



one

According to family legend, I was born on the floor of a taxi.

I'm the youngest of six, and apparently Mom went from "I have a bit of a cramp, but let me finish making lunch" to "Hello, Holland Lina Bakker" in the span of about forty minutes.

It's always the first thing I think about when I climb into a cab. I note how I have to shimmy with effort across the tacky seat, how there are millions of neglected fingerprints and unidentifiable smudges clouding the windows and Plexiglas barrier—and how the floor of a cab is a *really* terrible place for a baby to meet the world.

I slam the taxi door behind me to block out the howling Brooklyn wind. "Fiftieth Street station, Manhattan."

The driver's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror and I can imagine what he's thinking: *You want to take a cab to the*

subway in Manhattan? Lady, you could take the C train all the way there for three bucks.

“Eighth Ave. and Forty-Ninth Street,” I add, ignoring the clawing flush of awareness that I am absurd. Instead of taking the cab all the way home, I’m having the driver take me from Park Slope to a subway stop in Hell’s Kitchen, roughly two blocks from my building. It’s not that I’m particularly safety minded and don’t want this cabbie to know where I live.

It’s that it’s Monday, approximately eleven thirty, and Jack will be there.

At least, he should be. Since I first saw him busking at the Fiftieth Street station nearly six months ago, he’s been there every Monday night, along with Wednesday and Thursday mornings before work, and Friday at lunchtime. Tuesday he’s gone, and I’ve never seen him there on the weekend.

Mondays are my favorite, though, because there’s an intensity in the way he crouches over his guitar, cradling it, seducing it. Music that seems to have been trapped inside all weekend long is freed, broken only by the occasional metallic tumble of pocket change dropped into the open guitar case at his feet, or the roar of an approaching train.

I don’t know what he does in the hours he’s not there. I’m also fairly certain his name isn’t Jack, but I needed to call him something other than “the busker,” and giving him a name made my obsession seem less pathetic.

Sort of.

The cabbie is quiet; he isn’t even listening to talk radio or any of the other cacophonous car-filler every New Yorker gets used to. I blink away from my phone and the Instagram feed

full of books and makeup tutorials, to the mess of sleet and slush on the roads. My cocktail buzz doesn't seem to be evaporating as quickly as I'd hoped, and by the time we pull up to the curb and I pay the fare, I still have its giddy effervescence simmering in my blood.

I've never come to see Jack while drunk before, and it's either a terrible or a fantastic idea. I guess we're about to find out which.

Hitting the bottom of the stairs, I catch him tuning his guitar and stop a few feet away, studying him. With his head bowed, and in the beam of the streetlight shooting down the stairs, his light brown hair seems almost silver.

He's suitably scruffy for our generation, but he looks clean, so I like to think he has a nice apartment and a regular, well-paying job, and does this because he loves it. He has the type of hair I can't resist, neat and trimmed along the sides but wild and untamed on top. It looks soft, too, shiny under the lights and the kind of hair you want to curl a fist around. I don't know what color his eyes are because he never looks up at anyone while he plays, but I like to imagine they're brown or dark green, a color deep enough to get lost in.

I've never seen him arrive or leave, because I always walk past him, drop a dollar bill in his case, and keep moving. Then, covertly from the platform, I look over—as do many of us—to where he sits on his stool near the base of the stairs, his fingers flying up and down the neck of the instrument. His left hand pulls out the notes as if it's as simple as breathing.

Breathing. As an aspiring writer, it's my least favorite cli-

ché, but it's the only one that suits. I've never seen someone's fingers move like that, as if he doesn't even have to think about it. In some ways, it seems like he gives the guitar an actual human voice.

He looks up as I drop a bill into his case, squinting at me, and gives me a quiet "Thanks very much."

He's never done that before—looked up when someone dropped money in his case—and I'm caught completely off guard when our eyes meet.

Green, his are green. And he doesn't immediately look away. The hold of his gaze is mesmerizing.

So instead of saying, "Yeah," or "Sure"—or nothing at all, like any other New Yorker would—I blurt, "Iloveyourmusicsomuch." A string of words breathlessly said as one.

I'm gifted with the humblest flicker of a smile, and my tipsy brain nearly shorts out. He does this thing where he chews on his bottom lip for a second before saying, "Do you reckon so? Well, you're very kind. I love to play it."

His accent is heavily Irish, and the sound of it makes my fingers tingle.

"What's your name?"

Three mortifying seconds pass before he answers with a surprised grin. "Calvin. And yours?"

This is a conversation. Holy shit, I'm having a conversation with the stranger I've had a crush on for months.

"Holland," I say. "Like the province in the Netherlands. Everyone thinks it's synonymous with the Netherlands, but it's not."

Oof.

Tonight, I've concluded two things about gin: it tastes like pinecones and is clearly the devil's sauce.

Calvin smiles up at me, saying cheekily, "Holland. A province *and* a scholar," before he adds something quietly under his breath that I don't quite make out. I can't tell if the amused light in his eyes is because I'm an entertaining idiot, or because there's a person directly behind me doing something awesome.

Having not been on a date in what feels like a millennium, I also don't know where a conversation should go after this, so I bolt, practically sprinting the twenty feet to the platform. When I come to a halt, I dig in my purse with the practiced urgency of a woman who is used to pretending she has something critical she must obtain immediately.

The word he whispered—*lovely*—registers about thirty seconds too late.

He meant my name, I'm sure. I'm not saying that in a false-modesty kind of way. My best friend, Lulu, and I agree that, objectively, we're middle-of-the-pack women in Manhattan—which is pretty great as soon as we leave New York. But Jack—Calvin—gets ogled by every manner of man and woman passing through the station—from the Madison Avenue trustafarians slumming it on the subway to the scrappy students from Bay Ridge; honestly, he could have his pick of bed partners if he ever took the time to look up at our faces.

