

Hate I Have Never



(A LOUGH OUT LOUD ROMANTIC COMEDY)

FIRST COMES LOVE

BOOK 2

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One

Never Make a Scene

The day it all goes wrong starts as a more or less ordinary one. My fit watch startles me awake at dawn and, forty minutes later, notifies me I've run five miles through Central Park. A perfect six-minute-per-mile time.

Back at Gerard's apartment, he's still asleep. I peel off my sweaty clothes, take a quick shower, and wake Sleeping Boyfriend with a kiss and the aroma of French-pressed mocha.

"Morning, sleepy head," I say affectionately.

"What time is it?" he asks, still groggy.

"Six-thirty, time to go."

Gerard groans and shuffles out of bed. We eat breakfast in the kitchen listening to the morning news. Me wearing a towel, him in boxer shorts.

Fifteen minutes later, I brush crumbs off my lips and get up. "I'd better get going, big day ahead!"

"Oh, right. The announcement for the new junior editor is today."

"Yes, this morning."

"Nervous?"

"Positive," I say, showing more confidence than I feel.

"Listen, babe," Gerard says, jaw twitching. A sign he's worried. "Why don't we go out tonight to... mmm... celebrate?" He's being awkward. *Why is he so tense?* "I want to talk to you about something important."

Something important? Is Gerard finally going to propose? After three years together, it's about time.

I smile slyly. "Sure, dinner out sounds amazing."

P&P. Promotion and proposal all in one day. This is going to be the best day of my life.

"Now I really have to get ready for the office." I kiss Gerard's forehead. "Text me when you've made a reservation, yeah?"

He nods, and I waltz into his room to change. Many people hate their jobs, but I love mine. Well, not exactly the job I have—advertising—but the job I *could* have starting today. Junior Fashion Editor of *Évoque* Magazine, the top

female media brand in the world. Marketing was just my way in—an editorial position has always been the end goal.

Unfortunately, almost everyone else working at *Évoque* shares this dream. But I still hope to beat the odds. Annabelle Visser, our Editor-in-Chief—yeah, the mean devil wearing Prada—more than hinted that sales numbers will have a weight in the decision. Since joining *Évoque* five years ago, I've worked like a slave to become the star of my department. So if not written in stone, my promotion has at least been stitched in silk.

On all fours, I retrieve my sleepover bag from under Gerard's bed. One of my chief rules in relationships is *don't move in without a ring*. So whenever I spend the night at Gerard's house, I bring the essentials and leave nothing behind. This duffle bag is like an extra limb.

I shove my dirty running gear in a separate tote bag, then change into the working clothes I brought over: a black leather pencil skirt and emerald blouse that makes my green eyes pop. To intensify the effect, I shadow my eyelids to get that smoky look. At the office, exceptionally prim grooming comes with the territory and is expected of every employee.

Makeup done, I pull my natural strawberry red hair up in an intentionally messy bun, put on a bold shade of red lipstick, and wink at my image.

I'm the picture of a young, successful woman ready to conquer the fashion world.

From Gerard's Park Avenue condo, I can walk to work. The weather's perfect, and the late spring breeze only adds to my good mood. I wear foldable flats up to the edge of Central Park and then switch gears: plastic ballerinas for gel-cushioned pumps. I never show myself in public without heels. Not since that time when I went to Six Flags in my twenties wearing sneakers, and an attendant asked to check my height before he allowed me on a ride. For the record, I was a good six inches above the minimum.

In front of my office's skyscraper, I pause for a second to admire the building. Working at Northwestern, the publishing powerhouse of Manhattan, always gives me a thrill of pride. This is the place everyone wants to be. The building itself screams luxury and power from every glass panel and metal joint.

Ahead of me, the automatic doors sweep open, a strong, cool draft tightening my pencil skirt against my legs. Even the air feels expensive. As usual, I'm the first one in. *Good*. I always enjoy working in the quiet hours of

the morning.

I stuff my duffle bag out of sight under my desk and turn on my laptop.

Will HR call me? Or will it be my new boss? This is the first time I've been promoted to a different department, so I'm not sure if the procedure is similar to same-department promotions. In the past, my current boss always delivered the news, but since I'll no longer work for her...

My landline trills, jolting me out of my thoughts.

I inhale, exhale, and then answer. "Blair Walker, *Évoque Magazine*."

