



To the Stars and Back

(A GLITTERING ROMANTIC COMEDY)

FIRST COMES LOVE

BOOK 4



CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Christian

I race down the service hall until I find a door with a “personnel only” sign. I try the handle, it turns. In a flash, I rush in and shut the closet door behind me.

Without the outside light, the small room stands in complete darkness, but as I entered I thought I saw someone sitting on the floor or... was it just my imagination?

“Is someone in here?” I ask, unsure.

“Who’s there?” a shaky female voice asks.

“Sorry to intrude,” I say. “I need a place to hide.”

“Well, this closet is taken,” she wails. “Go away.”

“Are you crying?”

“Nooo.” Her reply comes out in a howl.

Clearly, the woman *is* crying.

“Should I turn on the lights?”

I grope the wall for a switch, find one, and flip it. But I only get a quick flash of metal racks filled with linens and toiletries before I’m hit over the head by something white and fluffy—a towel.

“Put that along the threshold,” my fellow stowaway orders. “People outside might notice the light. You’ll get us caught.”

I do as she says and then turn around to assess the situation. The hideaway is minuscule and cramped. Two silver racks crammed with supplies are pushed against the walls with only a narrow hall in the middle. Exactly what one would expect from a hotel storage room.

The woman sharing this impromptu refuge with me is a young brunette in a white T-shirt and jeans. She’s sitting cross-

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legged in the sliver of space between the racks, her shoulders leaning against the back wall. Hands in her lap, she's clinging to a phone, its screen dark.

I sit on the opposite side of the closet, resting with my back against the door with a sigh—*I'm knackered*. I fold my legs close to my chest so as not to invade her space too much—even like this our knees are not three feet apart—and study her. She isn't looking at me; she's too busy blowing her nose and wiping tears from her face. But even with a runny nose, red-blotted skin, and tear-streaked cheeks, I can tell she's pretty.

When the lady finally lifts her eyes to meet mine, their color is breathtaking. A deep, vibrant blue that reminds me of the Pacific Ocean on a sunny day. I wait for those two sapphires to widen in recognition as she takes me in, but nothing happens. Not a blink. She barely spares me a glance, then goes back to blowing her nose.

Could she really not have recognized me? Must still be too shocked a random bloke barged in on her hiding place. I wonder what a crying girl's doing stashed up in the broom closet of The Peninsula Beverly Hills.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask.

"Do I look okay to you?" she fires back.

Yeah, Christian, kind of a dick question.

"I meant, what happened? Why are you hiding in here?"

"Why are you?" she retorts.

Should I tell her I'm running from the paparazzi? No real reason why, but a gut feeling is telling me not to. So I decide not to mention the paps.

"Fair enough," I say. "Want to swap stories?" I tilt my head at her in a silent question.

She nods, so I go ahead and give her an edited version of the truth. Which is how, "I was meeting privately with Ridley Scott to discuss his next movie, but the paps busted us," becomes, "I

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had a meeting about a project I'd like to keep under wraps, but a bunch of people I've worked with in the past appeared in the lobby. Small world, huh?" I try to be casual. "And I couldn't have them see me here today. Hence the closet."

"Secret meeting?" She frowns. "Sounds shady."

I smile. "More confidential, really. What about you?"

"I... I..." She starts the phrase multiple times before collapsing in another fit of sobs. "I'm s-sorry..."

"No, it's okay... err... What's your name?"

"Lana," she says, blows her nose, then looks at me expectantly. "And you?"

Unbelievable. She really has no idea who I am. Not to sound arrogant or anything, but I haven't had to introduce myself to anyone in, well, forever.

"Christian," I say. "Christian Slade."

No reaction. Zero recognition in her eyes. Well, that's new and one hundred percent unexpected. Anonymity doesn't happen to me—*ever*. People know who I am. Everyone does, especially women. My face has been on the front page of practically every tabloid, magazine, and online publication in the world. The city is plastered with posters of me, I'm on the side of buses, on billboards and digital screens... and, yet, this woman has no clue who she's talking to.

"Hi, Christian." Lana cracks a small smile and, wow, her entire face transforms. "Sorry for breaking down on you. Not my best day."

Lana reaches into her bag for a stainless steel bottle and takes a small sip.

"You want some water?" she offers.

"No, thanks. I'm good."

I'm not thirsty, but I'm dying to know what's going on with this woman. But it doesn't feel right to pressure her to share. The last thing she needs right now is a nosy stranger. So I watch

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Lana as she drinks, unlocks the phone in her lap, and stares at the screen for an eternity without uttering a single word. When the display goes dark on its own, a fresh flood of tears rolls down her cheeks.

“Can I do anything for you?”

She snuffles. “Could you check if there are tissues somewhere in here?” She shows me the crumpled white paper in her hands. “This was my last one.”

I get up, search the shelves for a box of Kleenex, and hand it to her.

“Thanks.” Lana lets out a bittersweet chuckle. “At least I won’t run out of wipes.” She noisily blows her nose again.

“Are you planning on staying here long?”