To confirm my theory, a quick glance in my compact mirror reveals the clownish bleed of my mascara below my eyes and a particularly ghoulish lack of color in the bottom half of my face. I reach up and attempt to smooth the tangle of brown strands that every other moment of my life are straight and

lifeless, but have presently escaped the confines of my ponytail and defy gravity around my head.

Lovely, at present, I am not.

Calvin's music returns, and it fills the quiet station in this echoing, haunting way that actually makes me feel even drunker than I thought I was. Why did I come here tonight? Why did I speak to him? Now I have to realign all these things in my brain, like his name not being Jack and his eyes having a defined color. The knowledge that he is Irish just about makes me feel crazy enough to go climb on his lap.

Ugh. Crushes are the worst, but in hindsight a crush from afar seems so much easier than this. I should stick to making up stories in my head and watching from a distance like a reasonable creeper. Now I've broken the fourth wall and if he's as friendly as his eyes tell me he is, he may notice me when I drop money in his case the next time, and I will be forced to interact smoothly or run in the opposite direction. I may be middle-of-the-pack when my mouth is closed, but as soon as I start talking to men, Lulu calls me Appalland, for how appallingly unappealing I become. Obviously, she's not wrong. And now I'm sweating under my pink wool coat, my face is melting, and I'm hit with an almost uncontrollable urge to hike my tights up to my armpits because they have slowly crept down beneath my skirt and are starting to feel like form-fitting harem pants.

I should really go for it and just shimmy them up my waist, because other than one comatose gentleman sleeping on a nearby bench, it's just me and Calvin down here, and he's not paying attention to me anymore.

But then the sleeping gentleman rises, zombielike, and takes one shuffling step toward me. Subway stations are awful when they're empty like this. They're caves for the leches, the harassers, the flashers. It isn't that late—not even midnight on a Monday—but I've clearly just missed a train.

I move to my left, farther down the platform, and pull out my phone to look busy. Alas, I should know that drunk and persistent men are often not swayed by the industrious presence of an iPhone, and the zombie comes closer.

I don't know if it's the tiny spike of fear in my chest or a draft passing through the station, but I'm hit with the cloying, briny smell of mucus; the sour rot of spilled soda sitting for months at the bottom of a trash bin.

He lifts a hand, pointing. "You have my phone."

Turning, I give him a wide berth as I circle back toward the stairs and Calvin. My thumb hovers over Robert's phone number.

He follows. "*You*. Come here. You have my phone."

Without bothering to look up, I say as calmly as possible, "Get the hell away from me."

I push Robert's name and hold the phone to my ear. It rings hollowly, one ring for every five of my pounding heartbeats.

Calvin's music swells, aggressively now. Does he not see this person following me around the station? I have the absurd thought that it really is remarkable how deeply he gets in the zone while playing.

The man starts this shuffling, lurching run in my direction and the notes tearing out of Calvin's guitar become a soundtrack for the lunatic chasing me down the platform.

My tights keep me from running with any amount of speed or grace, but his clunky run speeds up, turns more fluid with confidence.

Through the phone, I hear the tinny sound of Robert answering. “*Hey, Buttercup.*”

“Holy crap, Robert. I’m at the—”

The man reaches out, his hand wrapping around the sleeve of my coat, jerking my phone away from my ear.

“Robert!”

“*Holls?*” Robert yells. “*Honey, where are you?*”

I grapple, trying to hold on because I have the sickening sense that I’m off balance. Dread sends a cold, sobering rush along my skin: the man is not helping me stay upright—he’s *shoving* me.

In the distance, I hear a deep shout: “Hey!”

My phone skitters along the concrete. “*Holland?*”

It happens so fast—and I guess things like this always happen fast; if they happened slowly I’d like to think I’d do something, *anything*—but one second I’m on the nubby yellow warning line, and the next I’m falling onto the tracks.



two

I've never been inside an ambulance before, and it's just as mortifying to snort awake in front of two sober professionals as I'd imagine it would be. A female paramedic with a permanent furrow etched into her forehead stares down at me, expression severe. Monitors beep. When I look around, my head becomes a rocket ship, counting down to some manner of combustive event. My arm is sore—no, not just sore, *screaming*. A glance down tells me it's already restrained in a sling.

With the distant roar of an oncoming train, I remember being pushed onto the tracks.

Someone pushed me onto the subway tracks!

My heart begins doing a chaotic version of kung fu in my chest and the panicked tempo is echoed by the various machines surrounding me. I sit up, struggling against the monumental wave of nausea, and croak, "Did you catch him?"

"Whoa, whoa." With concern in her eyes, the paramedic—

her name tag reads Rossi—gently urges me back down. “You’re okay.” She nods at me with confidence. “You’re okay.”

And then she presses a card into my hand.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255

I flip it over, wondering if the other side says,

Who to call when a drunk dude

pushes you onto the tracks

Unfortunately, it does not.

I look back up at her, feeling my face heat in indignation. “I didn’t *jump*.”

Rossi nods. “It’s okay, Ms. Bakker.” She misreads my mystified expression and adds, “We got your name from your purse, which we recovered just off the platform.”

“He didn’t take my purse?”

She presses her lips into a frown and I look around for backup. There are actually two paramedics here—the other is a scruffy Paramedic of the Month calendar-model type who is diligently charting something from where he stands just outside the ambulance. His name tag reads GONZALES. Beyond, a cop car is parked at the curb, and a pair of officers chat amiably near the open driver’s-side door. I can’t help but feel this isn’t the smoothest way to intervene in a potential suicide situation: I’ve just pig-snorted, my skirt is awkwardly bunched near my hips, the crotch of my tights is somewhere south of the equator, and my shirt is

unbuttoned to make room for the adhesive cardiac monitors. A suicidal individual might suffer a touch of humiliation here.

Scooching my skirt down with as much grace as I can manage, I repeat, "I didn't jump."

Gonzales looks up from his paperwork and leans against the ambulance door. "We found you there, sweetie."