"Miss Walker, this is Emilia Peterson from Human Resources. Please come up to my office right away."

"Absolutely, I'll be there in two minutes."

Emilia is our Talent Manager Coordinator—and she wants to see *me*. With a cheek-aching smile on my face, I rush to the elevators.

One floor up, I knock on Emilia's door, my stomach knotting in anticipation.

A muffled voice comes from behind the panel wall. "Come in."

If voices could be described as lipstick shades, Emilia's would be a Chanel Rouge. Suave. Confident.

I step into the office. Emilia—tall, platinum blonde, and lethally thin—lifts her icy gaze from some papers and says, "Ah, Blair. Please close the door and sit down." She gestures at the white chair in front of her white desk. Cold blue eyes settle on me. "Would you like some water?"

More some champagne. "No, thanks. I'm good."

"Very well, let's get straight to it." She folds her hands and sighs. "As you know, the position of Junior Fashion Editor was extremely coveted..."

Was? Is it mine now? I can't wait for her to say it, but I politely let her continue with her perfunctory speech. I can wait a few more minutes before I ask about the pay rise and extra benefits.

"...the race was tight, and you were an honorable runner-up..."

I nod my approval before my thoughts screech to a halt. *Wait, what?* Isn't this the part where she congratulates me and assigns me a new corporate phone? I was really hoping to get the new iPhone.

"What do you mean runner-up?"

"I mean you were an outstanding candidate."

"But not the winner?" My voice isn't nearly as steady as I'd like it to be—it projects a 99cents lip balm at best, regardless of the actual shade I'm

wearing.

“Unfortunately, no. You didn’t get the position,” Emilia confirms, never taking her eyes off me.

“Who?”

“It doesn’t really matter—”

“It does matter. Annabelle herself said sales figures would count toward the final decision. My numbers are better than everybody else’s!”

“Your numbers are good, but not the best.”

“No other sales manager signed as many contracts as I did this past year. I’ve put in more overtime and weekends to make sure of that. No one beats my numbers.”

“Someone did,” Emilia insists, her tone severe.

“Who?” I ask again.

For the first time, the corporate witch lowers her gaze, a shadow of guilt crossing her face. “Aurora.”

“Aurora?” I repeat. “But her figures are awful!”

Emilia looks at me again, impassible. “One of her long-standing clients increased their expenditure considerably... it tipped the balance in her favor.” Again, I sense she’s holding something back.

Comprehension hits me. “You mean her mother bought the editor position for her!”

Aurora’s mother, Rebecca Vanderbilt, is an iconic fashion designer with the power of old and new money combined. I never stood a chance against that kind of firepower.

“I know it might seem unfair...”

Are my ears functioning? Is our dear Talent Manager Coordinator trying to deny the injustice?

“Because *it is* unfair,” I say. “You’re ignoring the best employee to promote the one with a pedigree.”

Emilia’s nostrils flare. “We’re promoting the employee who brought the magazine the most business, regardless of how they got it.”

No point in arguing further. It’s clear the decision is irrevocable. Emilia’s immaculate white desk blinds me as I fight the tears threatening to shed. I take a few moments to steady myself before asking, “Is that all, am I free to go?”

“I understand you want to get this over with. You’ll see we’ve put together

an extremely generous severance package...” Emilia switches to a brisk, down-to-business tone so quickly it dizzies me.

“Severance?” I repeat.

“Yes. This might seem like a setback at first, but I’m really doing you a favor here.”

“A favor?” I sound like a talking parrot, only able to repeat the words I’m hearing.

“Yes. Advertising is not your field. You don’t like marketing, and I don’t know when there’ll be another editorial position available.”

“Why are you firing me?” I ask, still in disbelief.

“Motivation is an important aspect of your job, and you wouldn’t be able to bring your best effort to the table after today.”

“Is it just me, or are all the other applicants being fired as well?”

“Some other senior advertisers are being let go. Of course, I can’t disclose their names,” she says without batting an eyelid. “As I said, motivation is key —”

“Meaning you can no longer dangle the carrot of an editor position in our faces to have us slave for you day after day. What’s next? Are you hiring college grads to string them along instead?”

“Your replacement does not concern you.”

“Oh gosh, that’s exactly what you’re doing!” I nearly shriek. “Are you trying to run for worst employer of the year?” The words leave my mouth before I can swallow them back.

