

# hello

(from here)

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**For all those who missed the expected moments**

**We hope you found your bright spots**



**Content notes: Please be aware that this story touches on sensitive topics, such as parental death, Covid-19, AIDs, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder.**



## chapter one

### MAX

Conventional wisdom suggests that, when the world finally does begin to fall apart, love will be the only thing left that really matters. Petty grievances will fall away. You won't remember who called you Maxi Pad for the entirety of sixth grade (Logan Bennett) or how much money is in your bank account or the hours spent studying for that one calculus exam you almost failed. Instead, you will spend time with loved ones. Hold them close. Be present. Let them know that you care. And so, I guess, that's more or less how I came to be price-comparing boxes of condoms for my seventy-seven-year-old customer, Mrs. Phillips, at the start of a global pandemic.

This is what it's come down to. Me, standing in the Family Planning aisle of the grocery store debating the merits of flavored versus colored versus ribbed varieties—trust me, I am so not qualified for this—and guarding my grocery cart like a lion over its kill. I first took an after-school job as a personal grocery shopper eight months ago and never have I seen Vons like this. It's only been a couple

hours since Governor Newsom announced a shelter-in-place order effective tonight, but already the checkout lines stretch past the soda aisle, and if you want hand sanitizer that badly, you might not want to get too attached to your kidneys.

The canned beans shelves—wiped. Frozen pizzas—wiped. Cleaning products—wiped, wiped, wiped. It's as if there's a hurricane, a wildfire, and a blizzard all hitting at once and the entire county has decided to doomsday prep.

I run through the lists of today's clients, circling the items I still need. Listen, I'm not here to judge anyone's life choices, but, Mr. Wang, are three different types of soft cheeses and organic pomegranate seeds, like, really priorities right now? I make my best guess for Mrs. Phillips, which is all I can do, given the woman still doesn't know how to text, and make my way through the maze of shoppers who are demonstrating the whole spectrum of concern levels. I weave around a woman sporting those rubber yellow gloves meant for washing dishes and a dad in shorts and flip-flops licking his thumb and wiping food from his toddler's mouth all in one aisle. When I can't get through a traffic jam in front of the garbage bags, I take the long way through cosmetics toward the back of the store.

"Miss!" someone calls out from somewhere between canned goods and chips, and I'm 99 percent sure that he's not talking to me because I have a messy bun and a hole in the armpit of my favorite T-shirt and *Miss* is some country



club shit. “Uh, miss. Hello, I’m talking to you. Excuse me. You can’t do that.” A boy taps me on the shoulder and when I turn around, I see that we are the exact same height, looking eye to light blue eye, a detail that I only notice because, first of all, I’m not oblivious, and, second of all, he is all up in my business.

“Excuse you,” I say, but with attitude, and while trying not to notice the passersby staring me down like I’m trying to shoplift an entire case of frozen pizzas. “Social *distancing*.” I shoo him back.

He hooks his palm around the back of his neck and stares down the Salty Snacks aisle. “Oh, um, sorry, but you’re not supposed to hoard . . . toilet paper.”

“I’m not.” I lean my elbow on the cart handle, mentally tap-tap-tapping as a frantic shelf-stocker in a black apron and an “Ask Me about Super Savings” button rushes between us.

I know you’re not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but I’m sorry. I have this guy pegged. My age, floppy red-brown hair, nice teeth, those techie, catalog glasses, and real collared-shirt energy—so much that it’s like *hi, yes, you’re obviously from around here and own at least one leather item that’s been monogrammed*.

“Actually, you’ve got six packages.” He says it like it pains him a little to be the one to point this out. And yeah, I made sure to score a load from Lou in Inventory as soon as I arrived because I read the news. “The shelves are empty,”

he says, “and it’s just—well—you’re only supposed to take what you really need. So that there’s enough to go around.”

I eye his basket: a wheel of brie, Clorox wipes, and two bottles of sparkling water.

“So that’s what you really need?” I reach up and pull my bun tighter. “Not that I need to explain myself to you, but this is my job.” Like it pains *me* a little to be the one to point this out. “I deliver groceries.”

His mouth forms an O as he drags his fingers through his nice haircut. A bright shade of pink swallows up the freckles on the tops of his cheeks and I almost feel bad because, well, the absolute truth is that he’s kind of adorable, if you’re into that sort of thing. “I—wow—okay,” he says. “I’m sorry.” He coughs, which is so not the thing to do right now. Everyone within earshot looks at him like he’s Patient Zero in the zombie apocalypse. “I’m—can we just, like, start over? I’m Jonah and I’m really kind of desperate here.”

“I’m Max and that’s really not my problem.”

“Look.” He shakes it off. “I can pay you for the toilet paper.” He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a (monogrammed!) leather wallet, fishing a handful of bills from it. “How’s forty dollars sound?”

He holds it out and I stare down my nose, not wanting to admit to this boy who has at least a hundred just sitting there that, to me, forty bucks sounds really, really good. “I don’t want your dirty money,” I say, with more conviction than I feel.

He frowns. "I'm not, like, in the Mafia. I got it in a birthday card from my grandma."

"I mean germs. Cash is covered in them."

"Oh. Right. Those." He nods once, returning the money to his wallet. He rocks back on his heels before jumping out of the way of an oncoming cart with a squeaky wheel. "Okay then. Well, I'm sure we can negotiate a deal."

"Oh, so you're a lawyer?"

"My dad actually. M and A. That stands for mergers and acquisitions."

"I know what *M and A* stands for." I don't. "So what do you propose?"

He looks down at his basket and I see that he bites his nails. So do I. "Trade sparkling water for toilet paper."

I tilt my head, all *you've got to be kidding me*.

"Oh, come on," he protests. "Someone on your list definitely ordered sparkling water if they're from Fountain Valley, and I got the last two bottles." He holds one up and shakes it as enticement. "Oops, probably shouldn't do that," he says.

"No deal."

"Okay, okay." He holds up a finger. "You drive a hard bargain. I'll throw in the brie too."

I begin walking away with my cart. No thank you.

"Fine," he calls after me. "*Fine* and the Clorox wipes." I stop. Wait. This just got interesting. "Look," he says once he has my attention. "We can make it official and everything."

He has his palm up like a stop sign, like *hear me out*. “I, Jonah Stephens”—hand on his heart now—is he for real?—“in exchange for toilet paper and . . . other good and valuable consideration, yadda, yadda, yadda . . . do hereby agree to transfer all of my . . . *assets* in this here grocery basket to you—what was your name again?”

