


Beth Reekles

LOCKDOWN
on
LONDON
LANE

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Sunday



URGENT!!!!!!

DO NOT IGNORE THIS MESSAGE

NOTICE TO ALL RESIDENTS OF LONDON LANE,
APARTMENT BUILDING C

Dear Resident,

*As you will be aware from our previous missives on the subject, due to the current situation in which we are potentially facing a global pandemic due to a highly contagious virus, building management has made the decision to impose a seven-day quarantine on any apartment building in London Lane where a resident is found to have the virus.**

Unfortunately, someone in BUILDING C has tested positive.

BUILDING C is now in a seven-day lockdown. Please remain calm, remain safe, and wash your hands regularly. We ask that you avoid use of the elevators except for emergencies and avoid contact with other residents. Most importantly, please remain in your apartment.

Have a good week!

With kind regards,

The London Lane Building Management Team

**PLEASE NOTE: If you think you have contracted the virus, you are to inform your building's caretaker immediately. If you do not follow instructions, management reserves the right to serve notice of eviction to any tenant or to impose significant fines for breach of contract. Your caretaker for BUILDING C is MR. ROWAN HARRIS.*

APARTMENT #14 – IMOGEN

Chapter One

It's starting to get light out; the venetian blinds are a pale-gray color that does nothing to keep the sunshine away. The entire window seems to glow, and pale shadows fall across the rest of the room, obscuring the organized cluster of hair products and cologne on the dresser, playing tricks on the hoodie hanging in front of the wardrobe doors. There's a knee digging into my thigh. I rub a hand over my face, feeling last night's mascara congealing around the edges of my eyes, and start to peel myself out of the bed, hissing when I discover an arm is pinning down my hair. I bunch it up into a ponytail, slowly, to ease it free inch by inch.

The mattress creaks when I sit up, but—Nigel? I want to say Nigel—snorts in his sleep, still totally out of it, oblivious to my being in his bed.

I glance over my shoulder at him.

Still cuter than his profile picture, even with a line of drool down his chin.

“This has been fun,” I whisper, even though he's fast asleep. I blow him a kiss and creep across the bedroom to silently wriggle into my jeans. I look down at the T-shirt of his I borrowed to sleep in. It's a Ramones shirt, and it feels genuinely vintage, not just some ten-pound H&M version. Actually, it's really goddamn comfortable. And cute, I think, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror leaning against the far wall. Oversized, but not in a way that makes me look

like a little kid playing dress-up. I tuck it into the front of my jeans, admiring the effect.

Oh yeah, that's cute.

Sorry, Neil—Neil? Maybe that's it—this shirt is mine now.

My long brown hair, on the other hand, looks kind of scraggly and definitely not cute. Yesterday evening's curls have dropped out, leaving it limp, full of kinks, and looking pretty sorry for itself. I run my fingers through it, but give up. Hey, at least the smeared mascara is giving me some grunge vibes that totally match the Ramones shirt.

Collecting my own T-shirt and bra from the bedroom floor, I tip-toe into the open-plan living/dining room. Where'd I leave my bag? Wasn't it—a-ha, there it is! And my coat too. I stuff my clothes into my bag, then look around for my shoes.

Come on, Imogen, think, they've got to be around here somewhere. I can't have lost them. I wasn't even drunk last night! Where did I leave my damn shoes?

Oh my God, no. I remember. He made me leave them outside, saying they looked muddy. Like it was my fault it rained last night and the pathway up to the apartment block was covered in mud from the flower beds. And I joked that they were Prada and if someone stole them this had better be worth it, even though I'd only bought them on sale from Zara.

I do a final sweep just to make sure I've got everything. Phone—check. House key—yep, in my bag.

I hesitate, then do a quick dash back to the tiny two-seater dining table near the living-room door to nab a slice of leftover pepperoni pizza from our delivery late yesterday evening.

Breakfast of champions.

I step over some junk mail as I sneak out of the front door. It can't be much later than seven o'clock. Who the hell delivers junk mail that early in the morning? Who is *that* dedicated?