I screw my eyes closed, growling at his condescension. This still doesn't add up. "Two paramedics just happened to be wandering through the subway right after I fell onto the tracks?"

He gives me a tiny flicker of a smile. "Anonymous caller. Said there was someone on the tracks. Didn't mention anyone pushing her. Nine times out of ten it's an attempt."

Anonymous caller.

CALVIN.

I see movement just outside the ambulance, at the curb. It's dark out, but it's definitely him, holy shit, and I see him just as he stands. Calvin meets my eyes for the briefest pulse before startling and jerking his face away. Without another look back, he turns to walk down Eighth Avenue.

"Hey!" I point. "Wait. Talk to *him*."

Gonzales and Rossi slowly turn.

Rossi makes no move to stand, and I stab my finger forward again. "*That* guy."

"*He* pushed you?" Gonzales asks.

"No, I think he's the one who called."

Rossi shakes her head; her wince is less sympathetic, more pitying. "That guy walked up after we arrived on scene, said he didn't know anything."

"He lied." I struggle to sit up farther. "Calvin!"

He doesn't stop. If anything, he speeds up, ducking behind a taxicab before jogging across the street.

"He was there," I tell them, bewildered. *Jesus, how much did I drink?* "It was me, that busker—Calvin—and a drunk man. The drunk guy was going for my phone, and shoved me off the platform."

Gonzales tilts his head, gesturing to the cops. "In that case, you should file a police report."

I can't help it—the rudeness just flies out of me: "You *think?*"

I'm given another flicker of a smile; no doubt it's because I don't look the part of a ballsy back-talker with my saggy tights and unbuttoned shirt with pink polka dots.

"Holland, we suspect your arm is broken." Gonzales climbs inside and adjusts a strap on my sling. "And you may have a concussion. Our priority now is getting you down to Mount Sinai West. Is there anyone who can meet you there?"

"Yeah." I need to call Robert and Jeff—my uncles. I look up at Gonzales, remembering how my phone was in my hand one moment, and I was being flung onto the tracks the next. "Did you also find my phone?"

He winces and looks up at Rossi, who gives me her first—apologetic—grin. "I hope you have their number memorized." She lifts up a Ziploc bag holding the shattered remains of my beloved device.

Once my head is checked (no concussion) and my right arm is casted (fractured ulna), I file a police report from my hos-

pital bed. It's only when I'm speaking to the two intensely intimidating officers that I register that I was avoiding making eye contact with the man grabbing me. I didn't get a good look at his face, though I can quite accurately describe his smell.

The cops exchange a look before the taller one asks me, "The guy got close enough to grab your jacket, yell at you, and shove you over onto the tracks, but you didn't see his face?"

I want to scream, *Obviously you have never been a woman running away from a creepy dude before!*, but instead let them move on. I can tell from their expressions that my lack of a physical description dissolves the credibility of my *I-didn't-jump* story, and in the wake of this mild humiliation I decide it would seem even more suspicious if I knew the name of the busker at the subway and he still failed to stick around to help me out. So I don't bother to mention Calvin by name, either, and they jot down my generic details with only the vaguest display of investment.

After they leave, I lie back, staring up at the blank gray ceiling. What a crazy night. I lift my good arm, squinting at my watch.

Morning.

Holy shit, it's nearly three. How long was I down there?

Above the dull throb that painkillers don't seem to dim, I keep seeing Calvin standing up from where he'd been waiting at the curb. It means something that he was still there when I came to, doesn't it? But if he was the anonymous caller—and I assume he must have been because we all know the zombie didn't have a phone—why didn't Calvin tell the police that

someone pushed me? And why lie and tell them he wasn't a witness?

The telltale rushing click of dress shoes on linoleum crescendoes from the hallway, and I sit up, knowing what's coming.

Robert bursts past the curtain, followed more smoothly by Jeff.

"What. The. *Fuuuuuuuck.*" Robert stretches the last word into about seventeen syllables, and takes my face in his hands, leaning in, examining me. "Do you realize how freaked out we've been?"

"Sorry." I wince, feeling my chin wobble for the first time. "My phone got knocked out of my hand."

Seeing my family's panic makes the shock set in, and I start shaking wildly. Emotion rises like a salty tide in my chest. Robert leans in, pressing his lips to my cheek. Jeff steps closer, too, resting a gentle hand on my knee.

Although he isn't related to me by blood, I've known Uncle Robert my entire life; he met my mother's younger brother Jeff several years before I was born.

Uncle Jeff is the calm one; it's the midwesterner in him. He is steady, and rational, and deliberate. He is, you may have guessed, in finance. Robert, by contrast, is motion and sound. He was born in Ghana, and moved here when he was eighteen to attend the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Jeff tells me that Robert had ten job offers when he finished, but he chose the position of youngest-ever concertmaster of the Des Moines Symphony because the two of them fell in love at first sight the weekend Robert was in town interviewing.

My uncles left Des Moines when I was sixteen and headed to Manhattan. By that point, Robert had been promoted out of the ensemble to become the conductor of the symphony. Moving off-Broadway, even as a musical director, was a big step down for him in pay and classical prestige, but musical theater is where Robert's heart beats, and—maybe more importantly for them—it's long been much easier for a dude to be happily married to a dude in New York than in Iowa. They have thrived here, and two years ago, Robert sat down and composed what would soon become the most popular production on Broadway, *It Possessed Him*.

Unwilling to live away from them for long, I came to Columbia for my MFA in creative writing, but have basically stalled out. Being a baby graduate with an MFA in New York makes me a mediocre guppy in an enormous school of brilliant fish. Without an idea for the Great American Novel or any aptitude for journalism, I was virtually unemployable.

Robert, my savior, got me a job in theater.

My official title is archivist—admittedly a strange role for a twenty-five-year-old with zero Broadway experience—and given that we already have a million photos of the production for the program, I'm keenly aware that this job was created solely as a favor to my uncle. Once or twice a week I'll walk around, randomly taking pictures of sets, costumes, and backstage antics for the press agency to use on social media. Four nights a week, I work front of the house selling *It Possessed Him* T-shirts.