“I’m not leaving until they do.” She points a finger at the dark screen in her lap.

“Who’s they?”

“My boyfriend and my best friend,” she says.

Bloody hell.

“Or,” she continues, “more like my ex-boyfriend and my ex-best friend.”

“Are they... mmm?” How do I ask in a tactful way? *Impossible.* “Sorry, I don’t want to meddle if you’re not comfortable talking.”

She shrugs. “Talking is better than crying, and at least you’re a total stranger. It’s not like you can judge me.”

“I wouldn’t,” I say, and relax against the door. “Shoot.”

“You have an iPhone?”

Weird question, but I answer anyway. “Yeah?”

“Ever used the Find Friends app?”

“No. How does it work?”

“It allows you to share your position with your contacts, to see each other’s location at all times.”

That sounds like my very own personal hell. Imagine

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everyone being able to geo-target me at any moment. Oh, the paparazzi would love to have me pinned down like that.

“But you can turn it off, right?” I ask.

“Yeah. To access their location, a contact has to approve you.”

“And your boyfriend approved you?”

Seems like a stupid move for someone having an affair.

“Yeah, they both did.”

Even more stupid.

“But it was ages ago. I’m talking five or six years ago.”

I low-whistle. “Long relationship.”

Especially considering I’ve never made it past the one-year mark.

Lana winces. “Longer, unfortunately; we met in college.”

“So, the app?” I prompt.

“Yeah, sorry. We all followed each other on a weekend we went hiking in Big Bear, in case someone got lost. And I guess neither of them thought of withdrawing the approval.”

“And the app is telling you they’re both here?”

Lana swallows and nods.

“Could they not... I mean, could it be innocent?”

“Two adults booking a room at the Peninsula? They’re not here to play Scrabble,” she hisses.

No, probably not.

“I’m sorry,” I offer. “First time this happened?”

“No, I-I don’t think so.” Lana takes a deep breath, possibly to stop more tears from coming. “I like to check on John’s position from time to time...”

“John’s the boyfriend?”

“Yeah, Johnathan. And I’m not a psycho-stalker who likes to track her boyfriend’s every move or anything. It was more to see when he was coming home from work so I could set the table, or other silly things like that. Always knowing where he

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was felt... I don't know... comforting?"

Definitely sounds more stalkerish, but better not to contradict an angry, crying woman.

"Anyway," Lana continues. "About two months ago, I saw them in the same location, downtown, at lunchtime. But then afterward Summer—my best friend—called me and told me she'd bumped into John and that they'd eaten together, so I didn't read much into it. Not until it happened again last week."

"For the first time in two months?"

"I don't know. It's not like I check on their position every day; it's a random thing I do from time to time. When I'm thinking about John for whatever reason, I have a peek at where he is..."

"So, last week they were together again."

"Mm-hm, lunchtime again, but in Santa Monica this time, which is as far as it gets from both their offices."

I shift positions; this floor is really hard to sit on. "And I guess there was no call from Summer this time?"

"No, exactly." Lana pulls her hair away from her cheeks and up in a messy bun. Tendrils trail down, framing her face. She's cute. "And when I texted Summer to ask how she was doing, she told me she'd been stuck in the office all day."

"A lie."

"Yeah. That night I asked John about *his* day and he, too, lied. Said he had a business meeting in Malibu. No mention of a pit-stop in Santa Monica. As you said, I tried to come up with an alternative, logical explanation. The app isn't super precise. They could've been in the same neighborhood without being together. But even so, why lie?"

"Only one reason I can think of."

"Right." Lana stares back down at her phone, unlocks the screen, grimaces, and locks it. "After that day, I turned into a real stalker. I've been obsessed with the app ever since. And

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today, *bingo*, I caught them in the same place again. So I hopped on the first bus and followed them here.”

“And you’re sure they’re in the hotel?”

“Both their cars are in the parking lot.”

“They could’ve gone somewhere else.”

“I called reception and asked to speak to John. They connected me to his room.” Lana grimaces. “He didn’t even bother with a fake name. Anyway, I pretended to be the concierge checking in to see if everything was okay. I could hear Summer’s voice in the background, asking who was on the phone. They’re here together, probably having sex right as we speak, and... oh... oh, gosh...” Lana starts hyperventilating. “There’s no air in here...”

She needs something to breathe into. I only find sanitary paper bags on the racks, which isn’t the best, but... she’s having a panic attack. They’ll have to do.

“Here.” I open one and give it to her. “Put this over your mouth.”

Lana follows my instructions and, after a few deep inhales, she starts to calm down. Or, at least, she stops hyperventilating, which I’m taking as a good sign.

“Sorry,” she apologizes.

“Don’t be. I don’t know what I’d do if our roles were reversed.”

Probably would’ve already knocked down the damn room door and started throwing punches. At least her way doesn’t end in an assault charge.

“Can we... Can we talk about something else?” Lana asks.

“Like what?”

“Tell me about you. What do you do? What’s the secret project about?”

Ah, a direct question. I could skid the truth again, but no, I don’t want to lie to Lana. She’s already had enough bullshit fed

to her.