My shoes are exactly where I left them.

And, all right, in fairness, they do look like I trekked through a farmyard. I really can't blame him for making me take them off outside the apartment. I'm going to have to clean them up when I get home.

I hold the slice of pizza between my teeth as I wriggle my feet into them—and *ew*, they're soggy—and then I slip my coat on.

Okay, good to go!

I skip down the stairs to the ground floor, munching on my pizza and already on the Uber app to get myself a car home. These shoes are cute, but not really made for a walk of shame.

"Excuse me, miss?"

Despite there being nobody else around, I don't realize the voice is directed at me until it says, "Hey you, Ramones!"

When I turn around, I find a tired, stressed-looking guy with a handful of leaflets. Mr. Junk Mail, I'm assuming. He's wearing a blue surgical mask over his mouth and ugly brown slippers.

"Thanks, mate, but I'm not interested," I tell him, and make for the door.

Except when I push it open, it . . . doesn't.

I grab the big steel handle and yank, and push, and rattle, but the door stays firmly locked.

What the fuck?

Oh my God, this is how I die. A one-night stand and a serial killer peddling leaflets. Please, please don't let anybody put that as cause of death on my gravestone.

"Miss, you can't leave," the man tells me wearily. "Didn't you get the note?"

"What note? What are you talking about?"

I turn to him, my phone clutched in my hand. Should I call the police? My mum? The Uber driver?

The man sighs, exasperated, stepping toward me, but still maintaining a good distance. Like me, there's a rumpled look about him, but

he looks more like he rushed out of the house this morning, not like he's just heading home. There's a huge ring of keys hanging from his belt. Then I clock the white latex gloves he's wearing and get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"We got a confirmed case from one of the residents. The whole building's on lockdown. That door doesn't open except for medical needs and food deliveries."

I stare at him, all too aware that my mouth is hanging open. After a while, he shrugs in that *What can you do?* kind of way.

It's a joke, I realize.

It's got to be a joke.

I let out an awkward laugh, my lips stretching into a smile. "Right. Right, yeah, good one. Look, um, totally get it, real serious, but can you just . . . you know, use one of those keys, let me out of here? Cross my heart, I'll be *super* careful. Look, hey, I'll even cancel my Uber and walk, how about that?"

The guy frowns at me. "Miss, do you realize how serious this is?"

"Absolutely," I reassure him, but instead of sounding sincere, it comes off as fake, like I'm trying too hard. Condescending, even. Shit. I try again. "I get it. I do, but look, the thing is, I was just visiting someone. So I shouldn't really be here right now. And I kind of have to get home?"

There's a flicker of sympathy on his face, and I let myself get excited at having won him over. But then the frown returns, and he tells me sternly, "You know you're not supposed to be traveling unnecessarily, don't you?"

Damn it.

"Well, I mean . . . couldn't you just . . ."

I look longingly over my shoulder at the door. At the muddy path on the other side of the glass, the washed-out flower beds with the droopy rosebushes and brightly colored petunias. Freedom—so close I can almost taste it, and yet . . .

And yet all I can taste is my own morning breath and pepperoni pizza.

Which is not as great now as it was two minutes ago.

What are the odds I can snatch his keys off his belt and unlock the door before he catches me? Hmm, pretty nonexistent. Or what if I just run really hard and really fast at the door? Maybe I could smash the window with one of my heels? Ooh! Could I hypnotize him into letting me out of here? I could definitely give it a go. I've seen a few clips of Derren Brown on YouTube.

"Seven-day quarantine," my jailer tells me. "I've got to deep clean all the communal spaces. Anyone could be infected, and unless you're going to tell me you've got fifty-odd tests for all the residents in that bag of yours, nobody's going anywhere. Believe me, this is no fun for me either. You think I want to be playing security guard all day long just so I don't get fired by management and end up evicted?"

Okay, *fine*, well done. Congrats, Mr. Junk Mail, I officially feel sorry for you.

