe we all stayed alive another year for this."

I stand up to give her a hug. "Irene! You came."

She playfully shoos me off. "Calm down, it's just for a minute. I'll have to get back to Ernest soon." She squints at me. "I don't know what kind of partying you did this morning, but you got him all worked up."

"We just . . . walked to the park and back."

"Anyway." Her hands splay expectantly. "Thought this was a mixer, where the hell is everyone?"

Right on cue, the door jingles and Jane and Carmen file in. "Sorry we're late!" Jane calls. "But the new rec room is looking great! Or should I say—fire! Too soon?"

"Oh, good god." Irene rolls her eyes about as dramatically as a lady of a certain age can muster.

"You're all looking dapper!" Carmen takes his usual seat next to me. "Jane took over the entire thing. I was just the gopher, but it turned out pretty nice."

"Hey, I'm just trying to learn in the real world," Jane adds.

"You're right. You're right!" Carmen waves his hands.

Jane sips the wine Kelly slid to her. "Speaking of, I think my colorspace test results are up." She pulls out her phone and heads to the bathroom.

Jane has almost completed her first semester of interior design school. She takes the classes in the evenings, and her day job has been good about respecting her need to leave on time. It's been nice seeing her find her stride, although she has way less time for our investigations lately, (which have devolved to us watching the juiciest—most out-of-pocket—erotic thrillers and making intricate snack plates).

"Finally, I can relax." Carmen holds out his coke to cheers me. When I clink his glass, he just has to add: "Between my junk venture, and the rec room, I'd been working my asshole to the nub."

I shudder my sip of wine down at this visual. "Anyway, how's business going?"

"Oh, you know, still a lot of marketplace BS, but the website actually helps cut a lot of the scammer types out. No more worrying I might get molested in an alley."

“That’s great news!” I say while trying to ignore the added images he’s just planted in my brain. “Hell, I might have to open a storefront—been looking around here since the yuppies love my wares.”

“That’s the dream.” I grin and once again look around the bustling little diner.

He lowers his voice. “By the way, I reached out to Miley again.” His cheeks go red in a bashful way. “We’re going to have a coffee after school next week.”

The excitement and hope seeping from his every pore draws a pang into me as I remember my almost regular coffee dates with *my* dad. “Carmen, that’s really great.” My voice is shaky.

He allows himself a small smile. “She might end up getting too busy, she’s a teenager after all. But I gotta just keep supporting her from afar and letting her know that I’m here when she’s ready.”

I blink really fast before croaking, “I hope she can make it.”

Carmen stares into his soda before shaking his head. “Anyway, check these little sloths out. Bet you want one.” He taps his phone to show me Miley’s latest creations. His daughter has *already* started her own online business selling crochet animals. Last month Carmen gifted me a baby elephant from her line that I keep just under my naked lady lamp. My place is really coming together.

The bell dings and Norm walks into the restaurant. He looks around uncertainly, but his head is high. I give him a small wave as Carmen gets up to mingle with Divorced Dad and Lorna in the front booth.

Norm comes straight to Carmen’s seat. “So, there’s been some funny business at the old office,” he tells me.

“Oh yeah?”

“It seems Bob Wolch got into some trouble in Vegas and punched a card dealer. His board of directors wants him gone.”

A smirk threatens to break across my lips, but I try not to let it. “How very sad for all involved. I do hope their stock can recover.”

Norm smiles. “You didn’t hear it from me.”

“Of course not. I wish him well.” I sip my wine, pinky out.

Norm has been a steady supply of office tea for me. It’s so nice to hear it all . . . from a *distance*. (I guess Corbin and Olivia haven’t spoken to Lisa since her promotion last month.)

“And how’s the new job going?” Norm asks as he selects one of the olive breads from the basket Sami put out.

“Well, always busy, but different.” I think of the week I had at work—meetings for a fundraising gala we’re planning, a trip to city hall, and my favorite: Filming for my new video series on older buildings and their stories: #yychistorygal is really taking off. This week *I had to* visit a new ice-cream shop in a 1912 sandstone building—for the outreach. “Honestly, it’s great.”

“Hello, fuckers.” Jane pushes between us, turning on Norm. “Rupa asked where you were last night.” She nudges him on the arm.

Rupa is our newest tenant—after Fighting Couple moved out, she joined the building, and we’re all pleased that she’s never displayed a particular interest in sausage sandwiches. So far, she’s fit in well with our group of neighbors, even volunteering to manage biweekly game nights.

“Wait, seriously?” Norm’s eyes instantly brighten. “I’ve never had anyone notice when I’m not around. She’s not even normally at my table.”

Jane waggles her brows. “Exactly.”

“I’ll be at the next game.” Norm squares his shoulders. “Promise.”

Sami rejoins us, this time on our side of the counter, nudging between Jane and Norm. “I got the good sake for our crew’s after-party.”

“Perfect,” Jane says.

The restaurant has filled up way more than expected. From across the way, I spot Sami’s parents in the booth by the window, looking like the picture of pride as they observe the full house.

Just when things are starting to feel peaceful, my mother bursts into the restaurant.

I tense.

“Sami, do you know what my mom is doing here?”

His eyes flash toward her. “Oh god, I told Abu to clear it with you.”

Our parents somehow got ahold of each other in some local Persian Facebook group, and it’s been chaotic, to say the least.

Sami’s mom points at her right away, and my mom runs over to her. They kiss on each cheek.

Sami gives me the “oh shit” look.

“Unfortunately, I think we have to go over there,” he whispers as he places a hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I whisper back.

“Come on.” He puts out his hand.

We sidle into the booth, me wedged between my mom and Sami, Abu and Ava holding hands across from us. The parents begin speaking in rapid Farsi, so I lean my head against Sami’s shoulder and let myself relax. I may not understand what they’re saying, but it still feels like love.

I gaze through the window toward Valleyview Apartments. There’s still a black mark of soot on the lower right side of the brick wall—somehow immune to three rounds of power washing. On either side of the walkway, Carmen built planter boxes for our community garden. I can’t wait until the spring, when the beets Jane has planned start to bloom. Orange construction fences press in from the neighboring plots on either side, and the daily chorus of jackhammers and table saws has been . . . less than delightful.

This is not the perfect building. It’s not where I thought I’d be at this point in my life. Honestly, almost nothing has gone according to plan.

But plans don’t hold you at the end of the day. People do. And somehow, despite everything, this place—with its aging bricks and soot and noise—feels like it’s exactly where I’m meant to be.

I’m home.

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About the Author

Natalie Sue is the bestselling and award-nominated author of *I Hope This Finds You Well*. She is a Canadian author of Iranian and British descent. She spent her formative years moving around western Canada with a brief stint in Scotland, where she discovered her passion for storytelling as a means of connection and reading as a means of comfort. When she's not writing, she enjoys bingeing great and terrible TV, attempting pottery, and procuring houseplants. She lives in Calgary with her husband, daughter, and dog.

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