“I’m an actor,” I say, “and I’m working on a new movie.”

Her mouth curls into a little smile.

“What?” I ask, self-consciously.

Her smile widens. “You’re just so LA,” she says. “So, is this an actual movie we’re talking about, or are you really a bartender walking around with headshots in your pockets, hoping to be discovered?”

Maybe fifteen years ago.

“No, I did some work already.” That’s, like, the understatement of the century. I’ve featured in so many box office hits, I’ve been the top-grossing actor in LA for almost a decade. “You might’ve seen me?”

“No, sorry,” she says. “I don’t watch TV.”

No kidding!

“You don’t go to the movies?” I ask.

“Nope. I prefer to read books or spend time outdoors...”

As she talks, Lana almost unconsciously unlocks her phone. Only this time, she jolts, sitting up straighter.

“They’re on the move!” Her eyes track the screen for a few seconds. “They’re both heading back to their offices. Guess they finished their business and now it’s life as usual.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Take the bus home and pack John’s stuff before he comes back tonight,” Lana says determinedly. “I want that bastard out of our house.”

“Hey, you want a ride?” I ask on impulse. “I came here in my car.”

“No, thanks. I don’t drive by choice. There’s enough pollution around already. The weather here’s nice enough to walk anywhere I need to go, and if it’s too far, I use public transportation.”

“Oh, but I drive electric.”

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The lie escapes my lips before I know what I'm saying. My Ferrari California may be a sweet ride, but it's not exactly eco-friendly.

"Traffic is terrible at this hour," she protests.

"Traffic is terrible at any hour in LA," I counter. "I promise, it's no trouble at all."

Why am I so hell-bent on giving this woman a ride home? I don't know her. Her problems aren't mine. But I'm not heartless, and it doesn't seem fair to make her battle public transportation on top of everything else.

"You don't even know where I live."

"Where do you live?"

"Westwood."

"Perfect, it's on the way..." *...opposite to my house*, I finish silently.

Lana sags back against the wall. "Thank you," she says. "I'll gladly skip the over-packed bus ride, then. Are you good to go, or are the people you're hiding from still out there?"

I fish my phone out of my pocket. "Let me check real quick."

Christian, you're screwed. She's never going to believe the Ferrari is electric.

I think of the car's thundering roar... *No chance.*

Two Christian

I text my assistant, Penny; she's my only hope.

I need you to buy me a Tesla

Bring it by the Peninsula
parking lot in Beverly Hills

Swap it with the Ferrari

Leave the keys under the front
tire

Her reply arrives two seconds later.

Should I even ask?

No

How long do I have?

Kudos to Penny for understanding right away that time is of the essence.

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Half an hour tops

On it, Boss

I can always count on her. Penny is the most efficient PA on the planet.

But you should give me a raise

And the cockiest.

Tell you what

Get me a Tesla in 30 min

And you can keep the Ferrari for the day and go shopping with my credit card

Those are dangerous words

Never give your credit card to a woman

You're no ordinary woman

I know I can trust you

She replies with a smiling devil emoji.

“Everything all right?” Lana asks.

I stare up from the phone at her. “Would you mind waiting a little longer? To make sure everyone downstairs is gone.”

“No problem.”

We fall into silence, which quickly becomes awkward.

“What about you?” I eventually ask. “You haven’t told me what you do.”

“I’m a teacher.”

“Really?” An image of her dressed in a pencil skirt, white blouse, and dark-rimmed glasses pops into my head. I wave the dirty fantasy away, and ask, “What grade do you teach?”

“I’m a rocket science professor at UCLA, in the engineering department.”

“An engineer? I wouldn’t have guessed—”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” she interrupts me, suddenly on the defensive. “Not many girls in my profession. But we’re trying to change that.”

“We?”

“I volunteer as a tutor at charter schools, and I try to steer as many girls as I can toward scientific subjects, to empower them.”

A tutor, huh? Wouldn’t it be a weird coincidence if she worked at one of my schools?

“Really? I donate to a similar charity...” I say. *More like I’m the founder.* “Teachers Without Postcodes—ever heard of it?”

“Yeah, that’s the charity that sponsors my school.”

Call it destiny?

“Oh, which neighborhood?” I ask.

“Compton. The kids there are so smart...”

Once I’ve gotten her onto a subject she’s clearly passionate about, the conversation flows. Thirty minutes later, we’re

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enthusiastically discussing the need for a fairer education system when my phone pings.

Swap made

Keys under the front tire

Cheers

You're so British sometimes
O.o

Anyway, have fun with the
Tesla

I sure will with the Ferrari

As I read Penny's text, I grin and shake my head.

"Everything all right?" Lana asks.

"Yeah, the hall should be clear by now. Ready to go?"

"Sure, perfect."

I get up and offer my hand to pull her up. When our eyes become level, a breath catches in my lungs.

Man, what kind of trouble are you getting yourself into?

To avoid getting recognized by anyone, I guide Lana through the service halls until we enter the underground parking lot. I've come and gone this way enough times over the years to navigate the corridors of the Peninsula without troubles.