"But—"

"Listen, all I can suggest is you go back to your friend"—I appreciate that he says *friend* as though we're talking about an actual friend here, when it's so obvious that's not the case—"and see if you can get a grocery delivery slot, and maybe one from Topshop or whatever, see you through the next week. But unless you need to go to a hospital, you're stuck here."

*

I trudge slowly, grudgingly, back up the stairs. My shoes are pinching my toes, so I take them off, slinging the straps over my index finger to carry them. Mr. Junk Mail stays downstairs to scrub down the door I just put my grubby hands all over, almost like he's warding me off, making sure I don't try to leave again.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

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Ugh.

I know exactly what I'm supposed to do now.

But still, I hope for the teeniest bit of luck as I jiggle the handle for Apartment 14.

Locked.

Obviously.

Weighing up my options, I finally sit down on the plain tan door-mat, my back against the door, and press my hands over my face.

This is what I get for ignoring all the advice.

Not so much the *stay home* stuff (although that, too) so much as the *You're not in university anymore, Immy, stop acting like it* advice—from my parents, my friends, my boss, hell, even my little brothers.

As I always say, who needs to grow up when you can have fun?

This, however, is decidedly *not* fun.

My only option is to do exactly what I would've done back in university: phone my bestie.

Despite the early hour, Lucy answers with a quiet but curt, "What have you done this time?"

"Heyyy, Luce . . ."

"How much do you need, Immy?"

"What makes you think I need money? What makes you think I've done *anything*?" I ask with mock offense, clutching a hand to my heart for dramatic effect, even though she can't see me. And even though I can't see her, I absolutely know she's rolling her eyes when she gives that long, low sigh. "Although, all right, I am in . . . the *littlest* spot of trouble."

"Did you forget to cancel a free trial?"

Lucy's so used to my shit by now that she knows how melodramatic I can be over something like that—melodramatic enough to warrant an early-morning phone call like this.

But, alas.

I open my mouth to tell her I'm stuck with Honey-pot Guy, the guy

I've been messaging for the last week or so, whom she specifically told me not to go see because there's maybe a pandemic, and now I'm stuck quarantined in his building and I only have the one pair of underwear and I didn't even bring a toothbrush with me and . . .

And I *hate* admitting how right Lucy always is.

Even if, technically, this is all *her* fault, because she was too busy with some stupid wedding planning party last night to answer her phone and talk me out of going to see the guy in the first place. So I decided to go, and not tell her about it until I was safely back at home, just to prove a point about how she always makes a big deal out of nothing, how she worries too much.

"Oh Jesus Christ, you went to see him, didn't you? Honeypot?"

I *cannot* tell her the truth.

At least, not yet.

"No! No, no, of course I didn't," I blurt, even though I fully expect her to see right through me. "I, um, I'm just . . . well, look, so, the thing is . . ."

I don't like lying to my best friend—to anybody, really, if I can help it. If anything, I'm a total oversharer. But I decide this is for the greater good. I mean, really, I'm just doing her a favor, right? If she knew, she'd only spend the week worrying and stressing about me. I'm just sparing her that.

Lucy cuts me off with a sigh, understanding that whatever it is, it's a bit more than the usual mischief I get myself into, and she says, "Oh, you're properly fucked this time, aren't you?"

"Thanks, Luce."

Thankfully, she doesn't push me for answers. "How's your overdraft?"

"Not great."

"Did you run up your credit card again this month?"

"A little bit."

We both know that actually means "almost completely."

“Will a hundred quid cover it, Immy?”

“I love you.”

“I’ll add it to your tab,” she tells me, and I know she’s smiling. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Oh, you know me!” I say, laughing. I’m weirdly relieved that being quarantined with a one-night stand isn’t the craziest thing that’s happened to me in the last month or so. It’s definitely not as bad as the night out where I climbed onstage to challenge the headlining drag queen to a lip sync battle, is it? “I’ll work it out. Just . . . yeah. Thanks again, Luce. I’ll tell you everything when I see you next.”

“Don’t you always?”