I roll my eyes. “Max.”

“Max.” He grins, pleased with himself. “This agreement constitutes the entire agreement with respect to the matters set forth herein and may not be amended without the mutual consent of the parties hereto. How’s that?”

I sigh. “Think I can get that in writing?”

“*Actually*, that’s a common misconception. Verbal contracts are *just* as binding.”

“Learn something new every day.” I make my eyes wide and innocent. “Okay then. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Really? Awesome. That’s great! I would shake your hand, but—” He gestures at the madness going on all around us in the store and instead, unloads the brie and sparkling water into my cart. He’d been right. They’d been on my list.

Slowly, I take a pack of toilet paper and use the only nail whose life my teeth have miraculously spared to rip into the plastic, selecting a single roll. “Catch,” I say, and throw it over to him.

“What’s this?” He squeezes the roll.

“Toilet paper.” *Obviously*.

“Yeah, but I—”

"You didn't say how much." I pause a beat for him to catch up. "The contract simply stated that I owed you toilet paper. Period. Frankly, I think I'm being generous. It's a double roll."

"Okay, but I clearly meant—I mean—this—"

"Sorry." I shrug. "Verbal contracts are binding, I hear."

I turn as I'm walking away with my loot. He's standing on his tiptoes. "Come on. It's not like you can give someone an opened package!"

"That was from *my* stash," I yell from the end of the aisle. "Pleasure doing business with you." I salute. Shopping lists complete.

## chapter two

### JONAH

"I'm still confused as to why you have a single roll of toilet paper."

Olivia stares at my pitiable offering, tapping her fingernail on the Carrara countertop like a small but suitably disdainful gavel. Her expression reads, as always: *What the hell is wrong with you?* It should be ironic, since she's wearing an aqua-green bathrobe she hasn't removed in at least three days—it looks . . . hard—and she has her chestnut hair in slowly unraveling space buns. But my older sister can look judicial, and by that I mean deeply condescending, even without regular hygiene.

"Well, it turned out we didn't really specify," I manage weakly.

I'm still trying to remember *how* that happened. We were negotiating and it seemed to be fairly equitable . . . and then I was looking at her big green eyes and the way the right corner of her lip moved when she smiled and then I had no toilet paper and yeah it all makes sense.

"Do you know what an Unconscionable Contract is?" Olivia asks.

"I can speculate," I mutter. "It's not a big deal. I got another brie—"

"Not a big deal! Do you know how many times a day I poop, Jonah? Don't give me that face. This is not embarrassing. My intestines are like an active volcano." Olivia has been away for the last year at UCLA, but the pandemic forced her home even before the shutdown. Olivia has Crohn's disease, which, for her, is basically a constant inflammation in her bowels, and it puts her at greater risk. The occasional brie is one of the few fatty foods she'll allow herself. That and Chips Ahoy! chewy chocolate chip cookies, but only when under duress. "I'm going to have to origami my toilet paper for who knows how long. Death by a thousand tiny wipes."

"I bought you some moist towelettes at the gas station," I proffer, then sigh. "They only had one pack, though. And it's travel-size."

She takes a deep breath and examines me. Her eyes are sharp and small and hazel like our mom's had been . . . minus the warmth. "It all just seems a little . . . odd for you," she says finally, picking at her teeth.

"The embarrassing handling of a negotiation—"

"No," she corrects, analyzing some residual broccolini. We had that for dinner two days ago. "That's standard fare. I meant the actual gumption to negotiate with a stranger. You screamed 'Stranger Danger' every time someone walked by us in a parking lot until you were twelve. You're neurotic."

A *diagnosed* neurotic, in fact. First came the GAD: generalized anxiety disorder. That one sucks, but it's the panic

disorder that truly kicks my ass. I earned that label in eighth grade following my first public panic attack. They kept going from there, chipping away little pieces of me. And they led, of course, to the big one.

"I wanted toilet paper—" I murmur.

"Jonah."

"Okay, I wanted to keep talking to her," I admit. "I . . . well . . . I think we had a moment."

It was the loose strands of hair falling around her cheeks. It was the way she spoke . . . the confidence and the easy lopsided smile and the way her eyebrows arched and fell in a second conversation that was surprisingly easy to decipher: *vaguely amused, this boy is an idiot, vaguely amused, this boy is an idiot* . . .

And yeah, they never indicated: *Oh, he's cute. Or: I wish he would ask for my number.* God, I wish I'd asked for her number. A last name. A chance. All I have is *Max*.

Olivia is rubbing the bridge of her nose. "I hate when you slip into reverie. *Jonah*."

"Sorry," I mutter. "I just can't help but think she was the one. Except less melodramatic. But also possibly not, because I keep picturing her turning around and I think I can hear music."

"It's a pandemic, dickwad. Not the start of *Twilight*. I am *immunocompromised*."

Olivia overenunciates this like I've never heard the word. Like Kate hasn't already said it to me four hundred times



this week, as if we are protecting the last Siberian tiger. It wasn't exactly helping my stress levels in the grocery store. Kate sent me in because she was on a work call, and she told me to be careful and not to touch anything but, like, that's what shopping is.

"I know," I say.

"And you're not exactly a pillar of stability—" she starts.

*"I know."*

Olivia gives one last gavel tap, takes her glasses off, and begins cleaning them with her disturbingly brittle robe. I await my sentence.

"You're a dipshit," she pronounces.

"Thank you."

"This is a horrible idea. Forget about her. Join me in my super bubble and wait out the apocalypse in isolated, heart-numbing misery like an intelligent young man."

I wave her on impatiently.

"Fine," she says. "*You* want to see her again. *I* need toilet paper. I think we can solve both our problems in one fell swoop. You said she worked as a personal shopper. So, we simply find out which company she works for, procure an order from said Max, and *voilà*. I can wipe my ass, and you can make one of yourself."

I frown. "This sounds a little . . . stalker-y."

"I prefer *sleuthing*, but call it what you will."

"Don't you think she's going to figure out the incredibly unlikely coincidence?"

Olivia pauses. "Possibly. But I want toilet paper. Do you want to see her or not?"

"Well . . . yeah . . ."

She starts down the hallway, her aquamarine bathrobe fluttering out behind her like a cape. "Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"To do some sleuthing, my dear Watson. Watch and learn."

Thank you for shopping with Shop4U. I've begun your order and will be sending through messages on preference, changes, and substitutions.