In the garage, I head to the spot where I'd parked the Ferrari and eye my new ride. Penny bought me a red Tesla; not quite the Ferrari-red I'm used to, but still a nice color.

I stride to the driver's side of the car and make a show of dropping my keys. This gives me the excuse to bend down and collect the new ones my PA has hidden behind the tire. Only, instead of a regular key, I find a key card on the ground that looks better fit to open a hotel room than a car. It has the Tesla logo on it, though, so this must be what I need.

"Wow." Lana has come around to stand beside me. "This looks brand new."

You have no idea.

"Yeah, I just got it."

"Cool." She walks around the car to the passenger door and waits for me to unlock it.

With the key card in my hands, I feel like a total moron. I have no clue how to get this car to open. Where's the key card reader? Is that even a thing with cars?

Placing the card next to the door handle doesn't work. With beads of sweat blossoming on my forehead, I search for other possible places to stick this key.

Where would they put the opening mechanism?

The shell of the car looks all the same, except for a lighter patch of glass between the two side windows. For lack of better alternatives, I press the card to the door frame and wait for something to happen. When the Tesla finally beeps and unlocks, I sigh with relief and get in.

Two seconds later, I'm in a panic again. There's no start button near the wheel, or any other button or key slot; only a giant screen sitting in the middle of the dashboard.

How do I turn this thing on?

Pretending I have to check a message on my phone, I quickly

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pull up a user manual on the internet. The instructions say I have to place the key card near the cup holder and push the brake to start the engine.

Engine successfully started, I pull my seatbelt on and ask Lana for an address.

She gives it to me, and I try to work the screen to input our destination. The map is already there; how hard can it be? But after a few unlucky touches, I only manage to turn on the radio super loud, turn it off, and make the car tell me off with two angry beeps.

“Sorry,” I say to Lana, trying not to look too frazzled. “Car’s new; I still have to get used to all this”—I gesture at the screen—“technology.”

“No problem.” She smiles. “I can give you directions the old-fashioned way.”

“Great, thanks. Can you pass me the hat in the glove compartment?”

Whenever I drive, I always wear a baseball cap. Saves me from being recognized by the paparazzi, or anyone else, really. Penny knows. And I’m sure she provided me one.

Lana opens the compartment and hands me a black and white cap with a green peace sign printed in the middle. I’m unable to suppress a smirk as I put on the hat. Penny must have been cackling to herself as she picked it out; a literal Greenpeace hat. The woman knows how to be sarcastic.

As I merge into traffic, Lana directs me onto Wilshire Boulevard. From there, it’s basically a straight ride all the way to Westwood.

“My home is the one with the blue door,” Lana informs me twenty minutes later.

I pull up in front of a two-story townhouse, the bottom half white, and the upper floor painted a light blue. I kill the engine

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and stare at Lana, at a loss for words. What do you say to someone who's just had her life ripped apart by the two people she trusted most in the world?

"Thanks for the ride," Lana says.

"It was nothing."

She bites her lower lip but makes no move to get out of the car.

"Is something the matter?" I ask.

"Sorry." She hides her face in her hands. "It's... I'm not sure if I'm ready to go in there alone."

"You want me to come with you?"

"No, no. Thank you." She looks up at me with big, scared blue eyes. "I've already abused your kindness too much."

"Actually..." I massage my throat. "I'm parched. You wouldn't happen to have some of that water left?"

She doesn't; I saw her finish the bottle while we were in the closet.

I've given her the perfect excuse to invite me in, and her lips curl as her eyes go bright. It's like a secret, inside-joke smile.

"My bottle is empty, but I have drinks inside," she says. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure." I put the key card in my jeans pocket and we both get out of the car.

As we enter the house, the bohemian-hippy clashing colors of the interior almost make my eyes water. The furniture is intentionally-scratched wood, colored textiles, and the odd bronze decoration. At first impact, Lana's house appears messy, but after a closer look, I realize that it's just filled to the brim with books, pillows, rugs, and little tables and cabinets that occupy every available corner.

Rather the opposite of my pristinely white, minimalist Trousdale Estates crib.

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“Wow, lots of colors here,” I say.

“I know.” Lana shuts the door. “I can’t stand those soulless houses with all white surfaces and stainless steel appliances.” *And she’s basically described my house.* “I need to surround myself with furniture that has character.”

I take off the Greenpeace hat and follow her into the living room, where she points me to the pink-blue-orange-green couch. “Please sit here. Is water fine, or do you prefer something else? Iced tea? Pineapple juice?”

“Iced tea would be great, thanks.”

As I sit and wait for her to come back, I notice there’s no TV in the living room. When she said she doesn’t watch television, I assumed it meant she just didn’t turn on the TV much, not that she doesn’t even have one. Hence her having no inkling of who I am.

I haven’t been able to talk to someone who wasn’t biased by my job and fame for I can’t remember how long... fifteen years? Is this why I feel an inexplicable pull toward Lana? Is it the novelty of her seeing me like a regular person?