But unfortunately, I can't imagine dealing with the wild bustle of intermission or holding my gigantic camera with only

one good arm, and it punches an additional gust of guilt deep into my belly.

I am so useless.

I pull one of the pillows out from under my head and let loose a few screams into it.

“What’s going on, Buttercup?” Robert pulls the pillow away. “Do you need more medicine?”

“I need more *purpose*.”

He laughs to dismiss this, bending to kiss my forehead. Jeff’s gentle hand slips into one of mine in quiet solidarity. But Jeff—sweet, sensible, number-crunching Jeff—has found a love for throwing clay in the past year. At least he has the passion for pottery pushing him forward through the tedium of a Wall Street workday. I have nothing but my love for books other people have written, and the anticipation of seeing Calvin play guitar a few days a week at the Fiftieth Street station. After tonight’s stunt, I’m not even sure I’ll feel that anymore. The next time I see him, I’ll be less inclined to swoon, and more inclined to get up in his face and ask why he allowed me to be thrown under the proverbial bus. Or train, as it were.

Maybe I’ll go back to Des Moines while this fracture heals and take some time to think about what I really want to do with my degrees, because when it comes to liberal arts, one useless degree plus another useless degree equals zero jobs.

I look up at my uncles. “Did you call Mom and Dad?”

Jeff nods. “They asked if they should come out.”

I laugh despite my dark mood. I’m sure that without even seeing the extent of my injuries, Jeff told them not to worry. My parents hate the urban bluster of New York so much that

even if I were broken in half, in traction, it would still be better for everyone if they stayed in Iowa. Certainly it would be less stressful for me.

Finally, Jeff eases down on the mattress next to me and glances up at Robert.

I notice that Jeff licks his lips before he asks something difficult. I wonder whether he knows he does it. “So, what happened, Hollsy?”

“You mean, why did I end up on the C line tracks?”

Robert gives me a knowing look. “Yes. And since I’m confident the little suicide intervention advice we were just given in the waiting room was unnecessary, maybe you can tell us how you fell.”

“A guy cornered me. He wanted my phone and when I got too close to the tracks, he shoved me over.”

Robert’s jaw drops. “That’s what was happening when you called?”

Jeff’s cheeks go brilliant red. “Did you file a—”

“Police report? Yeah,” I tell him. “But he was wearing a hoodie, and you know how making eye contact with crazies only encourages them, so I couldn’t say much other than that he was white, probably in his thirties, bearded, and drunk.”

Jeff laughs dryly. “Sounds like most of Brooklyn on a Friday night.”

I turn my eyes to Robert. “A train had just left, so there weren’t any other witnesses.”

“Not even Jack?” Both uncles know about my subway crush.

I shake my head. “His name is Calvin.” Answering the

question that forms in their eyes, I say, “I’d had a couple cocktails and asked him.”

Robert grins down at me. “Liquid courage.”

“Liquid idiocy.”

His eyes narrow. “But you’re telling me Calvin didn’t see anything?”

“That’s what he told the paramedics, but I think he was the one who called them.”

Robert slides a sturdy arm around me, helping me up. “Well, you’ve been cleared to leave.” He kisses the side of my head and utters six perfect words: “You’re coming home with us tonight.”



three

I'm lucky enough to live alone in Manhattan—an absurd rarity, and owed entirely to the generosity of my uncles. Robert, for the job, of course, and Jeff because he makes a crap ton of money and pays a pretty big chunk of my rent. But as much as I love living in my little apartment, I'll admit I'm glad to not be there tonight. Going home with a broken arm to my small but lovely space would only remind me that I am a useless, phoneless, privileged heap of bones who is so pitiful she let a drunk dude harass her and push her off a subway platform. Being at Jeff and Robert's is cushy, but at least here I can scrounge up minimal value: after some sleep, I am the board game companion Jeff wishes he would find in Robert. I am the absurd singer-along Robert always wants in his company. And even with one arm, I am the cook that neither of them will ever be.

Jeff takes Tuesday off to make sure I'm okay, and when

we're all up and moving, around noon, I whip up a decent eggs Benedict for the three of us. Even with only one good arm I manage a better outcome than either of them would have. Robert fell in love with the dish sometime back in the nineties, and as soon as I was competent with a blender and frying pan he informed me that it needed to be my specialty because there is *Hollandaise* sauce on it. "Get it? Get it?" he always adds.

Jeff and I still groan every time.

The afternoon rolls by with the three of us curled up on the enormous couch, watching *Brigadoon* and *An American in Paris*. Robert told me to take the night off, and he doesn't need to be at work until around five today anyway. I know I won't see Calvin tonight, so I'm trying—and failing—to banish him from my thoughts. The memory of my first glimpse of his face and voice is blurred by a cocktail of feelings: First, there's disappointment. He was my happy place . . . why was I compelled to venture outside my predictable routine and ruin it by speaking?

Next, there's anger and confusion. Why didn't he tell the paramedics the truth? Why did he run away?

And finally, there's attraction . . . I still really, *really* want to make out with him.

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With a hammering heart, I jog down the stairs into the station the next morning, bag tight to my hip as I nudge past the slower-moving commuters. At the bottom, I pull up short, always unprepared for the sound of Calvin tearing through more

up-tempo, elaborate pieces. Most days, he's strictly classical guitar. But for whatever reason, on Wednesdays he seems to favor flamenco, chamamé, and calypso.

The crowd is thick at 8:45. It smells like dirty steel and spilled soda, coffee and the pastry the guy next to me is unself-consciously shoving in his mouth. I expected to feel at least some emotional turbulence when returning to the scene of my near death, but other than wanting some answers from Calvin, I don't. I've been here so many times that the banality of my memories still overrides the trauma. It still just feels . . . *ooh, busker and meh, subway.*

I take the last few seconds to rally before Calvin comes into view. I'm generally not one for confrontation, but I know I'll never stop overthinking what happened Monday night if I don't at least say *something*. His feet appear first—black boots, turned-up cuffs—then his guitar case and legs—a rip in the knee of his jeans—hips, torso, chest, neck, face.