**Maxine M.:** How ripe do you like your avocadoes? They have a decent selection.

I stare at the message, beaming . . . and concerned. This is kind of creepy. Okay. Very creepy. Olivia is disturbingly good at stalking people. The actual Vons shopping service didn't turn up anything, so she then googled all the third-party services offered in the area and checked their Instagram pages for followers named Max, or as I described her, the prettiest girl I've ever met, which was probably not helpful.

Sure enough, she found a *Max Mauro* following a local company called Shop4U, and even though Max's profile was private, that tiny little smiling circle was more than enough for me to shout: "Holy shit, you are an evil genius!"

But she wasn't done. Olivia downloaded the Shop4U app, ordered and canceled until MAXINE M. popped up, and then strutted out of my room, spouting some sort of Victorian adage and a few additions to my otherwise well-curated shopping list.

Now I have a message.

And more importantly, a chance to redeem myself.

Max doesn't know it's me yet, since we had to use Dad's AMEX and have his first name on the profile, but she will certainly figure it out when she gets here and sees me doing . . . Push-ups? Reading *Anna Karenina*? Somehow pretending my sister didn't just stalk her and *Oh hi Max I was just pruning these marigolds look at me I'm all aflutter!* Oh god.

I look at the blinking cursor on my phone.

Okay, let's review. Don't use the word *merger* ever again. Don't banter about toilet paper. *Definitely* don't admit your sister just tracked her down . . . I chew my nail feverishly, trying to think.

I always suck at this, but I suck even more lately because my last relationship ended *not well* in a very public, humiliating setting involving a preposterously muscular ass. Moving on.

I try to focus. Okay. Just say the first clever thing that comes into your head.

**Customer:** The softer the better! I am making a guacamole, or *ahuacamolli*, which was loosely the Aztec word for "avocado soup."

Okay, it's pretentious. And I admit I googled *avocado fun facts*. But it was either that or how they have more potassium than a banana, which is good to know, but . . .

I stare at my phone. No response. The seconds tick by.

Shit. I should have gone with the potassium—

**Maxine M.:** I will keep that in mind for my next hipster Instagram post. Ahuacamolli toast.

All the pent-up air in my lungs whooshes out again. My stomach is no longer a churning mass of regret and day-old brie rinds—Kate ate most of the actual cheese. She really is evil.

Kate is my stepmother, by the way, and an estate planning attorney. I call her the Wicked Witch of the Wills. Or, I would, if I weren't deathly afraid of her. She takes muay Thai three times a week and apparently her instructor told her to "ease up" because she broke some dude's nose.

Usually I can rely on my dad to temper the evil, but he's in Madrid for some major corporate acquisition or something . . . and hopefully catching a plane back soon. Really soon.

The one-two punch of Kate and Olivia is draining my soul.

I flop onto my bed and message Max back. The fact that she would reply like that to an anonymous customer just reaffirms what I already suspected: Max Mauro is kind of a badass.

**Customer:** Exactly. *“Just living my best life with my ahuacamolli.”*

**Maxine M.:** Educational flex. And yes, I got the waxing strips.

I sigh inwardly. The order *had* been well-curated until Olivia got her hairy mitts on it.

**Customer:** Those are for my sister.

**Maxine M.:** Don’t ask, don’t tell. I should go. Your order will arrive soon.

I put down the phone, grinning. I don’t support Olivia’s tactics . . . but Max is coming! And also holy shitballs, Max is coming like . . . soon. Now what? I want to run out and talk to her in person, but the app said *very* clearly that all deliveries were now to be left outside the door with a notification, and that it was better for everyone if clients stayed inside their homes and only retrieved the groceries after the driver had left.

But how am I going to say hi from inside? I turn to the window, pondering.

Oh. That could work.

I pace around my bedroom, through its lounge area and the attached bathroom and back around again. And again. And again. It smells like mint and gardenia . . . Kate filled our entire house with potters, so I basically live in a conservatory.

My bedroom also doubles as a shrine to all things cinema: a continuous loop of classics on my TV, alphabetized stacks of Blu-Rays because I'm a traditionalist, walls plastered with posters of my favorites: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*; *Greed and Glory* . . . basically a bunch of cowboys deadpanning me while I have anxiety attacks. I'm a massive Westerns fan, which is ironic, because I'm terrified of horses. I got bit once on a field trip. Long story. Actually, the horse just bit me on the shoulder for no reason.

Many of the posters have tears and crinkles. These are the movies I watched with Mom, and I tore them all down in the weeks after everything in a hail of hardened Sticky Tack and peeling greige paint. They went into the bottom of my closet with the photos and keepsakes and that amazing Death Star stress ball she bought me that brought back painful memories with every futile squeeze.

But I slowly put them back, over the last year or so. Baby steps, maybe, like the ones Dr. Syme is always talking about. That, or I'm just a masochist who craves grizzled disdain.

I sit down at my desk, trying to distract myself with some always productive YouTube rabbit-holing, but my eyes go instead to the navy blue folder sitting beside my laptop: the official welcome package to *Esprit Brillants*.

It's been displayed there for months like a nerdy trophy. I won the uber-competitive competition for the summer semester abroad in Paris, which made sense, since I prepped for that interview for a solid year. I *needed* to win.

*Esprit Brillants* was supposed to be the turning point. Now the sight of the folder makes my stomach roil. What if things don't clear up? What if I can't travel? What if things *never* go back to normal? The thoughts wrap their invisible fingers around my throat.

I check my phone again.

It's been twenty-four minutes since I got the last notification: Shopping complete. I'm getting a little too antsy and I know it. I inhale slowly. Deep in. Hold. Deep out. The little nagging questions try a more urgent angle of attack: Does my breathing feel different today? Did I already catch the coronavirus? What if I give it to Olivia? What if she dies and it's my fault again and—

I hear a bass rumble from the street and run to the window just as a car pulls up to the curb. *Car* might be a stretch, since that thing is rapidly devolving back into steel and rubber. The bright red beater looks very out of place against our pristine front yard and sculpted hedges, matching white Benzes in the driveway, and a truly repulsive cherub fountain that Kate picked out last year to spit recycled love and water to some gigantic Koi fish at the base.

The muffler spews smoke and sparks(?) as it comes to a stop. Is that legal?

The door swings open, and Max Mauro walks around the hood, hair the color of chocolate tied back in a messy bun. A few loose strands blow over her face. White tank top and one-strap-on overalls. She's freaking singing. I press my face against the windowpane.