Two abnormally fat cats jump on the couch, interrupting my musings. The tabby kitties look like twins, both with lush, light-brown fur and big yellow eyes.

“Hello,” I say.

One cat walks over my legs to go perch on the left armrest, while his doppelganger sits on my other side. I tentatively scratch the cat to my right, my hand disappearing within the long fur. Maybe they’re not fat; they just have loads of hair.

The kitty seems to appreciate the attention because, after a while, he curls up against my thigh and goes to sleep. The other one is still seated and looking at me expectantly. I give him a scratch, too, and when he’s contented, he settles on the armrest.

“Oh, I see you’ve made friends.” Lana is back with my glass

of iced tea. “Did they molest you?”

“Just demanded a scratch,” I say, then thank her as she hands me the glass and sits on a blue knitted pouf next to the couch. “You’ve had them for long?”

“Adopted them two years ago, but they’re a little older. Since they weren’t kittens, nobody wanted them, so I took them in. They’re brothers.”

“Yeah, I could tell. Do they have names?”

“Cengel and Boles,” she says.

“Wow, they sound like important names.”

Here comes the inside-joke smile again.

“Should I recognize the names from somewhere?” I ask.

The smile widens. “Only if you were a nerd and an engineer. Dr. Yunus A. Cengel and Michael A. Boles are the co-authors of the most widely adopted thermodynamics manual all mechanical engineering students have to face at one point. We all call the book ‘Cengel and Boles’ for short.”

I don’t have the faintest idea what a thermodynamics manual might contain, and for a second there, I’m overwhelmed by how smart this woman must be to be a rocket science professor at UCLA so young.

I never failed a class in high school, but I’m no genius. My scientific-savviness stops at what I was forced to learn in the 6th Form as my acting career took over before I could finish university, so... Not much of a scholar here.

“We thought it was funny.” Lana shrugs, and the smile disappears from her lips.

“Is your boyfriend an engineer, too?”

“Yeah, we fell for each other when we were paired for a group assignment in a robotics lab. But he works for an aerospace company now. Teaching has never been his thing.”

“Still planning on packing all his stuff before he comes home

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tonight?”

Lana lowers her gaze for a second, then trains those deep blue eyes on me with a new resolution sparkling in them. “Yeah, and I should start if I want to be done before he gets here.”

She stands up as if, decision made, she wants to get down to business right away. I sense it’s also my cue to go; she needs to do this alone. So I finish my tea in one long sip and get up as well. “I’ll leave you to that.”

We walk to the door and I step outside, awkwardly hovering on her doorstep. “I guess this is goodbye, then.”

She nods. “Thanks again for the ride.” Then she bites her full lower lip in a way I’m sure she doesn’t know could make a man lose his mind, and adds, “Wait here a second.”

Lana disappears inside the house and comes back a minute later holding a business card. She hands it to me.

Lana Voynich, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
lvoynich@ucla.edu

I turn the card and notice with a thrill she has handwritten her phone number on the back.

When I raise my gaze again, she’s blushing and blabbing, “If you ever need an aerospace consultancy...”

“You’ll be the first one I call.” I smile, and before I know what I’m doing, I pull her into a hug and whisper, “Good luck with everything.”

We pull apart, facing each other even more awkwardly than before, and she nods. “Thank you, I’ll need it.”

“Gotta go now.” I put back on the Greenpeace cap and hop the few steps down to the curb and my brand new Tesla.

Still not used to the key card or the driving system, I pull away from Lana’s house in understated silence. The rumbling

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engine of the Ferrari would've made for a much more dramatic exit.

Three

Lana

I shouldn't have given him my number.

"Call me if you ever need an aerospace consultancy."

So lame. What was I thinking?

You were pissed and feeling a little vindictive toward your jackass of a boyfriend, so you gave the cute guy your number.

Cute. The guy isn't *cute*, he's trouble. Eyes too green, face too handsome, smile too dashing. Not to talk about the half British accent. Right, too much on my plate already.

Ah.

Fury mixes with bitterness as I yank another of John's shirts off its hanger and curl it into a tight ball. When the fabric is all crumpled, I stuff the shirt in the open suitcase on the bed.

Johnathan likes his work shirts to be starched, pristine, and crisp. No one hates creases more than he does.

Aha.

Vengeful delight fills me as I grab the last dry-cleaned shirt and cram it messily next to the others in the case.

Never had more fun packing! Right! Tears threaten to start spilling again, but I fight them back and focus on taking out my rage on John's clothes.

Cengel must've sensed something is wrong, because he appears in the bedroom and jumps on the bed with a long meow.

"No, darling, Mom's not okay."

He bumps his head against my thigh and I scratch him behind the ears. But feline empathy only goes so far. Cengel soon loses interest in me and eyes the open suitcase with keenness.

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If there's something John hates more than wrinkled clothes, it's clothes coated in cat hair. We used to have countless arguments about keeping the cats out of the bedroom—and the bedroom closet in particular. Especially when we were packing for a trip and unattended, open suitcases were left lying around. Apparently, luggage, like boxes, is a premium napping location for kitties, even more so once they sensed case-sleeping was a big no-no for their humans.