Lucy has a way of ending conversations without having to say good-bye. I know her well enough to recognize that this is one of those moments. I say good-bye and thank her again for the money she’ll send me, the way she always does, which I will repay in love and affection and memes until one day in the distant future, when I have miraculously gotten my life together enough to pay off my overdraft *and* have enough left to put a dent in my ever-growing tab at the Bank of Lucy.

Feeling at least a little better, I stand back up, dust myself off, and knock on the door.

It takes a few minutes to open.

He’s disconcerted and groggy and wearing only his boxer shorts. The carefully coiffed blond hair I’d admired in his pictures is now matted, sticking up at all angles. The dried line of drool is still there on the side of his mouth.

I give him my biggest, bestest grin, cocking my head to one side and twirling some hair around a finger.

“Hey there, Niall. Um . . .”

He yawns loudly and holds up a finger to shush me before covering his mouth. He shakes his head, blinking a few times, then looks at me, confused and none too impressed.

“I hate to be an imposition, but your building is kind of . . . quarantined.”

“It’s what?”

I look for the piece of paper I stepped over earlier and bend down to pick it up. It’s a printed notice that, at a quick glance, instructs residents to stay indoors for a seven-day period. I hold it out to him, staying silent and swaying side to side, hands clasped in front of me, while he reads it, rubbing his eyes. He has to squint, holding it up close to his face.

“Oh shit.”

“There’s a guy downstairs, and he won’t let me leave,” I say. “I’m *really* sorry, but unless you want to take it up with him . . .”

I step back inside the apartment, leaving my shoes outside once more. He’s speechless as I put down my bag and coat.

“I’m just going to use your bathroom. You know, wash my hands.” I waggle them at him, as if to prove what a responsible grown-up I am.

When I come out he’s still standing by the door, still clutching the paper.

“So, Nico, listen—”

“It’s Nate.”

“What?”

“My name?” He raises his eyebrows at me, looking more pissed off than tired now. “Nate. Nathan, but . . . Nate.”

I bite my lip, grimacing. I’d kind of hoped if I ran through enough names, I’d hit on the right one eventually. I’d also kind of hoped if I said them quickly enough, he wouldn’t notice.

“Sorry. You’re . . . you’re saved in my phone contacts as the honey-pot emoji. You know, ’cause you . . . you said that if you were a fictional character, you’d be Winnie-the-Pooh, and you said your mum kept bees and . . . and that your favorite chocolate bar is Crunchie, which has honeycomb in it . . . I thought it was cute at the time, and

funny, but then I realized I'd forgotten your name, and you deleted your profile off the dating app, so I couldn't check *that* . . .”

Nate's face has softened.

But then, as I take my coat off, he realizes what I'm wearing and lets out a loud, disbelieving laugh. “You're really something, aren't you? Talking your way over here when everyone's meant to be social distancing—”

“I didn't hear *you* complaining,” I mutter, none too quietly.

“Sneaking out without so much as a good-bye, *and* you were planning to make off with my favorite shirt. Wow.”

“Maybe it was just going to be a good excuse to see you again.”

He laughs, rolling his eyes. “Imogen, believe me when I say I have *never* met anybody like you before.”

I curtsy, even though it sounds like an insult, the way he says it. “Thank you.”

That, at least, makes him laugh. Nate-Nathan-Nate runs a hand through his hair, taming it only slightly, then tells me, “There are spare towels in the bathroom cabinet if you want to take a shower. I'm going to see if I can get a food delivery slot online. Then, I guess we'll . . . I don't know. Figure this out.”

I'm not exactly sure what there is to “figure out” besides maybe ordering some frozen lasagnas and a few pairs of underwear, but I nod. “Right. Totally. You got it, Nate.”

So much for my swift exit.

APARTMENT #6 – ETHAN

Chapter Two

It's automatic, the way I roll over when I'm not even fully awake yet, my arm out to pull her closer. The empty space beside me startles me for a second before I wake up enough to remember where she is. I turn back over to face my bedside cabinet, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes with one hand and fumbling for my phone with the other. My hand closes on it and I yank out the charger.