She comes to the porch, and I belatedly notice she has AirPods in. I pat my hair down—needlessly, since it sits flat by default—and knock on the window. She keeps walking. *The AirPods* . . . she can't hear anything. I knock again, louder this time, but Max disappears below my line of sight. My plans. My message. My chance at redemption—they're all strolling away with her. I open the window, lean out, and shout at the top of my lungs:

"Max! Max! It's me! *Ahuacamolli!*"

I see a surprised old man with a Yorkie jump on the sidewalk, squint, and look up at me. Mr. Finney. He hates joy. Max seems to notice the scowling Mr. Finney and turns back to me as well. We meet eyes. I don't know what the hell to say. My brain is broken. I just . . . stare. I think my mouth moves, but nothing comes out. Speak! Please! Something!

Max smiles, waves, and then gets into her ramshackle old Civic and drives away, sending up a trail of smoke and fading sparks. I watch her go, sighing and retreating inside.

On the window is my sign, carefully written on the glass with a blue permanent marker:

HELLO (FROM HERE)



## chapter three

### MAX

“Did you wash your hands?” my mom asks by way of greeting. She has her cell phone to her ear and is pacing in the kitchen of our second-floor apartment. On a normal day, the drive from Fountain Valley back to Huntington Beach is twenty minutes, but today, it took exactly one hundred and fifty-two thousand times that. It’s like all of California simultaneously thought, *But this might be my last chance to eat In-N-Out Burger* and hightailed it to the freeway. Like, *You know what might be fun? To give purgatory a test-drive.*

“I literally just walked in the door, Mom.”

“Shhhh!” She draws pinched fingers across her lips. A beat. Then—“Sing two happy birthdays while you scrub. Don’t stop.” She gives me The Look.

“You’re talking to me now?” I run the faucet and pump soap into my palm.

“Uh-huh. Yessir. I can arrange for them to be available—I can’t hear you.” Mom snaps her fingers and points at the faucet. She’s back on me apparently.

It’s amazing. My mother can be having two legit conversations at once and it’s up to me to know when it’s my turn.

She calls it her Single Mom Superpower. She has lots of them—like finding the best thrift store furniture and tuning out any questions with the word *dad* or *father* in them.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . .” I have a bad singing voice. The kind that would get me singled out as a national laughingstock if I ever auditioned for a reality TV singing competition. I glance at my mom. We both have the kind of pasty white skin that doesn’t tan, just burns. Her long dark brown hair—same as mine—is pulled up into a ponytail. She’s still wearing her Mauro’s Dry-Cleaning polo with *Rae* embroidered above the logo—a clothes hanger bent into the shape of a crown. Barefoot, the hem of her old Dickie’s tucks underneath her heels.

“Did you take off your shoes?” My mother sets her phone down on the peeling laminate countertop and ticks through the mail pile.

We’ve been in this apartment through four consecutive lease renewals, the longest I’ve lived anywhere, and even though it’s not the nicest place we’ve called home, I like that we’ve hung around long enough to paint the walls a buttery yellow and for it to smell like my mother when I walk through the door.

We share a bathroom, our toothbrushes side by side in the medicine cabinet next to the sink, and I swear the fact that not all of our apartments have come with washer-dryer hookups is the main reason why Mom started a dry-cleaning business.

I try not to think of that kid Jonah's house, of the massive lawn, of the scaling walls, of the working fountain in the front, because it seems wild that he lives there and I live here and we both call these places "home" like they belong in the same category. For the record, I'm not in the habit of comparing my life to those of rich, Fountain Valley kids. I mean, what's the point and who cares? I'm proud of how far Mom and I have come and the best part is, we have nobody to thank for it but ourselves. It's just that when the whole world is supposed to "shelter at home," it's hard not to clock the differences in what that word can mean.

I dry my hands on a dishtowel and then wiggle my pink-socked toes to demonstrate my shoeless feet. "Who was that?"

"Just one of the two dozen clients who wants to know how the heck they're going to get their clothes now that everyone's supposed to stay put." She pushes bangs off her forehead and collapses into the kitchen chair that our cat, Sir Scratchmo, uses to sharpen his claws. Mom worked at Ricky's Cleaners for eighteen months before Ricky announced he was going to retire and planned to close the place. We had six months to scrape together savings and bank loans and google *how to run a cleaning business*, but Mom said we wouldn't get an opportunity like this again to have something that's ours. I don't think stains are exactly a passion of my mother's, but people will always need their clothes cleaned, and we Mauros are practical like that. "You

know they say that we should be stocking up on cash in all of this too," she says.

"Who is 'they'?"

She takes a long sip from a glass of water. "I saw an article on Facebook."

"Mom, what have we talked about when it comes to Facebook articles?"

She waves me away. "Mm. Was it wild out there?"

"You know *Walking Dead*? Well, like the entire first season of that, but with better hygiene." I do the bored stare into the open fridge, letting the artificial air cool my cheeks. "What's for dinner?"

"Sorry, M 'n' M, you'll have to fend for yourself. I've got more calls to make."

Coincidentally, *Fend for Yourself* would also be the title of the sitcom version of my life. Sometimes I think the majority of my childhood was one long afternoon sitting way too close to the TV and eating boxed mac 'n' cheese. Not that I'm complaining. Rae Mauro works harder than anyone I know, and for as long as I can remember it's been just the two of us, which means often it's just me.

I dump two pepperoni Hot Pockets on a plate and shove them in the microwave. Three minutes later, dinner is served, and I tiptoe past Mom, who's deep into strategizing her customers' wardrobe deliveries using our coffee table like it's a Risk board. Honestly, I don't even understand why anyone *needs* their dry-cleaned clothes during a lockdown except that I guess cashmere is pretty soft, if you can swing it.

I tuck myself beneath a mound of blankets and balance the plate on my lap before searching the covers on my bed for the remote control. Sir Scratchmo judges me from his perch on top of my dresser, flicking his scruffy tail. Sometimes Scratchmo watches me with such disdain that I think he sticks around only on the off chance I might choke on a pizza roll and he'll get to feast on my carcass.

I check my delivery app—sixty-two dollars in tips today. Not too shabby. I mentally tally the Berkeley fund. I think even my mother's starting to believe it might happen. A four-year business degree from one of the best colleges in California. Two years ago, I would've said I'm destined to be a community college kid, at least for the first two years, because universities are crazy expensive—like, fifteen *thousand* dollars a year expensive. But think what kind of boss business ladies Mom and I could be with a school like that on my résumé.