“Go ahead, then,” I tell Cengel.

He eyes me surreptitiously.

“No, it's not too good to be true. Mommy is being serious; you can sleep in the case.”

As if to test me, the cat places both his front paws on the brim of the suitcase. When I don't protest, he dives in, kneads Johnathan's clothes, purring loudly, and finally settles down.

His twin, probably sensing a great injustice was taking place, hops on the bed only a few minutes later. He throws his brother a dirty look and then stares up at me accusingly.

“You can sleep in the case, too,” I reassure Boles. “Let me pad the other side for you.”

I snatch a row of John's carefully folded sweaters out of a drawer, crumple them a little, and lay them at the bottom of the case as bedding.

I pick up Boles and drop him on top. “Here you go.”

He seems undecided at first, his feline nature probably telling him that if his human wants him to sleep somewhere, then he shouldn't. But suitcase-naps are too inviting to pass up, so in the end, he curls up next to his brother.

Once the closet and dresser are taken care of, I move into the bathroom and unceremoniously throw John's toiletries into a gym duffle bag. By seven p.m., I've packed all his things and, except for the array of suitcases waiting in the living room, it

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could be as if Johnathan never lived here.

The bastard, however, doesn't get home at the usual time. Guess that with the extended lunch break, he had to pull long hours at the office to make up for it. The app is telling me he's still at work.

When his dot finally starts moving, I sit on a stool at the kitchen bar and wait for him, eyes glued to the front door. The more time passes with no sign of Mr. Cheater, the angrier I get. Emotions range wild in a rollercoaster of betrayal, rage, sadness, anxiety, uncertainty, pain... until the cycle starts anew.

When I finally hear the key turn in the lock, I've chewed my nails to shreds and I'm exhausted. Still, my heart starts beating super-fast as a fresh rush of adrenaline floods my veins.

I watch Johnathan walk into the house as if it was any other night.

"Hi, honey," he says. "Sorry I'm so late. Had a terrible day at the office."

Whoa, what a performer.

A sneaky, cheating, lying bastard. How can he act so naturally after having spent the afternoon screwing the brains out of my best friend?

How?

"I had a pretty horrible day, too," I say.

A raging understatement.

For a moment, I'm tempted to ask what has made his day so bad and listen as he feeds me more lies. See how far he'll go. But, frankly, I'm drained, and I can't wait for him to be out of the house and out of my life.

"Oh, I'm sorry. What—" He stops mid-sentence as he spots the suitcases. "Are we going somewhere?" He frowns. "Because I'm super busy at work. I can't take any days off."

Don't worry, I think bitterly in my head, I won't whisk you

away from your mistress.

“Really, Lana,” John says, starting to look annoyed now. “You know I don’t like surprises.”

“Relax,” I snap. “I haven’t planned a romantic gateway if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“So what’s with the suitcases?”

Again, I’ve imagined a million possible sarcastic replies in my head. Something like, “Since you already paid for a room at the Peninsula...” But I’m too tired for sarcasm, and I want to end this farce, so I go with the simple truth: “I know about you and Summer.”

John’s neck snaps toward me so fast I’m afraid it might break. Our eyes meet, and a wide range of emotions appear on his face: shock, fear, embarrassment... But to my utter dismay, his features settle on relief.

“Shit,” he says, scratching the back of his head. “That’s not how we wanted you to find out.”

Such a simple response, yet it tells me all I need to know. Taking his answer as the hypothesis for my failed-relationship theorem, I can only come to three logical conclusions:

a) John wanted me to find out. (His visibly relieved expression being incontrovertible proof.)

b) He’s chosen her. They’re a “we” now, apparently. He won’t even try to beg me for forgiveness. (Not that I would ever forgive him.) But a bit of groveling would’ve at least given me the satisfaction of showing him all my contempt. Also, it would’ve helped me believe I haven’t thrown away the last ten years of my life on a complete douchebag. And this brings me to realization number three:

c) The asshole didn’t even say he’s sorry!

In fact, Johnathan is more curious than contrite when he asks,

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“How did you...?”

No point in keeping the suspense alive. “The Find Friends app. Neither of you removed me from your followers.”

He makes a “so-dumb” grimace and seems at a loss for what to say next, so I take over. “I’ve packed all your stuff. I want you out of the house by tonight.”

Still wordless, he stares back and forth between me and the suitcases. Then he acknowledges my request with a single nod.

And just like that, a ten-year relationship is over.

It all feels so anti-climactic.

John silently loads the bags in his car. When he comes back inside, though, he seems to want to talk.

“Listen, Lana—”

“Don’t,” I interrupt him. Nothing he could say now would make me feel better. No excuses, justifications, not even a simple apology, would change things. Fighting to keep my tone even, I add, “I’ll need your keys back before you go.”

Johnathan’s eyes widen at the hardness in my voice. Looking chastened, he nods and unhooks his keys from the chain to drop them on the small cabinet in the hall. We stare at each other for a long, silent moment until I break.