A traffic jam of emotions always clogs up my throat when I see his expression, and how transported he becomes when he plays, even in the chaos of the station. I push them down, digging for the memory that *he left me shouting like a crazy person in the back of an ambulance.*

He looks up right as I move in front of him. The shock of eye contact makes my heart roll over and I wince; my righteous indignation has deserted me. His eyes drop to my cast, and then return directly to the strings of his guitar. Beneath the shadow of his stubble, I can see a flush climb over his cheeks.

This acknowledgment buoys me. I open my mouth to say something just as an E train shrieks to a stop on the platform

only a dozen yards away, and I'm quickly swallowed in the sea of people pouring out of it. Breathless, I look back through the crowd, only to catch Calvin packing up his guitar and jogging up the stairs.

Reluctantly, I move deeper into the station, nestled in the herd of commuters. It's notable that he looked up, right? He doesn't usually do that. It's almost like he was waiting for me to appear.

The C train pulls into the station, too, and we all take a few steps closer to the tracks, closer to each other, ready to jockey for a spot inside.

And so begins my completely unnecessary ritual.

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Robert is waiting for me in front of the Levin-Gladstone Theater when I approach. It's probably more accurate to say that he's waiting for the coffee I bring every Wednesday through Sunday. When I hand it over, I catch a flash of the telltale logo on the cup, and am sure Robert does, too. Madman Espresso is ten blocks away. If Robert realizes that I take the train every morning to an out-of-the-way coffee shop because I want to see Calvin, he doesn't mention it.

He probably should. I need my ass kicked.

The wind blows Robert's red scarf up and around his black wool coat, like a wild flag waving in the middle of the gray steel view along Forty-Seventh Street. I smile up at him, letting him have this quiet moment of transition.

Work is stressful for him lately: *It Possessed Him* has

taken off in a really insane way in the past nine months, and all shows are sold out for the foreseeable future. But our lead actor, Luis Genova, only signed on for a ten-month run, which comes to an end in a month. At that point, screen legend Ramón Martín will take over, and with his intense Hollywood fame comes even more intense pressure on Robert to make sure the orchestra lifts Ramón into the Broadway stratosphere. If Robert wants to walk around outside a little and drink his coffee to procrastinate, I'm game. I'm not going to make him go into that building any sooner than he wants to.

He takes a sip, studying me. "How'd you sleep last night?"

"Painkillers and emotional exhaustion ensured that I fell like a brick into bed."

Robert nods at this, eyes narrowed. "And how was your morning?"

He's working up to something. I squint suspiciously back at him. "It was fine."

"After what happened on Monday night," he says, and lifts his cup, "you still went to see him at the station today?"

Damn it. I should have known he was onto me.

Maybe I will make him go inside. I pull open the heavy side-entrance door and bat my lashes in his direction. "I don't know what you mean."

Robert follows me into the cool shadows of the theater. Even with the sounds of people working behind the scenes and onstage, it's quiet compared to the electric atmosphere of show time. "You go get me coffee at Madman every workday."

"I like their coffee."

“As much as I love that you bring me caffeine every morning, you and I both have perfectly functional coffeemakers in our apartments. You’re taking the subway ten blocks and back every morning for fancy espresso. You think I don’t see what you’re doing?”

I groan, turning to move deeper inside, toward the stairs leading to the second-floor offices. “I know. I’m a mess.”

Robert holds the stairwell door open, looking incredulous. “You still like him even after he left the paramedics thinking you were a jumper?”

“In my defense, I went there this morning in an attempt to confront him.”

“And?”

I growl into another sip. “And I didn’t say anything.”

“I understand what it’s like to have a crush,” he says. “But do you think you should put him so squarely in your daily routine?”

As we ascend, I poke his side with my undamaged left elbow. “Says the guy who moved from Philly to Des Moines because he fell in lust with the waiter serving him a rib eye.”

“Fair point.”

“And if you don’t approve, then point me in the direction of someone better.” I spread my hands, looking around us. “Manhattan—particularly musical theater—is a beast for single women. Calvin was a safe but fun little diversion. I never planned on getting nearly murdered in front of him, let alone actually speaking to him.”

We emerge from the stairwell, and Robert follows me into his office. It’s a tiny room along a hallway with four identically tiny rooms, and is in constant disarray, with sheet music every-

where and paintings, photos, and notes on Post-its lining every inch of wall. Robert's computer is, I think, one generation older than the desktop I took to college six years ago.

He pokes at the keyboard to wake up his screen. "Well, I notice that Evan in strings is always looking at you."

I do a quick mental file through his strings section. All that comes to mind is his lead violinist, Seth, and Seth is not attracted to the ladies. Even if he were, Robert wouldn't let me date him even over his dead body; despite being invaluable to the production, Seth has a knack for throwing tantrums and stirring up drama within the ensemble. He is the only person I've ever seen make Robert truly angry.

"Which one's Evan?"

Twirling a finger over his close-cropped hair, he says, "Long hair. Viola?"

Ah, now I know who he means. Evan is sexy in a Tarzan kind of way, but . . . the rest of him might be a little *too* wild. "Yeah, Robert," I say, holding up my hands, "but the fingernails on his bow hand . . ."

"What are you talking about?" Robert laughs.

"How can you not see this? It's like he's plucking his strings with a shark tooth." I shrug. "He just seems oddly carnivorous. I don't think I could overlook it."

"Carnivorous? You devoured your lamb chop last Wednesday. It was feral."

He's right. I did. "I cook great lamb, what do you want from me?"

From the doorway comes the sneering groan of my boss. "What the *fuck* are you even talking about?"