Exactly.

If you work hard, if you make sacrifices, if you stick to the plan, you'll get ahead. Mom and I are like two horses in the Kentucky Derby. For most of the race, we've just been out here trying not to get trampled in the pack, but then slowly, slowly, inch by inch, we pushed up, and we pressed and pressed even when we were bone-tired, even until just recently, and we nosed ahead enough to get our photo finish. And as my mom likes to say, the finish line is really just the beginning.

The cheese from the Hot Pocket still manages to burn the

roof of my mouth, so I have to use my hand as a fan while my jaw hangs wide open, like no wonder I'm single. I watch one episode of *Hannibal* and then half of another, take my plate to the sink and wash it while my mom is still talking with great passion about camelhair and mothproofing on the phone. Outside is the usual racket of the dumpster lid opening and closing and cars locking, the guy next door playing his bass too loud, and footsteps from the apartment above ours.

I belly flop back onto my bed and stare at my Mickey Mouse alarm clock—eight thirty. For the record, lots of things sound like a good idea when you're really, really bored, and almost none of them can be considered your fault. Like eating an entire package of Oreos or starting a blog or attempting to dye your hair blond. Or in this case, unlocking your phone and finding that you forgot to click "delivered" on your last order of the day and so you still have access to a certain pre-pre-law-slash-L.L.Bean-model-wannabe's phone number.

**Maxine M.:** So you could have told me that you were the customer I was shopping for earlier.

**CUSTOMER:** And RUIN the element of surprise?

**Maxine M.:** Wait, this \*is\* the guy from the grocery store, right?

**CUSTOMER:** Jonah Stephens, the one and only.

**Maxine M.:** . . .

**Maxine M.:** Yeah ran a quick fact check on that and I just found like 13 of you on Facebook alone so . . .

**CUSTOMER:** Did you friend me?

**Maxine M.:** No

**CUSTOMER:** Why not? You were right there!

**Maxine M.:** Because . . . we're not friends?

**CUSTOMER:** Details

**Maxine M.:** Yeah you're not big on those I seem to recall

**CUSTOMER:** OK OK not friends got it.

**CUSTOMER:** Do you think that's permanent?

**Maxine M.:** Nothing is permanent Jonah. Time is ephemeral. The ice caps are melting and Criminal Minds is canceled and Prince Harry moved to America so hey anything is possible  
DREAM BIG

**CUSTOMER:** says the girl to the boy with a predisposition for existential crises

**Maxine M.:** says the boy to the girl with a susceptibility to ennui

**CUSTOMER:** ennui. Fancy.

**Maxine M.:** This is weird, by the way.

**CUSTOMER:** Which part?

**Maxine M.:** . . . texting you

**CUSTOMER:** Yeah, but the whole world is weird so it's like a double negative. It cancels out.

**Maxine M.:** That logic is airtight.

**CUSTOMER:** Waiting for an emoji. I can't tell if you're being sarcastic.

**Maxine M.:** Oh I don't believe in emojis.

**CUSTOMER:** They aren't Santa Claus, Max. Emojis exist. They are a reality. Like climate change.

**Maxine M.:** What I mean is that I've taken a principled stance against emojis. Like if there were enamel pins that could support the fight against emojis, I would have five pinned to my jean jacket because enamel pins, unlike emojis, I freaking love.

**CUSTOMER:** OK, wow, a lot to unpack here. So did you have a traumatic formative experience with an emoji? Is this like a scary clown type thing? Max, are you afraid of emojis?

**Maxine M.:** I'd rather not say.

**CUSTOMER:** This is a safe space. I can recommend resources. Start a support group.

**Maxine M.:** . . .

**Maxine M.:** . . .

**Maxine M.:** OK, fine.

**Maxine M.:** I was dumped via emojis.

**CUSTOMER:** Serious?

**Maxine M.:** Dead.

**CUSTOMER:** It's settled then. I'm never using emojis again. Out of solidarity to those whom emojis have harmed.

**Maxine M.:** Thanks.



**Maxine M.:** Moving on. So . . . are you, you know, worried?

**CUSTOMER:** Max, worry is my permanent state. I worry about the soccer goal I missed at an away game 3 years ago. I worry about my SAT score. I worry about that one time my voice cracked when I raised my hand in AP Euro. So yeah I guess you could say I'm worried

**Maxine M.:** Not really what I meant. But anyway. I can't keep my eyes open.

**CUSTOMER:** That's lucky. I can never get mine to shut.

**CUSTOMER:** Hey, do you mind if I save your number?

**Maxine M.:** Yes.

**CUSTOMER:** OK . . .

**Maxine M.:** I mean no!

**Maxine M.:** I mean I don't mind.

**Maxine M.:** Good night Jonah Stephens

**CUSTOMER:** Good night

**Maxine M.:** zzzzzzzzzzz

I wake to the sound of my mother's voice talking loudly into the phone. My Mickey Mouse alarm clock reads 6:00 a.m. and I roll face-first into my pillow. Sir Scratchmo jumps onto my back and begins kneading it, sneezing twice like he's allergic to me.

My best friend, Dannie, had strong-armed me into a joint New Year's resolution to start mornings off with "mindful

meditation!" and "gratitude journals!"—in my defense, I'd been three glasses of sparkling cider deep—and now the first thing I think when I peel open my eyelids each morning is: *How . . . dare . . . you, Dannie*. Which, when I told her, she somehow took as a compliment. Like: *Thinking of you too, XOXO!*

My sleeping laptop trills from the corner of the bed where I fell asleep with it half open. It trills again. Relentless. Sir Scratchmo gets the boot and I wriggle sideways to reach my keyboard, jostling the screen to life.

"Hiya." My friend Imani's face pops up the moment I click on the Google video chat. The third side of the Max-Dannie-Imani triangle. Imani and I know each other from way back when we started at the same daycare down the road. Then we met Dannie when Mom and I lived at the Crescent Moon Complex circa fourth grade. There was a community pool. Times were simpler.

Imani has a glowing sheen of sweat on her dark brown skin. She's wearing a sports bra and sipping from a green smoothie. "I had to finish my Zumba video before Sweets starts watching the *Today Show*, and I knew you had to work, so." She shrugs like this should be a perfectly good reason to contact someone before sunrise.

I grunt, my chin still smashed into the comforter.

"Oh grouchy Max. You know I love grouchy Max. Not as much as hyper Max but definitely more than in-her-feelings Max." She uses her hands to weigh the options. "You're just so cute when you snarl. Grrr. Yeah, like that."