“Please go,” I whisper.

He nods again and, without another word, he leaves.

Once the door closes, I let myself collapse on the kitchen floor to cry. I’m not sure if it’s a nervous reaction, if I’m sad, mad, at him, at *her*, I don’t know... My feelings are so all over the place right now, I can’t sort myself out.

With a stomach knotted too tight to eat anything, I skip dinner. I change into my PJs, lift a cat under each arm, and go to bed. I changed the sheets earlier. Not that our bed has seen much action lately, but I’m sure John and I had sex at least once or twice in the past two months.

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How creepy that he would still sleep with me while he was cheating with someone else.

I shiver in the dark, wondering if he's already told her. If they're together right now, discussing me and everything that happened.

Will she try to contact me? Apologize?

I've known Summer even longer than Johnathan. We've been friends since grade school. Me, her, and her identical twin, Winter—I know, parents can have a questionable sense of humor when naming their children—have been a fantastic trio from the first day of school. Inseparable ever since.

They say twins have a special connection. Well, with Summer and Winter I've always felt like the third twin. To me, they've been more like sisters than best friends... or at least, they were...

How could Summer do this? Stab me in the back over a guy? Did Winter know? How deep does the conspiracy go?

I spend the night tossing and turning with nightmares of Summer and Johnathan together, having sex, mocking me, laughing at my foolishness.

Between the nightmares, I dream of the stranger who gave me a ride home; only Christian is their accomplice, and he's helping them sneak around behind my back...

My mind is so twisted it keeps coming up with horror-like scenarios: Winter telling me she's siding with her sister and that we can no longer be friends, my students making fun of their naïve professor in the middle of a lecture, the dean firing me because I'm so dumb I didn't even notice my boyfriend and my best friend were having an affair, our friends all siding with them... And so on, and so on, until, finally, I languish in a dreamless slumber.

Four

Lana

A double ring of the doorbell wakes me up the next morning.

I'm not sure what time it is but, judging from the bright light filtering in through the blinds, it must be late. With no classes to teach or faculty meetings to attend this morning, I didn't set an alarm last night.

Was I expecting a delivery?

No, I don't remember ordering anything online.

Did *Johnathan* have a delivery scheduled?

Yeesh.

How long will I keep receiving his mail?

Will I wake up every day to find a reminder of his betrayal right in my mailbox?

He'd better find a new address where he can forward his correspondence.

Oh, gosh, will he move in with Summer?

Has he already?

My stomach churns at the thought. Either that, or my internal organs are protesting hunger after a skipped dinner. Anyway, I don't care whose mail they're trying to deliver, I'm not getting up. I'm going to stay in bed nestled between my two cats and never leave the house again. Except maybe to buy cat food. The innocents shouldn't pay for their humans' mistakes.

I'm snuggling deeper under the sheets when the buzzer goes off again, and again... and again.

"All right!"

I slither out of bed, trying not to disturb their sleeping

majesties, and stroll to the front door in my PJs.

When I see the person on the landing, my first instinct is to sucker punch her in the stomach. But then I take in her clothes—plastic flip-flops, khaki cargo Bermuda pants, plain white T-shirt. Her uneven, white-circles-around-the-eyes tan. And the messy bun—a real, hair-that-hasn't-seen-conditioner-in-a-month tangle of golden locks. And my brain clicks. Summer would never dress so casually. She's not standing on my doorstep, her twin is.

"Hi," I say.

"Whoa." Winter winces. "For a moment there I thought you were going to throttle me."

"Sorry. It's just that—"

"I share a face with the devil," she finishes the sentence for me.

"Oh, so you know."

"Just found out." She steps forward and pulls me into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry."

I wrap my arms around Winter's warm body, relishing the human contact, tears already welling in my eyes.

"Shhhh," she soothes me. "It's going to be all right, and I brought donuts."

I pull back, noticing for the first time the pink box she's holding.

Winter flashes me a goofy smile. "Double glaze!"

I manage not to start crying, and beckon her to come in. "Want coffee to go with those?"

"Yes, please, the jet lag is killing me!"

We move into the kitchen and I get busy with the coffee machine.

"When did you get back?" I ask.

Winter is a travel photographer and never stays in LA for

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long.

“Only last night...”

“Where were you this time?”

“Madagascar.”

“How was it?”

“Amazing, but do you really want to talk about an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean right now?”

I turn my back to her and grab two mugs. “No, not really,” I admit. The machine beeps; I fill the mugs and settle at the bar next to my friend. “So, how did you find out?”

Winter gives her donut a savage bite. “The evil twin came to pick me up at the airport last night,” she says, speaking with her mouth half full, “and when I walked out of the gate, I found her crying while she was talking on the phone.”

“With Johnathan?” I ask. Acid rises in my throat at saying the name, and I temper it with a bite of fried, saturated fats covered in sugar. Just what I needed.

“Yeah.” Winter washes down the donut with a generous sip of coffee. “Summer wouldn’t tell me anything at first, but then it’s not like she could keep the affair a secret, not since they were already busted!”