There's a notification waiting for me on the screen: a text from Charlotte an hour ago.

Just about to leave—I'll see you in a couple of hours! Xxxxx

She always tells me she's not a morning person, but the honest to God truth is she absolutely is. What she is, is the kind of person who likes a *lazy* morning. She'll wake up an hour before she has to be at work just so she can spend some time curled up under the covers reading, or jotting things down in the powder-blue notebook she takes everywhere with her.

Today must be a special occasion, though, for her to have been actually up and out of bed so early. Well—either that, or after three days being home with her twin sister and parents, clearing out her childhood bedroom and the attic to get ready for her parents to sell up and downsize, she's been going stir-crazy and can't wait to get home.

Lockdown on London Lane

Yeah, I think, it's definitely that one. She's been putting this weekend off for as long as she can; she's been living in denial of her parents selling the house since they announced it a couple of months ago, and I can't say I blame her. My parents divorced when I was ten and after that, they both moved around a couple of times. If I had to say good-bye to the kind of home Charlotte's known her whole life, I'd be pretty upset about it too.

I can only imagine how tough this weekend has been for her; it makes sense she'd be on the road before eight o'clock.

What doesn't make sense is how much I've missed her the last couple of days. It's genuinely pathetic. I can just imagine my friends telling me, *Ethan, grow a pair, any guy would give his right arm to have the place to himself for a weekend, get the girlfriend out of the way, have a break from her!*

I *did* see a couple of mates on Friday night, but that was for a Fortnite livestream for my Twitch channel. And *see* is stretching it a little—we all joined from the comfort of our own homes. Real crazy, frat-boy kinda stuff, of course. While the cat's away, and all that.

But I've missed her.

It's not like I can't *cope* without her, like I'm some mummy's boy who never learned to do the dishes or make a bed or do the laundry or anything. It's not like that. If anything, *I'm* the one who does the bulk of the cleaning around here, always tidying up after her.

It'll be good to have her back home, that's all.

I stay in bed for a while checking my other notifications—YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp. I clear through some emails saying I've got new patrons on Patreon, which sends a thrill of excitement through me, as it always does, and finally I haul my lazy ass up to take a shower before Charlotte gets back.

We can catch up on *The Mandalorian* this afternoon, maybe, if she doesn't want to spend some time writing. Or we could watch a movie. I wonder if she'll have a bunch of stuff from her childhood bedroom

we need to find the space for—old exercise books and homework projects we'll have to shove in a box under the bed, or Beanie Babies.

Maybe she'd let me put the Beanie Babies on eBay, if they're worth anything.

I can't complain too much if she does want to keep them. It's not like I don't have my fair share of action figures and collectibles in the apartment. And the giant Charizard plushie . . .

I dread the day my parents get the same idea; I hope that by the time they do, I'll at least live somewhere with enough space to store my entire collection of Neil Gaiman books, my old PlayStation, records from my vinyl phase that I can't quite bear to get rid of.

It occurs to me now that when Charlotte thinks of us moving somewhere with more space one day, she thinks about it in the context of a guest bedroom, or a potential future nursery. Or a library. Actually, I could definitely get on board with a home library.

Breakfast made, I'm sat on the sofa watching old episodes of *Parks and Rec* and daydreaming about the studio space I might have one day that *isn't* just a dedicated few square feet of the living room, when my phone rings. It's Charlotte, which is weird, and I answer with a knot in my stomach, visions of her car broken down on the side of a motorway or—

Come on, Ethan, take a breath and answer the phone.

Sliding my thumb across the screen to answer, I manage to *not* start with, "What's wrong?" and instead say, "Hey, what's up? Did you forget your key?"

"Ethan," she says. Her voice wobbles. The catastrophizing part of my brain kicks into high gear for a second, thinking I was right, her car broke down, something is horribly wrong. She sounds upset, but it's not just that—she's agitated, angry. "Ethan, you have to get down here. He's saying I'm not allowed in the building."