“No, Blair, we run a business. I thought you were sensible enough to know that. And honestly, I expected you to behave like a professional. If anything, this behavior just wiped away any regrets we might have had about not promoting you. Really, Blair. There’s no need to make a scene.”

Those last words slap me harder than if she’d actually hit me. Making petty scenes goes against my creed, against my list of dos and don’ts. The list that’s helped to keep me focused on my life goals and out of trouble since I was a teenager. I carry it wherever I go; it’s the secret to my success. Until now, anyway. With Emilia’s words still ringing in my ears, I picture the number one item on the list: *never make a scene*.

That thought is enough to bring me back from blind rage to controlled fury. Emilia’s right, I don’t need to humiliate myself any further. I’m going to leave in a dignified way and my head held high.

I school my expression into one of neutrality as Emilia slides a brown envelope over her stupidly white desk and taps it. “In here you’ll find all the info about our offer. Please review it. I’ll be happy to answer any questions you might have.”

I take the manila envelope without opening it.

“I’m sure you did the best you could,” I say. No point in trying to negotiate a better deal. When you get the ax, *Évoque Magazine* gives you what they deem fair and not a cent more. “Is that all?”

“Yes. It’s understandable if you want to leave before everyone else gets in. A security officer will escort you back to your desk to collect your belongings and will take your security pass on the way out.”

Security, seriously? Are they afraid I’ll steal a Birkin on my way out?

“Very well. Goodbye, Emilia,” I say in the most civil tone I can muster.

Outside the office, a guard is already waiting for me. With a deep breath, I prepare myself for the most humiliating fifteen minutes of my life.

“You didn’t get the promotion.” Gerard’s mouth hangs open. “I really wanted you to get it.”

Oh? When did he start caring so much about my career? Being a corporate lawyer, he always seems so focused on *his* job. But the concern in his eyes is genuine and so sweet.

“Me, too, honey.” I take his hand across the restaurant table. “But I don’t want to ruin our night brooding over my lost job.” I spent the entire day crying, curled in a ball on my couch, and only the prospect of tonight kept me sane.

Gerard looks aghast. “I thought this would be the best day to tell you... that you’d be happy...”

He’s worried my job’s demise is going to ruin his proposal. “You can tell me anything,” I reassure him. “It doesn’t matter what happened at work. We can talk about whatever it is you wanted to discuss.” *Or you could just give me the diamond ring and be done with it.* “I won’t be sad, I promise.”

Gerard frowns. “I’m afraid you will be.”

“Be what?”

“Sad.”

“Sad?” He has it all wrong. Wedding planning is exactly the kind of distraction I need from the pile of CVs I’ll have to send to find a new job. Right, let’s focus on the half of my life still going according to plan. “Why would I be sad?”

“Blair.” Gerard sighs. “I think we should take a break.”

“A break?”

The talking parrot is making a comeback.

“Yeah, we should see other people.”

“Other people?”

“Yes, I’m not sure we’re compatible.”

I blink. “After *three years*?”

He nods. “Yes, you’ll agree w—”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Who is she?”

“S-she? There’s no one else,” Gerard stutters defensively.

“Is it Laura?”

After endless arguments about my “unwarranted” jealousy for his secretary, I’m not going to pull any punches.

Gerard shakes his head frantically. “No.”

Still, he dares to deny it.

“You’re lying,” I hiss. “How long have you been screwing her?”

“It’s not like that.” His entire face turns red. “We’re...”

“What? In love?” I scoff. “An affair with your secretary—*seriously*? You’re such a cliché.”

“Blair, lower your voice. People are staring.”

I sweep the room with my eyes and, indeed, more than a couple of heads have turned our way.

“Am I embarrassing you, Gerard? Is that why you brought me to this nice restaurant to talk, so we’d be in a public space?”

“Blair, we can discuss our problems like the two civil adults we are. There’s no need to make a scene.”

No. Need. To. Make. A. Scene.

My head begins spinning, filled with a whirlwind of memories. My mother admonishing me whenever I threw a tantrum: “Blair, a well-educated young woman should always behave properly. We don’t make public scenes. That’s not what we do.”

I remember the speech my ballet instructor gave me when I didn’t get the

lead role in *The Swan Lake*: “Blair, real ballerinas take setbacks with their heads held high. They don’t make scenes.”