My chest tightens. It’s still hard to process which betrayal is worse: Jonathan’s or Summer’s. “And then... what did she say?”

“Sure you want to hear the pathetic stream of excuses she came up with...?”

I nod.

“Well, it was the usual. She felt alone and sad after breaking up with Robert... It started innocently at first— she bumped into Johnathan by chance a few times. They clicked, things spiraled out of control...” Winter makes a pretend-gag face. “She made it sound as if you could accidentally sleep with someone.”

“Yeah, they just happened to find hotel rooms booked in their name, right?” I say. “An affair that lasts months is no mistake. And what if I hadn’t caught them? How long would they’ve kept at it?”

“Summer claims she fell in love and didn’t know how to stop... She hoped Johnathan would break up with you, but also didn’t want you to suffer, and a bunch of other trite crap...”

I blanch at this. “In love? Summer said they’re in love?”

Winter’s eyes widen. “Oh, I’m sorry, was I too flat?”

“No,” I reassure her. “I need someone to be straight with me.”

Donuts finished, I refill our mugs and we move to the couch. Five seconds later, each of us has a cat in her lap.

Winter scratches Boles under his chin and asks, “So, how heartbroken are you?”

The question startles me. Of all the things I’ve felt in the past twenty-four hours—angry, betrayed, shocked, anxious, sad, tired—somehow heartbroken hasn’t made the list.

“How can you tell if you’re heartbroken?” I ask.

“Standard symptoms include a heart-ripped-out-of-chest sensation, palpitations, shivers of panic at the idea of never being able to kiss the loved one again...”

“Mmm,” I muse. “Nothing like that. I’m more stunned than anything else. John has been in my life for so long that losing him feels more like having an arm cut off than my heart ripped out.”

“Good.”

“How’s that good?”

“You can survive without a limb, but it’s pretty hard to keep going without a heart. And...” She stops, and twirls a loose lock around her finger, looking undecided if she should continue.

“Come on, out with it,” I prompt her.

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“I’m trying to find a silver lining,” Winter says. “If breaking up with Jonathan isn’t giving you the slightest chest pain, perhaps it isn’t all bad you broke up. I mean, he and my sister are two cockroaches who deserve to burn in hell forever, but maybe it was about time you took your relationship with John behind the barn and shot it.”

“Why would you say that?”

“You guys... mmm... lately, seemed a bit flat as a couple.”

I curl my fingers into Cengel’s fur. “Flat how?”

“Not as into each other...”

“Johnathan clearly wasn’t into me since he’s been screwing my best friend on the side. And how long is lately?”

Winter scrunches her face in an apologetic grimace. “Couple of years?”

“That long? Really?”

“Yep, you guys were like that thirty-year married couple with nothing to say, instead of one that still has to get engaged and tie the knot.”

“After ten years together, a relationship can’t be as intense as it was in the beginning,” I counter.

“Try to be very honest with yourself, Lana. Are you or are you not in love with Jonathan?”

“I’m confused,” I say. “He’s been such a big part of my life, I don’t even know how to function without him.”

“That’s co-dependence, not love.”

“Yes, but we share the same friends, and now we can’t all hang out together. From now on it’s going to be: who do we invite, Lana or Johnathan and Summer? Our group is split, ruined. I wonder who’ll get custody of whom?”

“Johnathan will get Mike and Ingrid, for sure. Mike is his best friend.”

“Oh, but I love Ingrid.”

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“Well, you’ll get to keep Martha and Hector—and Susan, too. Daria is borderline; she likes my sister but hates cheaters—”

“Oh, please, stop.” I cover my face with my hands. “See?” I mumble between my fingers. “Exactly my point. There are going to be factions, people taking sides. It’s not just my romantic life that’s ruined, but everything else, too. And there’s two of them and one of me. In the end, it’ll be easier to keep calling them and leave me out, and I’ll end up the single loser with no friends.”

“Hey, what about me?” Winter protests. “I’m right here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, thanks for coming.” I squeeze her knee. “But it’s a coincidence you’re in LA. You’re gone most of the time.”

“Fair enough. No other friends or colleagues you can lean on outside our group?”

“Not really. I meet up with a few of the younger professors for lunch and coffee sometimes, but they’re all married with kids.”

“So your life is screwed.”

“Appears so.”

“But you’re not heartbroken.”

I take a moment to reflect before answering. My feelings for Johnathan haven’t been wild in a long time. And I’m definitely more scared of the turmoil this breakup will bring into my life than losing Johnathan per se...

“No,” I say. “My heart is bruised but intact.”

“Good.” Winter’s face opens up in a bright smile. “Let’s focus on the positives for now.”

I crack a grin. “So, should I tell you about the handsome stranger who rescued me from the Peninsula’s closet?”

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Camilla Isley is an engineer turned writer after she quit her job to follow her husband on an adventure abroad.

She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please. She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious.

A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them.

You can find out more about her here: camillaisley.com and by following her on Twitter or Facebook.

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