"What? Who?"

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“Mr. Harris,” she tells me, meaning the building’s live-in caretaker. “He’s—Ethan, can you please come down here and talk to him? And wear a mask.”

Confused as hell, I can only hold the phone near my ear even after Charlotte’s hung up on me, before kicking myself into gear. I leave my plate of half-eaten bagel on the sofa and root through the set of drawers in the hallway. She thought it was ridiculous when I ordered a bunch of blue surgical masks online a couple of weeks ago, before they even started using the word *pandemic* in the news; now, I can’t help but feel a little smug. Anxiety: 1, Charlotte: 0.

I wash my hands and put the mask on, then snatch up my key and leave the apartment. There’s a scrap of paper on the floor someone’s pushed under the door, but I’ll check it later. I go down the single flight of stairs in just my socks, almost tripping over my own feet in my haste.

Mr. Harris is standing near the main doors to the building with his arms crossed, wearing white latex gloves and a mask like mine. On the other side, with her bags on the floor and her hands bunched into fists on her hips, is Charlotte. My glasses steam up from the mask so I nudge them up on top of my head, where they balance on my thick blond-brown hair, and I squint at him instead; Charlotte’s head becomes a fuzzy patch of orange where her hair is a mess.

“What’s going on?”

“Ethan, tell him!” she yells, voice muffled by the door. She raises a hand to pound against the glass, leaving smudges on it. “He’s locked me out! He can’t do this!”

The caretaker sighs. It’s a long-suffering sigh, like this is a conversation he’s already had a thousand times. He turns to give me a frown and I can imagine his teeth grinding behind that mask.

“Ethan, please tell your girlfriend she can’t enter the building. You got the note, right?”

“What note?”

“Bloody hell, what was even the point of me . . . ?” He trails off with a sharp sigh, rubbing the back of his forearm against his brow. “The whole building’s on lockdown. You remember I put a notice out when all this started that said if anybody in the building got sick, if we had a confirmed case, we had to lock down for everybody’s safety? Nobody in or out.”

“Yeah . . . ?”

“Confirmed case last night. Someone, *not naming any names*, caught it from her *divorce lawyer*, if you can believe it. She got a test done and it turned up positive. So we’re on lockdown. Nobody’s getting *in*, or *out*. Including your girlfriend.”

Oh shit.

I bump my glasses back down to see Charlotte’s face, still scrunched up in anger, her lips in a tight little pout. They steam up again just as she gives me a look that says, *Ethan, I swear to God, if you don’t open this door right now, I’ll break it down myself.*

For someone so small . . . what’s that Shakespeare quote again?

Charlotte has it printed on a tote bag. It’s very accurate right now.

“Come on, Mr. Harris,” I say, with a nervous laugh. My hand moves up like I’m going to step toward him and clap his arm, until I remember the six-foot rule and think better of it. “It’s us, you know we’re good. Charlotte lives here. Where’s she gonna go?”

“Where’s she been?”

“At her parents, but—”

“Well, she’s going to have to go back there.”

“But . . .”

I wouldn’t exactly say I was *friends* with our caretaker, but we’re on good terms. His apartment is directly below ours, and apparently he’s glad to have us there, because the previous owners “might as well have been practicing tap dancing with all the noise they made.” He watches my YouTube videos, too, he told me a while ago. He said he

likes having “a celebrity” in the building, and we always stop for a chat if we see him.

I don’t know why I think I’m going to convince him to let Charlotte in when he looks so determined, but for a second I really believe I can. We’ve never made any fuss. We’re good neighbors, good people, he even knows us by name.

And how can he say no?

Charlotte lives here, this is her home. Of course he has to let her inside.

“I can’t let her inside,” he tells me sternly. “Nobody in, nobody out, no exceptions. Well. Exceptions are by emergency only, and this doesn’t class as one.”

“What about food?”

“Get it delivered. I’m setting up a sanitizing station, make sure everything’s clean before it gets through.”