Emilia this morning. Gerard now.

The vortex stops on a clear image of the list’s number one item: *never make a scene*.

It’s all been for nothing. All the sacrifices I made. All the times I said, “No,” to anything even remotely fun. All the lost opportunities... *to live* rather than just behave. The list, my secret recipe for success, is worthless. At twenty-nine, what do I have to show for it? Nothing. No job. No boyfriend. Everyone thinks they can walk all over good old Blair because she’s too polite to say anything. *No more*.

Rage takes over. My fury bubbles up and I vomit years of repressed feelings and self-imposed restraints on Gerard. “*A scene?* You don’t want me to make *a scene?*” I get up and throw my napkin on the table. “Well, guess what! You’re out of luck.”

“Blair, don’t—”

“Why?” I scream. “So you can run to your office’s side dish with a clean conscience?”

“Don’t talk about Laura that way. I won’t allow it!”

“Do you prefer boyfriend-stealing bitch?”

Everyone in the room is staring at us now.

Gerard’s ears turn a deeper shade of red. “Blair, please sit down, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I’ve nothing to be embarrassed about,” I yell. “I’m not a cheating, lying bastard! Ladies and gentlemen, please give a round of applause for Gerard Wakefield and his mistress, the secretary, Laura.”

A server arrives at our table and stares at us, perplexed. “Spaghetti marinara?”

In a crazy impulse, I say, “Mine.” I grab the plate and before I know what I’m doing, I tip it over Gerard’s head. “How’s this for a scene, Gerry dear?”

Gerard shoots to his feet, his head, face, and suit dripping marinara. “You crazy bitch!” he shouts, dabbing the sauce off his face with his napkin. “It’s hot sauce! You could’ve blinded me. I’ll sue you for this.”

“Please do,” I shout back. “But be prepared to fight me in court. I’m sure the managing partners at your firm will be thrilled to learn of your extracurricular activities with their employee. They’ll fire you on the spot!”

That shuts him up. Gerard opens and closes his mouth like a gaping fish. To stare at his spaghetti marinara-covered head would almost be funny, if the situation wasn't so tragic.

With one last glare, I storm out of the restaurant. Utterly lost and with no idea where I'm going, I run outside into the night. Oh, it felt so good to let it all out. Gerard's spaghetti-splattered head flashes before my eyes again and I can't help but laugh. A crazy, hysterical, uncontrollable laugh. Not being in control is great. Not holding back is fantastic. I should've done it a long time ago. I should've done so many things. All my life, I've had it backward. I've spent years caged behind the bars of the list, never allowing myself a moment of fun. That's over. The list's regime ends now.

I fish the page out of its honorific pocket in my bag and do a quick scan of all the taboos there.

"You're a fraud," I accuse it. "You're a useless piece of nonsense."

Years spent always being good, always being in control, always working hard—and for what? I have nothing.

My first instinct is to tear the sorry piece of paper into a million pieces, but a more powerful, self-destructive impulse takes over. Tearing the list is not enough; I need to completely overthrow it! Each line, each forbiddance, each bit of life I've denied myself will be experienced, starting tonight!

I scan all the don'ts in search of something stupid and reckless. My eyes stop on a vicious-looking set of words. I nod. It's as good a start as any, and I can tackle it right away.

Two

Never Get Drunk

My entire body aches. Even the tips of my hair are in pain. Instead of blood, it feels like acid is pumping through my veins, and my lids have been replaced by sandpaper. *What's happening to me?*

I try to move. Easier thought than done. My muscles feel like Jell-O. I'm stuck lying on something soft, something that smells like a cold winter day: pine cones and rain. Slowly, I open my eyes. Daylight stabs my pupils, sending tendrils of pain through my brain. *Where am I?* In a bedroom, it seems. *Whose bedroom?* Ah, that's the question.

Panic gnaws at my stomach, followed by a flood of nausea. I turn to one side and spot a glass of water and a blister of Aleve on a nightstand. *A lifeline.* I pop two pills and drain the water before collapsing back on the bed.

Whose bed? Oh, crap... I'm in someone's bed, in my underwear, and I've absolutely no idea how I got here.

The last thing I remember is walking into a bar determined to tackle the next item on the list: *never get drunk.*

Ding-dong. Mr. Hangover, we meet at last... Not sure I like you. I close my eyes hoping the Aleve will act quickly.