With a grin I answer, “Lamb,” just as Uncle Robert answers, “Man claws,” and Brian’s frown turns radioactive.

In an effort to keep nepotism at the minimum I don’t actually report to Uncle Robert but to the stage manager, the brilliant yet douchey Brian, who I’m convinced has odd collections of things at home, like a hoarder’s cave with every single back issue of *National Geographic*, or butterflies pinned to dusty boards.

“Super-cute family bonding.” Brian turns to sashay away, calling over his shoulder, “Holland. Stagehand meeting. *Now.*”

With a last zany smile thrown to Robert, I follow Brian downstairs to the stage and the weekly meeting awaiting us.

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The stagehand team consists of twenty people. Brian oversees all the details—blocking, cues, props, scenery, and ensuring that Robert’s job runs smoothly—which means that he likes to claim credit for the current cult fever over *Possessed*. But the real heroes are the ones behind the curtain responding to his barked orders: the people Brian pleasantly refers to as his minions.

Don’t get me wrong—Brian’s job is a beast, and he is very good at what he does; the production runs smoothly, the sets are stunning and noted in nearly every one of the raving reviews the production receives. The actors hit their cues and the lighting is absolutely perfect. It’s just that Brian also happens to be a power demon with a rampant petty side. Case in point, just now a text arrives on my phone:

I see that your incapacitated, so I'm not quite sure how you plan to handle job duties this week.

Brian's inability to get the *your/you're* distinction correct makes something itch deep inside my brain. And he's texting me about this—while sitting a mere three feet away—not only to avoid direct confrontation (at which he is terrible) but also to give a clear message to the stagehand currently speaking that he doesn't care what she has to say.

He might be a dick, but unfortunately, he's also right. I can barely hold my phone with my right hand peeking out of the sling, I have no idea how I'll maneuver my camera. It takes some time, but I manage to type a reply with my left.

Other than front of the house, are there things I can help with for the next couple weeks?

It pains me to hit send on such a vulnerable text, it really does. Even though my tiny archivist salary is comprised of money from nearly every department, Brian feels the most put-out for even having to deal with me on a regular basis. I already know this job is a gift—I don't need his gleeful reminders of that fact every time we interact.

While the stagehand continues to update us on the progress in painting the new drop-down forest, Brian ignores her and types, sneering down at his phone.

Looks like you're uncle needs more help than I do.

It takes me a minute to understand his meaning, but when I do, it's accompanied by an almost comically timed, deafening cymbal crash coming from the orchestra pit.

The entire group assembled for the meeting onstage stands from their seats and peers down as the aforementioned lead violinist, Seth, shoves clear of the percussion section, shoulders past Robert, and begins to storm up the center aisle.

I glance down at Seth's chair; he left his violin just sitting there. I can't stop staring at it—I've heard from Robert that Seth's violin cost upward of *forty thousand dollars*, and he just plopped it on his chair before leaving in a huff. From the second position, Lisa Stern leans over, gingerly picking it up. I'm sure she'll return it to him later; no doubt Seth assumes she will, too. What a dick.

He has tantrums all the time, but for some reason, the stillness in the theater that follows *this* outburst feels profound.

My stomach drops.

Seth has three long "duets" with the lead, and those segments are the heart of the soundtrack. Seth's violin is more than part of the orchestra ensemble; although he doesn't appear onstage, he's truly one of the lead cast members and has even been featured on our primary merchandise, and in mainstream media. We can't have a single performance without those solos.

What transpired must have been major, because Robert's calm voice carries through the entire theater: "Let me be clear, Seth. You know what it means if you walk out today: Ramón Martín begins in a month, and you won't be joining him."

"Fuck you, Bob." Seth jerks his arms into his jacket, and doesn't look back as he yells, "I'm done."



four

My new phone vibrates just as the credits roll on my third consecutive *Vampire Diaries* episode of the night. I wouldn't normally be mainlining addicting teen dramas on a work night, but Robert balked when he caught me awkwardly trying to fold Luis Genova T-shirts and kicked me out after the Wednesday matinee, thereby exacerbating my guilt spiral. I can't go to yoga, I can't try to write, I can't go have a drink because of these painkillers. I can't even focus on reading without the intrusive worry about what Robert is going to do without Seth leading the orchestra.

My phone vibrates again and I cross the room to where it's charging on the kitchen counter, next to the laptop I haven't touched in weeks. I'm wholly expecting it to be my brother Davis calling to ensure I'm not out venturing the mean streets of Manhattan with only one arm to protect myself, but am

pleasantly surprised to see Lulu's smiling face light up the screen instead.

"Hello, there." I open the fridge, scanning the contents.

"How's my little invalid?" Judging by the sound of voices and clanking silverware coming from the other end of the line, Lulu is at Blue Hill, where she is—like many in Manhattan—an actress waiting tables while awaiting her big break.

I tuck the phone between my chin and shoulder, and with my good arm pull a casserole dish out of the fridge and set it on the counter. "I'm home. Robert said I looked like a three-legged puppy at a dog show and told me to go home for a few days."

"What a monster," she says with a laugh.

"Are you at work?"

"Yeah. Actually . . . hang on." A few moments of muffled silence pass and then she returns, the background quieter now. "I had an early shift, so I'm leaving soon."

"You're off tonight?" I stop with my plate of cold lasagna just shy of the microwave, outlook suddenly brighter. "Come over and I'll make you dinner. I'll only need one of your hands."

"I have a better idea. I got a two-for-one on the cover to see this ridiculous band, and Gene can't go. Come with me!"

I know this story well: Lulu found tickets to a venue on Groupon and couldn't pass them up because they were *such a good deal*. Most of the time, I love her impulsivity and obsession with random adventures. But it's cold tonight and going out requires changing out of my pajamas—which means putting on actual clothes that I'd have to wrestle my way into.

"This is a pass for me, Lu." I pop my food into the microwave while she whimpers into the line.