I pull a blanket over my head.

"Okay, so I came up with a whole quarantine to-do list and I want to run it by you to see what you think."

"Already?" I peek out from underneath the blanket.

"Yeah. It's been like two days. Get with the program." On-screen, Imani flourishes a notebook. "First, learn to knit. Second, Marie Kondo my whole closet. I want to spark major joy over here. Third, train for a marathon, but not if I've gotta wear a mask, shoot, I didn't think of that, and fourth—I'm struggling with a fourth."

"Read *War and Peace*."

"I guess I could, but—"

"Oh my god, I was kidding. I think one through three will keep you plenty busy. It's not like this will go on for an eternity."

"I just hate the idea of having nothing to show for this time, you know?"

"Really? Because my only goal is survival."

"You're *working*. That's so important." The Athleta store where Imani has a weekend job had announced its closure two days ago. "Speaking of which, could you pretty-please snag some Aleve and fiber gummies for my grandparents?" Imani and her parents have been living with Sweets and Big Paw since two Christmases ago. It's a long story with a mostly happy ending, but she can't get away with anything around Sweets, and her apartment's so crowded that when she comes over here, she's just excited to get fifteen minutes alone in the bathroom. "Oh and Dannie needs some packs

of frozen fruit. She's scared she's going to get scurvy by the end of this. I think that's the thing people get on ships."

"Done and done." Technically, I'm not supposed to do any personal shopping while on shift, but who am I kidding? "I better get a move on. You know what they say: Early bird gets the good canned soup."

"Godspeed. And maybe run a comb through that hair? There's enough fear in the world right now without you scaring the good citizens of Fountain Valley too."

I log off and tug at the blinds cord before prying open my sticky window. Sunlight is just starting to seep into the sky and palm fronds rustle in the breeze. On the best days, I can smell the ocean right from my room. Today is one of those days. I poke my head out and take a deep whiff. There's salt in the air. A skateboarder rolls down the middle of the quiet street below, the low hum of his wheels on asphalt close enough to hear.

Reluctantly, I slide off the mattress and spend the next twenty minutes trying to become human. By the time I've washed my hair and brushed my teeth and rubbed lotion into my face, I'm at least not snarling anymore. Openly.

I pour myself a cup of coffee from the half-full pot waiting for me and clutch a mug with both hands, sipping slowly. "Did you sleep?" I ask Mom. My dad left when I was four years old, which, no matter what anybody says, is late enough for me to remember but apparently easy enough for him to forget, because after he took me to Disneyland

that one time when I was six, I never heard from him again. The day after Disney, Mom took me to sit by the ocean and said, "See how big the ocean is? That's how much I love you, which is plenty." She had a point.

"A couple hours," she says. "Early shift today?"

"The world is ending. The people need their shaved Brussels sprouts."

"Be smart out there. You hear me?" She pushes a granola bar into my hand with the same gravity with which she might hand over a loaded weapon, as though *granola* might protect me. This is the part where I'm supposed to roll my eyes, but even though this might not sound "cool," I actually like when my mom goes all mama bear on me. It makes me feel lucky. Maybe not a thing you think to appreciate unless you came close, like we did, to losing everything, even each other.

"I will. Text me if you need anything while I'm out, okay?"

Something triggers: *Text*. Last night. That guy from the grocery store.

That guy who has a name.

*Jonah*.

Oh right. So, that happened.

And it wasn't terrible.

I grab for my phone and see that there's a new message on-screen, sent at 2:01 a.m. *All the better to ignore me by* followed by a link to Spotify. My mouth does a little twist.

"Don't forget these."

I look up. Mom forks over a plastic bag. In it, hand

sanitizer and the Clorox wipes I'd conned Jonah out of. At the door, I push my feet into my worn-out shoes and lace them. I slide on latex gloves. I swipe hair out of my eyes. I put in my AirPods. I hit play on the first song. Listen. Grin. Type.

Oh . . . so you're \*that\* guy?

## Jonah's Greatest Cannot-Debate-It \*Essential\* (get it?) Playlist

*7—Catfish and the Bottlemen*

*Rill Rill—Sleigh Bells*

*This Year—Mountain Goats*

*Loving is Easy—Rex Orange County*

*We are the People—Empire of the World*

*Ready to Let Go—Cage the Elephant*

*Making Friends—Joey Cape*

*Mass Pike—The Get Up Kids*

*Waiting for the End of the World—Elvis Costello*

*The Kids Don't Stand a Chance—Vampire Weekend*

*Big Jet Plane—Angus and Julia Stone*

*Such Great Heights—the Postal Services*

*Maps—Yeah Yeah Yeahs*

## chapter four

### JONAH

A panic attack is the classic chicken vs. egg scenario.

I am having a panic attack because I am afraid of having a panic attack because I had a panic attack last week because . . . it's the circle of (a miserable) life. My therapist said to stop asking which came first. Just do the steps, Jonah. It doesn't matter where anxiety starts—only where it ends. Apparently, *I* get to decide that part.

Of course, I suck at making decisions. So, naturally, I am in my bedroom having a panic attack with my hand on my cell phone ready to call 911 because my heart is pounding and I can't breathe and maybe this one is it and I am actually dying and . . . It isn't.

I see it out. I breathe deeply: in through the nose, out longer and slower through the mouth. The attack passes without pressing the call button, or having a heart attack, or whatever the hell else I'm afraid of. The aftermath leaves me feeling like a deflating balloon.

I used to turn to my mom. Warm eyes and an easy calm and that wry smile that pushed the dark away. But these days I turn to, well, me. It's not quite the same.



I catch sight of myself in the mirror. Bedraggled auburn hair from my own grasping hands, glazed blue eyes, shoulders slumped forward in defeat. I look awful. I feel worse. Every panic attack leads to the slow creep of derealization . . . that numb *I'm looking through a screen* feeling where there is no past or future or anything but this deeply shitty now. I manage to get to my bed and flop there, staring up at the ceiling. My phone was pinging a couple times through the attack, and I finally check my messages. It's my best friend: the enigmatic Carlos F. Santi.

P.S. He actually writes *Carlos F. Santi* for everything and even introduces himself that way, so I just gave up and went with it.

**Carlos F. Santi:** DUDE I am so bored come hang out

**Carlos F. Santi:** At least play COD with me. I have gossip. I won't tell unless you play

**Carlos F. Santi:** OK fine Emerson messaged me today. Like . . . now you want to talk?!

I sigh. He's been trying to get me to hang out for days now, but Kate keeps giving me a hard no. And to be honest, I would be worried anyway for Olivia's sake.