When I open them again, I've no clue how much time has passed—a minute or an hour—but at least I'm slightly better. Well enough to roll over and retrieve my discarded clothes from the floor. There's my bag, too, and I always carry a compact mirror. *Face damage assessment time.* Gingerly, I flip the little metallic lid open. I've got panda eyes, but it's nothing some makeup remover wipes can't fix. The cool touch of the damp cotton is heavenly on my heated skin as I scrub myself clean. The soothing moisture helps also with the headache, so much so that I don't stop until I've used up the entire packet of wipes.

With my head a little clearer, I search for my phone and unlock the screen. Eight fifteen in the morning. There's an unhealthy number of missed calls and messages waiting to be answered. *Later.* My temples are still pounding. I open the map app to check where in the world I am exactly. The little blue

dot stops on Brooklyn Heights.

What the hell am I doing in Brooklyn? How did I get here? Whose house is this?

Time to find out.

Still sitting on the bed, I put on the silky turquoise dress I was wearing last night—perfect for a proposal, not so much for a morning-after commute from Brooklyn. There’s nothing I can do about the hair, so I scrunch the red tangles in a messy-for-real bun and stand up.

The room spins. I blink several times to fight the dizziness and shake my legs until the dress’s skirt slithers into place, reaching my knees. Shoes in one hand, bag in the other, I drag my feet to the door and tentatively exit the bedroom to enter... a cool loft. One of those with brick walls and modern furniture.

Feeling like a burglar, I slip my pumps on and shuffle into an open-space living room with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Hello?” My voice sounds thick.

“Morning,” someone says. A *male* someone. “I was starting to worry you were dead.”

“I thought I was d—” My throat catches as a guy in jeans and a light blue shirt comes out from behind a pillar. He’s so good-looking I literally can’t talk. Rumpled dark hair on the longish side. Dark brown—almost black—eyes, a strong jaw covered in five o’clock shadow, and he’s smiling at me. A little sexy dimple on each cheek. My stomach flips.

Is it the smile or the hangover?

But the real question is, did I have sex with this hunk? Well, I woke up in his bed wearing only underwear. I hope we did it. And I hope he wants to do it again because I can’t remember a thing and the guy is too handsome for me to leave, not remembering having sex with him.

Eeeeeee, somebody please censor my brain. Never in my life would I have had sex with someone I just met—but that was the whole point of throwing out the list and getting crazy drunk. If this man is the first outcome of my new lifestyle, high five to me. But how embarrassing not to remember if we slept together. What do I do? Do I ask him? I don’t even know his name!

“Er, Blair?” he says. “Are you all right?”

Mr. Hot knows my name. “Yeah, super... mmm... uh...”

“Richard.” He smiles again. “The name’s Richard Stratton. I made coffee,

you want some?”

If he wasn't already hot enough, the dude has an impossibly sexy British accent that's making my knees wobble. Either the accent or serious dehydration.

“Richard, sure.” I pretend like he needn't have told me his name. “Coffee would be great, thanks.” I stroll to the kitchen bar, sit on a stool, and drop my bag to the floor.

“Black? Sugar? Milk?”

“Sugar equals poison,” I declare. “Do you happen to have almond milk?”

Richard's eyes widen.

“Black's fine,” I hurry to say.

Mr. Hot hands me a mug. “You didn't seem to have a problem with the sugar rim of your cocktails last night.”

“About that...” I take a sip of coffee, hoping caffeine will help my synapses connect. “I'm not exactly sure what... er. To be honest, last night's a bit—uh—foggy. How did we meet?”

“I called you.”

“You called me?”

I have to kill the parrot possessing me and stop repeating whatever people say.

“Mm-hmm.”

“How? Did I give you my number?” I think I'd remember giving my number to someone as hot as him.

“No, I got it through a friend of mine.”

I frown. “A friend?”

The parrot lives.

“Yes, I'm the Editor-in-Chief of an up and coming web-based magazine. We're looking for a Fashion Editor—”

I hear magazine, I hear fashion, and the other shoe drops. *He's gay.* Ninety-five percent of Évoque male employees are gay. “Oh, you're gay,” I interrupt him, a bit crestfallen. “Of course you're gay. That face is too handsome for you to be straight. I mean between the hair, the eyes, and the smile you'd have to go around with an I'm-too-hot warning sticker on your chest...” I'm babbling and Richard's eyebrows have shot up. *Blair, shut up.* But I'm possessed, and can't stop talking. “And that accent! Imagine what it would do to women. You sound like Prince William. Well, at least now I

don't have to ask you if we slept together last night..." I brush my hand over my forehead in a gesture of relief and laugh nervously. "Phew."