The sound is so pathetic, it chips away at my resolve and I don't even have to say anything—she knows it. “Come on, Holland! The band is called Loose Springsteen! How amazing is that?”

I growl.

“Don't make me go to Jersey by myself.”

“A cover band in *Jersey*?” I say. “You really aren't sweetening the deal here.”

“You'd rather stay home in your pajamas eating leftovers than have the night of your life with me?”

I snort. “You might be overselling it just a bit.”

She whimpers again, and I break.

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Lulu was absolutely overselling it. Hole in the Hall is a . . . *bar*? That's really the nicest thing I can say about it.

The subway station lets out just across the street from a nondescript brick building and Lulu giddily dances down the sidewalk. The neighborhood is a mixture of business and residential, but at least half the surrounding buildings look vacant. Opposite the bar is an empty Korean restaurant, with shuttered windows and a sign hanging crookedly near the doorway. Next door is a converted house with neon letters that spell *House of Hookah*; the once-bright tubes are now dark and dusty against the tin roof. It's not exactly a mystery why Hole in the Hall would need to seduce potential new clientele with Groupon deals.

Lulu turns to perform her dance backward, luring me

across the shiny wet street. “This is promising, at least,” she says brightly as we join a small crowd of people lined up near the door.

The opening notes of Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” can be heard through the brick walls, and each time the door opens the music rushes out, as if escaping. I have to admit it feels good to get dressed and leave my worries to languish in the apartment for a few hours. Leggings and a dressy top weren’t too much work, and Lulu and her two good arms helped me blow-dry my long hair. For the first time in a couple of days, I don’t look and feel like a troll doll. This night might not be so bad after all.

When it’s finally our turn to enter, Lulu brandishes her two-for-one coupon like a badge and shimmies through the line.

Unsurprisingly, it’s pretty no-frills inside. The walls are lined with old video games, and carved-up tables stand in clusters surrounding the bar. The decor is a questionable mix of Harley-Davidson, taxidermy, and Old West paraphernalia. A stripper pole stands proudly on a platform at one end, and a stage at the other. The lighting is dim and dusty, and combined with a makeshift fog machine, it makes the band members little more than backlit figures moving around onstage.

Settling at a table, Lulu flags down a waitress and we order drinks that materialize almost disturbingly quickly, like they were poured hours ago and left to grow stale behind the bar.

Lulu studies her cocktail, charmingly titled *Adios Mother-fucker*. With a tiny why-the-fuck-not shrug, she takes a swallow, wincing as it goes down. “Tastes like 7Up.”

I am mesmerized by the blinking neon ice cube in her glass. “I worry your drink is going to give someone a seizure.”

She takes another sip and her straw blooms with fluorescent blue alcohol. “Actually, it tastes like sparkling water.”

“See, that’s the house-made moonshine killing your taste buds.”

She ignores this and turns her brown eyes on me. “Is the cast a giant pain in the ass? I’ve never broken a bone.” She grins. “Well . . . none of my own, *ifyouknowwhatImean*.”

I laugh, looking down at my purple cast peeking out of the black sling. “It could be worse. The camera’s a bit unruly and I can’t fold shirts very well yet, but I mean . . . I could be dead?”

She nods at this, taking another sip of her drink—which is already half-gone.

“I mean,” I say, “let’s be honest, I only need one hand to take people’s money during intermission, so it’s not that bad.”

“I hear you’re great one-handed.” She slaps a beat on the table and makes a rim-shot noise.

“The best.” I wink. “What about you, any auditions?”

Lulu shakes her head with a little pout and then does a shoulder shimmy to the beat of the music. She might waitress to make ends meet, but she’s dreamed of being an actress since she was old enough to know it was a possibility. We met in grad school, where she was studying theater and I was writing. She’s told me on several occasions that she should become my muse, and I can write script after script for her. This should tell you a lot about our dynamic, which—despite this Jersey sidequest—is generally more entertaining than tedious.

She’s been in a few low-budget commercials (she played

an accident-prone chicken in an insurance commercial, and I have several gifs of this performance I like to occasionally text her out of the blue), attended almost every acting class offered in New York, and (as a favor to me) was given a small part in one of Robert's shows. It didn't last long—because, as Robert put it, “Lulu is good at playing Lulu and only Lulu”—but as long as she draws breath, she will believe that her big break is just around the corner.

“No auditions this week.” She watches the stage while taking another neon pull from her drink. I gingerly sip my watered-down Diet Coke. “Crowds haven't died down since the holidays, so we're all taking on extra hours.” Nodding toward the musicians, she says, “I feel like I'm being visually assaulted by the crotch of that guy's outfit, but this band? They don't completely suck.”

I follow her gaze to where the lead singer has moved to stand under a single bright spotlight. His acid-washed jeans are so tight I can see every lump he has to offer. A few more hours in those pants and I'm confident he can kiss his child-fathering years goodbye. The band shifts from the closing notes of Def Leppard's “Pour Some Sugar on Me” into a cover of Great White's “Rock Me”—I have my older brother Thomas's addiction to hair metal to thank for this knowledge—and a brave (or drunk) group of women gravitate to the edge of the stage, dancing to the bluesy opening chords.

And why not? I sway a little in my seat, drawn in by the way the guitar player drags out each note, like a maddening seduction, his head bent low in concentration. Loose Springsteen might be a cheesy cover band—and most of them are

wearing at least one dangly earring and/or an article of clothing covered in animal print—but Lulu is right: they aren't half bad. With a little polish I could see them playing in a bigger club somewhere, or in an eighties revival off-off-Broadway.

The singer falls back and the guitarist moves into a circle of smoky light, beginning his requisite solo. There's a surprisingly loud reaction from the women up front . . . and there's something familiar about the way he holds the guitar, the way his fingers glide up the neck, the way his hair falls forward . . .

Oh, holy . . .

He lifts his chin, and even with his eyes in shadow and half his face turned away, I know.