Carlos and I talk about fifty times a day—most of it involves his ever-changing love life—but it feels weird not to see him. He's clearly having a hard time with all this too. I'm about to message him back when I hear the familiar ominous clacking of heels outside my doorway.

"You look like hell." The Wicked Witch of the Wills is wearing a striped gray pantsuit, even though she is working from

home. Her ponytail is pulled back in that *Maleficent* look, which matches nicely with her crimson lipstick and cold, dead eyes. No wonder her clients just sign shit and leave. I know I sound awful, but like, she broke a dude's nose doing muay Thai. She could kill me on a whim.

"I know," I mutter.

"Do we need to make a virtual appointment—"

"Yes."

My biweekly appointments have been put on hold, of course, but Dr. Syme is apparently opening up some Zoom calls. He already says I space out a lot during regular sessions, so this should go well. In fairness, things have gotten better in the last two years. After . . . Mom, I was spiraling hard. Panic attacks twice a day. Not sleeping. Not eating. *This*, by comparison, is an improvement.

She nods. "Good. I'll set one up. Are you doing your breathing exercises—"

"Yes."

"Hmm." Kate examines the room. "You know, Charla can't come for a while. You'll have to clean this place yourself. No more towel swans and throw pillow roses."

"I'll survive."

"We all have hard times," she said. "When I lost my husband—"

"Didn't you divorce him because he wanted to be a surfer?"

She nods unabashedly. "We met in law school. He changed."

“What’s the point of this anecdote?”

“I was sad. But I picked myself up, got back to work, and look at me now.”

I glance at her. “You want me to wear pantsuits and feed on old people’s souls?”

“You’re impossible.” She pauses. “Your father didn’t catch his flight today. Has to wait it out . . . A few people at the firm tested positive. He’s stuck in the hotel. He’ll call later.”

I sit upright, snapping back to reality. “How long until he can leave—”

“I don’t know. He has to monitor for symptoms. Spain has a lot more cases than we do.”

“Can’t he just get on a plane anyway and—”

“No. I’ll book the next available appointment. Have a shower, Jonah. You stink.”

Then she’s gone, mercifully, leaving me to wallow in brand-new anxieties about my father. And my stench. I run my hands down my face, pulling my bottom lip with them. I really do need a shower and a distraction. Kate is evil. Max has gone radio-silent.

That leaves only one other woman in my life.

I watch helplessly as Olivia completes her dominion in Settlers of Catan. She gave me a free choice of games in an attempt to level the playing field—UNO was a complete disaster—and then still kicked my ass. This is supposed to

be my specialty too. I beat Carlos in like twenty-five minutes when we played. Granted, he thought it was called Settlers of Canada even after the game was over and questioned the inclusion of deserts, but still.

"Well, that was fun," Olivia says. "You *almost* had me. Napping, I mean."

"I thought you've never played this game," I mutter.

"I haven't. I am simply superior in every facet of life. Including settling."

"That is true," I agree, eyeing her. "You were born to be quarantined."

She's in her petrified bathrobe again. Her hair has become a chaotic, possibly sentient mass atop her head, and she has abandoned all pretenses of teeth-brushing, semi-regular bathing, and socks. The last one troubles me the most, since she puts her feet up on the coffee table where I eat lunch. I make a note to give it a thorough Lysol wiping.

Olivia snorts and goes to the fridge. "Pretty much. Though Crohn's at twelve really sealed the deal. Trust me, there are worse fates than staying home."

"Are we out of anything?" I ask as she paws through the fridge.

"Here we go," she groans. "I don't know. Yes, I suppose. We could use milk."

"Milk, huh . . ."

"If you're debating whether calling your crush to deliver you milk in the midst of a pandemic is a questionable

romantic gesture, then the answer is yes. Thoroughly . . . yes.”

“It’s been two days since I’ve seen her. She . . . didn’t message me back yesterday.”

Olivia sits back down with a glass of water and a stack of chocolate chip cookies. It’s nine a.m. “Where did you leave off?” she asks, sounding deeply bored already.

I pause. “Well, I sent her a playlist—”

“Oh, god. Did any of the songs include the words *crush*, *love*, *longing*—”

“Only in passing,” I murmur, burying my head in my hands. “I liked the songs.”

“Well, you’re all in now. You might as well propose.”

“What do I do, Olivia?” I look up at her. “Save me from myself.”

Olivia curls one wayward strand of hair around her finger. “Well, considering I have self-respect, I would dig a deep hole and hide in it. Of course, you, on the other hand, don’t. So do something romantic. Get her here in a way that doesn’t scream *Where is my liver pâté?* And by here, I mean *outside*, ye of always questionable judgment.”

“Hmm.”

“Think while you clean the board, serf.”

“You know, I’m astounded you don’t have a significant other.”

“Me too,” Olivia agrees, downing her water in one gulp. “I’m such a treasure.”

I ponder that for a moment. "Do you like scavenger hunts?"

"I'm not ten years old, so no. Let me guess: You did one of those for Ashley."

"Okay, ow."

"It probably sent her running to that goalie. *Save me*, Adam. Ha!"

I stand up, mind racing now. "This could work."

"I'm embarrassed for you already."

"Hey, Max . . . do you want to play a game?" I put my hand over my mouth in horror. "I heard it as it was coming out."

"Should I call the police now or wait an hour?"

I run for the stairs. "I won't say that!"

"Good. Hey! The board is not clean! Jonah! Not! Clean!"

I drop into my desk chair and pull out my cell phone. Here goes nothing.

## chapter five

### MAX

**Jonah:** Hey Max. I have a mission for you (should you choose to accept it).

**Max:** I don't.

**Jonah:** Don't what?

**Max:** Choose to accept it.

**Jonah:** OK. That is not how I pictured that going.

**Max:** Really?

**Jonah:** But you haven't even heard what it is yet. You're making a completely uninformed decision.

**Max:** All right. Hit me with the facts. You've got 1 minute.

**Jonah:** OK!

**Jonah:** You know what? Let's just pretend there was no exclamation point there.

**Max:** Can't. I already pictured you clicking your heels together when you said it.

**Jonah:** Moving right along. Let's get back to the mission, shall we? Dares.

**Max:** Dares?

**Jonah:** You don't sound impressed. See I think the problem is you were supposed to imagine it with jazz hands.

**Max:** You really should have sprung for the exclamation point that time.

**Jonah:** So what do you think?

**Max:** I'll pass.

I pull my sunglasses down onto my nose. A scented mini surfboard swings from my rearview mirror. I pull up my next delivery address while the car idles with the windows down. It's a sunny seventy-two degrees. Outside, sprinklers chug water onto the empty golf course that's peeking out from between the houses here. Two down—I reach across to the passenger seat and strike *Rivera* from my crumpled list—four to go.