Richard stares at me dumbfounded for a few seconds before saying, "I thought I made it clear last night I wasn't gay." His tone is dead serious.

Something in my guts twists. "You mean we"—I point at my chest and then at his—"slept together?"

"No, we didn't. I was mocking you."

"But I woke up in your bed in my underwear."

"I left you in my room with your clothes *on*. You must've done the undressing."

"Oh, so you *are* gay."

"No, I'm not gay." He scoffs. "It's just that so-drunk-she-can't-remember-her-name doesn't do it for me."

I'm too mortified to speak, so I hide my red-beyond-control cheeks by staring at the floor.

"Last night," Richard continues, "I called you to talk about a job opportunity, and you told me to join you in a bar in downtown Manhattan. When I got there, you were already drunk and delirious about a list, spaghetti marinara, and someone's secretary..."

I'm feeling smaller and smaller. From under my lids, I dare a peek at Richard.

"When we left the bar, I tried to put you in a cab to get you home, but you weren't able to supply an address. So it was either leave you on the street or bring you back here."

"Oh, okay." I drop the empty coffee mug on the bar and get up. "Sorry for all the trouble I caused and thank you for... mmm..." *Giving me a bed to sleep in instead of the curb? Saving my life? Making me believe for five seconds that we had sex?* I go with, "For hosting me last night. I'll get out of your way now." I pick up my bag from the floor and... I've no idea where the exit is. "Where's the door?"

"This way." Richard leads me to the opposite side of the room and stops in front of a metal door striped with faux rust, or real rust, I'm not sure. Cool, design rust in any case. "About that job interview," he adds. "You want to reschedule?"

"You still want to interview me?"

"You look suspicious."

Not look, am. “I don’t mean to be rude, but if you’re still considering me for a job after last night’s stunt and this morning’s conversation, you must be desperate.”

His jaw tightens. “I’m not desperate.”

“So what’s your magazine’s circulation?” I challenge.

“It’s an online-only editorial hub; we hardly have any circulation.”

“You’ve no printed edition?”

“No.”

“Alexa rank?”

Richard holds my gaze for a couple of seconds before answering, “In the lower thousands. But most of our traffic comes from in-app views, with no ad blocking, and we want it to stay that way.”

“As I said, you’re desperate.”

“Well, from what I gathered last night, so are you.”

Ouch. Below the belt, Richard. Way below the belt. What else did I tell him while I was drunk as a skunk? Probably better I don’t remember.

“Listen.” He rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, and I get distracted looking at his forearms. *He has really pretty forearms. Correction: he has really pretty everything.* “I don’t claim to be *Évoque Magazine*, but I’m working on making something fresh. *Something better.* I’ve put together a great team, so before you snub us, why don’t you hear me out?” Richard takes a business card out of his pocket and hands it over.

As he comes closer, I get a whiff of that same pine cones and rain scent I smelled in the bedroom. *His scent.* So, Richard was my cold winter day. The combination of shower gel or aftershave plus male skin is intoxicating. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep focused and take the card. “Thank you.”

“Go home, take a shower, and come back to check us out at the address on the card. This afternoon, tomorrow morning. Whenever works.” Before I can politely decline he adds, “If nothing else, stop by so you can see my too-handsome face one more time,” and winks.

My mouth hangs open, and my face sizzles in shame for the millionth time since I woke up. “You know you can’t use anything I said while I thought you were gay against me.”

“Nice try.” Richard gives me a wicked smile and opens the door. “See you later?”

I scold him on the way out. “Maybe.”

“This way.”

He guides me down the hall in silence until we reach the elevators. There, I push the down arrow and wait. When the doors sweep open, I briskly step inside, push the lobby button, and say, “Goodbye.”

Richard braces both arms against the doorframe. “I’ll see you soon,” he says, stepping backward, and, as the doors begin to move adds, “And I’ll work on finding that sticker.”

The doors close so that I’m left staring at my shocked, beet-red face reflected in the metal.

###

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