

PART 1: Boston, July-August 1987

Chapter 1

The breeze off the waterfront raised goose bumps on Sarah's arms. She rubbed them to keep warm, wishing she'd brought a sweater to cover her slip of a dress. Couple after sparkling couple disappeared inside the restaurant, some giving her an occasional backward glance but then leaving her alone on the sidewalk, teetering on her heels. Their laughter taunted her, as did the aroma of lobster and melted butter.

She squinted down the pier. Nothing resembling Jay or his car was anywhere within visual range. Glancing at her watch again only proved he was ten minutes later than the last time she'd checked, when he'd only been twenty minutes late. The pay phone across the street had already eaten two of her quarters, gifting her nothing in return but two fruitless stabs at his answering machine.

Her stomach growled, poking at her for trusting him to show up and for starving herself all day in anticipation of the fancy dinner he'd promised. *I should have known*, she thought, shaking her head. This was supposed to have been a celebration. He'd been clean for six weeks and wanted to thank her for sticking by him. Again. But getting a "something came up, meet me there" message had never been the start of anything good. It was often the start of another binge and another morning-after when she would be called in to do damage control, armed with orange juice, aspirin, and a fifth of something from the package store across the street. She gave him another ten minutes, made her flustered excuses to the maître d', who had already given away their table, and took off toward South Station with just enough quarters in her purse for the trip home.

The T ride back to Sarah's apartment near Boston College felt like the longest of her life. Into the hamper went the slinky new dress she had no business buying on her joke of a salary. She tossed on an oversized T-shirt and jeans with a rip in the knee. While she settled into her roommate's sofa with a bowl of leftover spaghetti, she managed to convince herself that lobster was overrated.

Then, she called Emerson.

“Why do I keep cleaning up other people’s messes?”

His electric typewriter, the same Smith Corona Super Sterling he’d been using since college, hummed in the background. Sarah felt a twinge of guilt for disturbing his writing. He always made time for her; she knew that and tried not to take advantage, but sometimes—

“For the same reason I do,” he said. “It makes you feel useful.”

She missed Emerson: the way he spoke, how carefully he chose his words. Even when they were words she didn’t want to hear. “I don’t feel useful. I just feel used. He stood me up tonight. Again. It was totally humiliating.”

“So...stop seeing him.”

“I tried that,” she bit at her lower lip, “a few times...”

Emerson let out his breath. It was an old, wounded sound, clearly discernible over the purr of the typewriter. His voice took on a serious tone, deeper than usual. “Sarah—”

“I know,” she sighed. “You’re tired of this conversation. I’m tired of it, too. I’m sorry, Em. But...I think I need to have it one more time.”

The humming stopped. She hadn’t visited him for a couple of years—another thing to feel guilty about. How easy it would be to pack a bag, take the bus to Syracuse, and let him adore her until she got her confidence back. But she knew the cost of his adoration and how much easier it was to bear from a distance.

She pictured Emerson leaning his long, unmuscled body back against his chair. He’d push a lank curtain of dishwater-blond hair off his forehead and his little, round glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. The corners of his mouth would set into that heartbreaking perpetual downward turn—to match his eyes, his brow, his shoulders—as if his very genetics were trying to drag him into the earth, piece by piece.

His voice then came out lighter. “All right.”

“What were you working on?”

“You don’t want to talk about Jay anymore?”

“No. It’s too depressing. Tell me what you’re writing about.”

Pause. “You really want to know?”

“Sure.”

Another pause. “Spray cheese.”

Sarah laughed for the first time that day. “Not something for the *New Yorker*?”

“Not exactly.”

To supplement his paycheck, Emerson wrote “personal experience stories” for men’s magazines. His forte was using food products in ways Shop-Rite never intended. He’d started back in college. The money was easy, and it was all kind of a goof to begin with, but Sarah preferred not to think about why, at twenty-nine, he still wrote for men who read with one hand.

To further distract herself, she asked, “What happened with the short story you were writing about your brother?”

At first, he said nothing. She imagined him pulling off his glasses, rubbing at his eyes. “It’s a melodramatic pile of crap,” he finally said. “Every time I read it, I keep thinking how much better it would be in the hands of a real writer.”

“You *are* a real writer, Em.”

His laugh sounded bitter around the edges. “Don’t humor me. I’m a hack. I push a mop at an old age home and get paid by the word to write fake letters so men with no imaginations can get off.”

“But only until something else pans out,” she added quickly, a running joke she’d added quickly many times.

“Right,” he said, drawing out the word. “I’m just biding my time until the Nobel Committee finally notices my literary accomplishments. Or my skill with a mop-wringer. Whichever comes first.”