"That's him," I say, pointing. I sit up straighter, pulling my phone out. I'm still on enough painkillers to not entirely trust my eyes right now. I zoom in, snapping a blurry picture.

"Who?"

I stare down at the screen and recognize the cut of his jaw, his full mouth. "Calvin. The dude from the subway."

"*Shut* up." She squints, leaning in. "That's *him*?" There's a moment of silence where I know she's looking him over, seeing exactly what I've seen almost every day for the last six months. "Damn. Okay." She turns to me, brows pointed skyward. "He's hot."

"I told you!" We both look back over to him. He's playing high on the neck, screaming out the notes on his guitar, and unlike the meditative lean of his posture at the station, here he's completely playing to the audience. "What is he doing here?" What if he sees me? "Oh my God. Is he going to think I followed him?"

“Come on, how would you possibly know he’s the guitarist for Loose Springsteen? You’re not exactly a member of their fan club.” Lulu lets out a happy cackle. “As if they *have* a fan club.”

She’s right, of course, but even now, the way I can’t take my eyes off him, I *feel* like a stalker. I already know so much about his schedule—I saw him just this morning, after all—and I know even more now. Is this the kind of thing he does when he’s not busking? Good Lord. Maybe this is why there’s such a fire to his playing at the station; he has to physically force this music out of his head.

The song ends and the lead singer slips his mic into the stand, muttering that they’re taking a break before smashing his bottle of Rolling Rock to his lips and triumphantly draining it.

I’m out of my chair before I know what I’m doing. People shuffle back to their seats to refuel on bad beer, and the lights go up just enough that I see Calvin disappear into the shadows and reappear a moment later at the opposite side of the bar.

Whereas the rest of the band is a veritable cover spread of 1980s fashion don’ts, Calvin is in a black T-shirt, with the hem tucked lazily into the front of his dark jeans. He’s wearing his black boots, too, and the left one is presently propped on the brass rail near his feet. The bartender places a dark beer in front of him and he lifts it, staring ahead.

I’m not sure how to approach him, and he still hasn’t seen me standing a few feet away. Saying his name somehow feels sincerely weird, so I square my shoulders and slide onto the barstool beside him.

Only once I’m seated do I register that there were about

ten other women working up the nerve to do the same thing, coming at him from all angles. He turns slowly, like this happens at every set break and he's never sure what manner of companion he's going to end up with.

But when our eyes meet, he startles, face immediately relaxing into a genuine smile. "Hey, it's the girl from the Netherlands."

And I can't help it. Incredulity makes it burst out of me: "Hey?"

Calvin's smile turns a little sympathetic, like he gets it, and waves to the bartender, who immediately approaches. "Whatever she wants," he tells the older man.

I hesitate. I didn't come over here to have a drink with him. I came here to scratch that tickle of curiosity in my head that's been plaguing me for the past few days . . . and maybe tell him off a little. But his inherent easiness is disorienting. I expected him to be shy, or stiff. Instead he's nothing but relaxed, smiling charisma.

The bartender taps an impatient finger against the bar.

I apologize under my breath before ordering, "Club soda with lime, please."

"A real wild child you are," Calvin teases.

I meet his eyes, giving him a forced grin. "I'm on painkillers." I nod to the cast. "Broken arm."

He grimaces playfully. "Right."

The question is so much easier to ask than I'd expected: "So why didn't you tell them what you saw? They told my family I *jumped*."

He nods a few times, swallowing his sip of beer before

speaking. “I’m sorry. I am. But I didn’t think the police would believe my version.”

Pre-subway-platform-dive Holland would be losing her mind right now at the way his accent moves every word to the front of his mouth, and *think* comes out as *tink*—a tiny coin dropped into a cup.

Okay, Holland of today is losing her mind a little, too, but she’s at least trying to keep her cool.

“Well,” I say, “they didn’t believe my version, either. They handed me a couple of self-help pamphlets and probably aren’t even looking for the guy who did it.”

Calvin turns, meeting my eyes. “Look. Being in the station, I see . . .” He shakes his head. “I see people do terrible shite all the time and then report it themselves. Crime fetish, or somethin’. That’s all I could think about in that moment. Your bum ran off, and I was more concerned with getting you safe than stopping him.”

As he talks, he reaches into the front pocket of his jeans for a tube of ChapStick, absently pulling off the cap and running the balm quickly over his lips. The move is so distracting that I don’t realize I’m staring at his mouth until the bartender loudly deposits a tumbler of sparkling water and limes on a napkin in front of me. Calvin slips the tube back into his pocket as he nods in thanks.

My brain shuffles through memories of Monday night, and I have to admit that what he’s said makes sense—even if it doesn’t explain why he lied to the EMTs. But does that matter? It was embarrassing to be handed the suicide prevention card, yeah, but in reality, Calvin called 911, and stayed to make sure

I was okay. Now what feels remarkable isn't that he fled after I was safely awake in the ambulance, it's that he stayed that long to begin with.

Calvin holds out his hand. "Apology accepted?"

I take it, and grow a little breathless knowing that he plays his guitar with the fingers he currently has wrapped around mine. A hot pulse works its way down my spine. "Yeah. Apology accepted."

Releasing me, he stares at the cast for a few seconds. "I see you've got no names written on there."

I follow his attention down. "Names?"

"It's required when you choose a little-girl color, love. You *beg* your mates to mark it all up."

Oh. Something turns over inside me at his playful smile, exposing my vulnerable underbelly. I realize now that a significant fraction of my brain was hoping he wouldn't be so amiable when he saw me, that he would be defensive and sharp, so I'd have a good reason to tuck my crush away.

"I'm still traumatized by the gore of my friend's sweaty, smelly, graffitied cast in fourth grade." I grin over at him. "I'm trying to keep this one pristine."

The band begins to reconvene on the stage, and Calvin glances over his shoulder before draining his beer.

He stands, and then grins down at me. I'm overcome by his exultant smile. "Well, if you change your mind and want it dirtied up, you know where to find me."