**Jonah:** It'll be fun!

**Max:** I'm working.

**Jonah:** Right. No. I totally get it. I mean maybe some other time.

**Jonah:** Or not. Not is good too.

**Jonah:** You know I'm just going to say it: this is when an emoji would really come in handy. Because it's totally cool. Could not be more cool.

So yes, I opened a can of worms. My bad. It's not like I meant to, you know, strike up an unlikely friendship or anything. This isn't some weird community outreach program in which I volunteer to spend quality time with the richest, preppiest kid I can find.



Though if it were, let the record show, I'd be straight crushing it.

Anyway. I generally prefer my worms in the can, thank you very much. It'd be so much easier to ghost him if I weren't halfway enjoying this exchange. And if I didn't have a secret thing for slightly neurotic boys with pretty hair who look really cute in glasses. Still, don't think the idea hasn't crossed my mind—when I want to, I can go full on specter. Happy Halloween in March.

**Max:** Serious question: Do other girls fall for this stuff?

**Jonah:** Is that a trick question?

**Max:** I hope not.

**Jonah:** There are no other girls

My hand is on the gearshift. I've only got another five minutes before someone in this nice neighborhood calls the cops on my "suspicious-looking vehicle." That's counting on twice the usual amount of time, given that every residential street I've driven down today looks eerily deserted. No one balancing coffee cups on top of their cars, wrangling kids into car seats, dragging trash cans to the curb. It's spring break, but everyone says it's bound to last at least an extra week, and it's not like anyone's rushing off to ski or sip drinks with tiny umbrellas or whatever it is people in this neighborhood do on vacation. Instead, the sky is robin's-egg blue and the sun is perfect and there isn't a soul in sight to appreciate it except for me.

It's not that I'm lonely. Because Max Mauro doesn't *get* lonely. I am perfectly content being a solo artist. My favorite card game is solitaire. But, it does strike me that in a world that has suddenly and unexpectedly stopped spinning, there may be plenty of days exactly like this one up ahead, and so, purely from a practical standpoint, it might not be the worst thing to break up the monotony. If the opportunity were to present itself.

I remove my hand from the gearshift.

**Max:** How bored are you?

**Jonah:** My body has molded to the sofa so that's an interesting development

**Max:** For the record, there's no such thing as "Dares." That's not a game. It's called "Truth or Dare." We can play that. If you want. But! You have to be 100% honest with me no avoiding the question no holding back. Do we have a deal?

**Jonah:** Deal.

**Jonah:** And I'm happy you changed your mind.

**Max:** I mean. I'm obviously going to blackmail you. I need a retirement fund.

Two seconds later my phone vibrates. "You did not just FaceTime me." I stare down at Jonah, who has apparently relocated so that he's propped up against an expensive-looking headboard.

"Clearly I did. That's what we're doing right now. We're FaceTiming. See? Hi!" He smiles, and, yep, the glasses are

working on me. "I haven't been outside in three days. I want to make sure the world still exists."

"Do I look like your avatar?" I say.

"Think of me more like a co-pilot." He holds his hands to his face like aviator goggles.

I stare out the windshield at the curve of worn tire marks in the cul-de-sac's dark gray paving. "Fine," I say. "Then, off we go, I suppose."

"Hold up, hold up." He waves his hand at me. He's wearing a polo shirt. To hang out at home. "I have to turn my camera off."

"What's the point in that?"

"The point of *that* is safety," he says, and this time he sounds a little annoyed. I must look low-key confused, because he adds, "I just—I knew someone who got into an accident texting and driving and it's a whole—we don't have to get into it. Just—"

My screen goes cloudy and the word *paused* appears across it.

"Better," Jonah says.

Honestly, I'm not loving the idea that he can see me when I can't see him. I resist the urge to cover my face in my hands. I don't have on an ounce of makeup and an angry zit is taking up residence on my chin. "Okay. Whatever." I nod once and hook my phone into the dash holder. "What's our first challenge?"

...

"No." I spear him with one of the Mauro women's patented looks.

"I didn't peg you for a chicken," he says.

Mrs. Phillips lives in a pink stucco house nestled back behind a massive iron gate.

"I'm not." I lift my chin.

"Great. Then press the intercom. It's just that *little* button right there by the gate." Jonah, un-pausing the camera, uses the cap of his pen to point it out for me.

"I know which button," I huff.

"Oh, okay, so you're stalling." He gives me a pleased-with-himself grin. "I wasn't sure."

"Does it have to be that song?"

"Excuse me, *'that song'*? *That song* is a—"

Before he can finish, I lean out the window, screw my face up tight, push the intercom, and channel my inner Lionel Richie:

*"Hello, is it me you're looking for?*

*I can see it in your smile, these groceries drive you wild."*

"—Max?" Mrs. Phillips voice crackles through the speaker. "Is that you?"

I slap my hand over my mouth. I haven't sung around anyone other than my mother since I was a kid and I'm reminded once again why. My singing is a straight-up travesty.

Jonah disappears from frame, but I can hear him laughing. Squealing. Oh my goodness, Jonah Stephens *squeals*.

I snort-laugh and clap both hands over my mouth.

"Max!" he erupts.

"Shhhhh!" I say.

"Is there a pig out there, honey?" asks Mrs. Phillips.

Jonah mouths *pig* to me.

"No, I, um, just had the sudden urge to sing. It happens sometimes. It's uh—it's a condition. Melo . . . dono . . . nophyism?"

I pinch the skin between my eyebrows. I cannot look at Jonah right now.

"I love it, dear! What guts! Come on in. Did you get the lubricant this time, by the w—"

"I got it!" I say. "Coming up to the porch now."

"Oh my god, please let me meet her," Jonah begs as the gates creak open.

I drive up the pavers past the pruned topiaries. "Mrs. Phillips? I don't think so. But, now that you mention it, I do have someone I could introduce you to later. My favorite customer. *If you're good.*" I open the car door to get Mrs. Phillips's groceries. "For now, you have other things to focus on. Like how you're next."