Chapter 2

Emerson lived off of Westcott Street in Syracuse, about a mile from the university, in the same sagging, two-story wood-frame house he'd been hunkered down in since the summer before his sophomore year. The faces had changed as students—mostly foreign, mostly male—had come and gone, leaving their strange cooking smells, colognes, and Emerson behind. He felt like a fixture with kitchen privileges, a monument to cheap rent and inertia. Mainly though, he felt like a student who was supposed to have passed through as well but got stuck somewhere along the way.

After speaking with Sarah, Emerson felt more stuck than ever, marooned back in the days when even thinking about her with another man was enough to twist his insides into knots.

This latest joker really fried his bacon. Not because he was yet another name on Sarah's dance card of abysmal boyfriends, but because he was talented, handsome, and built like some kind of Greek god, by Sarah's description. Worse, she seemed to be in love with him. Why else would she keep taking the stupid cokehead back?

He stared at the piece of paper in his typewriter. Globes of aerosol cheese on naked female haunches had lost their appeal. He should give it up for the night and go to bed with a good book. A good book never disappointed him. Heroes triumphed in the end, and the bad guys got what was coming to them. Unlike real life, when the bad guys won and the good guys got royally fucked.

There was a tap on his bedroom door, a sort of polite scratching sound. Only one of his housemates knocked like that.

"Come on in, Rashid." Emerson put away what he'd been writing. "I'm done here."

The younger man sidestepped in, wearing striped pajamas that looked recently ironed. A graduate student from India, he was one of the residents who hadn't yet left Emerson behind. They made an odd pair. Rashid was a good six inches shorter than Emerson—about the same height as Sarah. And Emerson, though not as lean as he'd been in college, looked underfed next to his friend and housemate, a recent and

enthusiastic convert to American culinary delights like all-you-can-eat buffets and french fries with everything.

“You are not getting bad news from Sarah, I hope?”

Emerson shrugged. “Just the usual.”

Rashid nodded and stroked his anemic attempt at a mustache while gazing at the photo of Sarah that Emerson kept taped to the wall behind his typewriter. “The boyfriend?”

“Yeah. The boyfriend.”

Emerson could choke on the word. He was looking at her picture, too. She’d sent it to him. There had been a male attached—not Jay but one of the many. Emerson had snipped him out. He liked the photo of her too much to sacrifice it because the jerk of the moment happened to have an arm around her shoulders. It was taken at some sort of artists’ charity event. What he liked best about the photo was that despite the sophisticated dress hugging her curves, despite the long, brown hair moussed and sprayed into a careful imitation of postcoital disarray, it caught Sarah in the act of being Sarah: spontaneous and unpretentious, unposed and unpoised.

Puppyish eagerness seeped through cracks in Rashid’s reserve. “She will be coming to visit?”

“Seen any flying pigs lately?”

His housemate looked confused. A diplomat’s son, Rashid had learned English from a variety of British teachers in a variety of countries. American idioms still troubled him.

“No,” Emerson sighed. “I don’t think she’ll be coming to visit. At least not any time soon.”

“I should like to meet her one day, after all you have told me.”

“And I should like to meet your fiancée one day,” Emerson said.

Rashid’s smile faded. “Yes. Someday I should like to meet my fiancée as well.”

Chapter 3

Jay wasn't answering the phone or the door buzzer, although she knew he was home and alive: his car sat in front of his apartment building and changed parking spots every day or so, which she couldn't imagine had happened of its own accord. So the only avenue Sarah had to elicit any kind of reaction to his no-show on the waterfront was his answering machine. She left what she considered angry messages. They were ineffective. She then opted for a softer approach—by that time, she really was worried about him. When this didn't work, she tried silence. Perhaps a few days of guilt stew would provoke some contrition.

It was nearly a week before she saw or heard from him again.

Her birthday fell during that week. Everyone else remembered. Emerson sent red roses with his usual mushy card—a tradition he kept up since she'd graduated from the university and moved to Boston, eight years ago. For the first five years, Sarah had a counter-tradition of her own. She'd have a short panic attack in the back room of the Copy King, followed by a serious case of the creeps for the rest of the afternoon, interspersed with calls to her roommate to debate the symbolism of red roses. Later, over a beer or two and a lot of convoluted rationalization, she'd convince herself that perhaps she'd read too much into a bunch of stupid flowers and a heartfelt birthday greeting from her old-lover-now-platonic friend.

Then she'd call to scold him for having spent too much on her.

"I had a good month," he'd say.

Somehow, July always happened to be a good month.