For a second, I imagine having something like that for Charlotte, and Mr. Harris setting up a giant hose to douse her in Dettol spray before she’s allowed inside.

“Unless she can show me a negative test,” he says reluctantly, as though he’s risking his job by even allowing us that much, “she’s not getting in. Quarantine’s lasting a week. Sure you two can survive being apart for that long, eh?”

He shrugs, and his scowl softens just long enough for me to see he actually *is* sorry about this whole mess; I know he doesn’t have too much say on the matter, that this really is up to his bosses, the mysterious, faceless, building management we’ve never set eyes on but who occasionally send us threatening letters via Mr. Harris to remind us there are no pets in the building, there is no renovation work to be done without clearing it with them first, that if nobody owns up to who damaged the window on the third floor they *will* be charging an equal share of the (absolutely extortionate) cost of repairs to each resident.

I always picture them in the same way as Station Management, from the *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast—some mysterious, dark, writhing, many-headed mass of condemnation. Charlotte says they're more like Mr. Rochester's mad wife in the attic from *Jane Eyre*. Either way, I don't imagine petitioning *them* right now would make a blind bit of difference.

Mr. Harris steps back, but he doesn't leave. He's got to make sure I don't try to smuggle Charlotte indoors, I guess.

I do the only thing I can, which is to turn toward her and give her a helpless shrug, pulling a face even though she can't really see it because I'm wearing a mask. I can't see her expression clearly enough because of my fogged-up glasses, but I can guess how disappointed she is.

She gestures widely enough for me to see, though, and I get the message. I tell Mr. Harris "Thanks," even though it's really thanks for nothing, and head back upstairs. Inside, I wash my hands again, take off the mask, and pull my glasses back down so I can see the world in all its high-definition glory again. My phone is already ringing on the sofa and I grab it, answering as I head out to the balcony, leaning over it to see Charlotte standing below.

She runs a hand through her short ginger hair, shaking it out, and pouts up at me, looking so desperately sad. Through the phone, she tells me, "I thought he might listen to you."

"Because I'm a guy?" I flex a nonexistent bicep and kiss it.

"Because he likes your YouTube videos, you *idiot*." She laughs, but it fades away quickly. "I'm going to have to go home. Just as well my parents haven't gotten rid of my old bed yet, huh?"

"Do you need your stuff? I could drop a bag down from the balcony. Clothes, or . . . ?"

She shakes her head. "Thanks, sweetie, but that's okay. I've got some stuff, and my laptop and things. I can borrow some of Maisie's clothes. She has terrible taste, but she *is* my identical

twin. Give or take a few pounds.” Charlotte grabs her love handles, cracking a grin.

“Didn’t you both buy the same dress last Christmas?”

“Shush. Look, I’ll . . . I’ll just go back home. I’ll see you next week, I guess.”

“Providing this is all over by then.” And someone else in the building hasn’t contracted the virus, and then someone else, and we’re not in this strict lockdown for the next several months, and Charlotte never gets to come back to our apartment, and . . . My chest constricts, and suddenly looking out at the empty common area in front of the apartment is like surveying some scene from an apocalyptic disaster movie. And *I am on my own*. I’m basically Will Smith in *I Am Legend*, except without the dog, and not half as cool, and—

“I’ll be back next week when this silly lockdown thing is over. I promise. I’ll scale the walls if I have to, okay? Don’t spiral.”

“I’m not spiraling.”

She raises her eyebrows, squinting up at me, not buying it. Despite the fact that she’s the one locked out of her home for the next several days, somehow she’s the one comforting me.

“It’ll be fine. It’s—it’s not a big deal, really, is it? In the grand scheme of things. We can FaceTime, and text, and you can have some peace and quiet to film a few videos and get some work done without me walking by in the background and messing up your edits. It’s fine. It’s just a week.”

We talk a little while longer, until Mr. Harris opens the main door long enough to tell Charlotte to please collect her bags and go, and I wave good-bye from the balcony. Charlotte blows me a kiss on her way to her car, and I catch it.

Just a week.

It’ll fly by.