That year, she was secretly glad he'd spent the money. She felt vindicated to have a trophy, proof that some man besides her father or her boss cared enough to remember.

So she'd skipped the panic attack—although she had called Emerson later to scold him; after all, it was tradition—and arranged her flowers in an old plastic wash bottle the pressman had found in the back room. She'd set it to the left of her workstation, the side closest to the counter, in case Jay came in.

But that had been days ago. The wash bottle had been replaced by a crystal vase, donated out of pity by her boss's wife and already chipped by Sarah's T-square. The blossoms drooped. An occasional petal floated down onto her drafting table, but she'd be damned if she'd throw the roses away before Jay had an eyeful of what another man thought she was worth. Even if they crumbled to dust and potpourri, she'd keep the stems.

Luckily, it didn't have to go that far.

Jay made his entrance the following Friday around noon, a tall drink of rock star in a T-shirt and tight black jeans. Sarah was on the floor of the Copy King's small lobby, up to her elbows in the guts of the Jurassic self-service copier. She was clearing yet another paper jam for a sweet older lady who had been attempting to copy her receipts by inserting them *en masse* into the hand-feed tray, even though Sarah had explained to her several times that this was not in the best interest of the copier.

She recognized Jay first by his red canvas high-tops, his long, slim legs, and the swagger in his walk. Despite a stern talking-to, a tiny part of her brain danced, inebriated on lady hormones upon his very presence.

"I'll be with you in a minute," she told him, forcing a deliberate frostiness into her voice. She shredded a piece of paper out of the roller and slapped the front cover closed.

"I'm not paying for those." The woman clucked at the ragged bits in Sarah's hands and on the floor surrounding the copier.

"Of course not, ma'am, but you did make ten copies before that, and the sign says—"

Jay whipped a twenty out of his wallet and flashed Sarah's customer a set of enviable caps. He'd paid the dentist in cash. "I'll take care of that for you, gorgeous."

The woman was predictably flummoxed. "Now, isn't that nice. See dear, some people know how to be polite."

The door chime tinkled, and she minced down Beacon Street, an unmistakable wiggle in her hips.

"I *was* being polite," Sarah told her retreating form.

"You could be nicer to people." Jay shrugged his broad shoulders and smiled as she crossed to the cash register. The teeth were an improvement on his parents' DNA and a lifetime of bad habits, but

in some areas, he had been naturally blessed, most notably with thick black hair and dark blue eyes to commit a felony for. Regardless of what parts of him were natural and which had been a public works project, the fact that he looked so damned good and knew it did little to improve Sarah's mood.

She plucked the bill out of Jay's fingers and rang in the ten copies, plus the five that had jammed, the three that had come out too light, a couple more because she was mad, another because the air conditioner barely worked, and another because he hadn't as much as looked at her roses.

Jay blinked at his empty hand. "I didn't think you'd actually take it."

With a huff, she handed him his change. He counted it before stuffing it into his wallet. Emerson wouldn't have counted.

Jay rocked on his heels, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and lifted his eyebrows. "So...wanna come over for lunch?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. He had to be kidding. It would take a lot more than a surf across his waterbed to make things right this time. "You'd better be talking about food."

He blinked back puppy eyes that seemed to reach over the counter and touch every inch of her, all at once. She had to look away. "Baby, I fucked up."

No kidding. She glared at the floor, remembering the stiff ocean breeze on her bare arms, the indignity of having been stood up, the anger and fear that pulsed through her as she'd pumped quarters into the pay phone. Then almost a week of silence! "You could have called."

"I know." He sighed. "I should have. Look, baby, I'm trying. Really. I want to stop. I do. But it's so hard. I need you to help me."

She was caught by his verisimilitude of sincerity. He did it when he was on stage too. Sometimes he'd look her way, and it felt like they were the only ones in the room.

"How," she found herself saying.

"There's a place near Springfield, they have a program." He leaned in close, elbows on the counter. She smelled the tobacco on his breath—tobacco and peppermint Life Savers. "I got a gig near there tonight. Come with me. We can stay over somewhere, and tomorrow morning you can check me in."

She stared, her mouth going slack. This was the first time he'd brought it up on his own. She didn't think about the promise she'd made to Jimmy to work late that night and over the weekend. She didn't think.

"It'll take three weeks." He stroked her cheek with an index finger. He kept his nails long because of the way he played his guitar and he scratched her, ever so slightly. "But, baby, I'm doing it for us."

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It was quarter to one in a bar outside Springfield. Jay's band futzed around with cables and sound checks, lobbing private jokes at each other while they prepped for their last set. The crowd had thinned but the smoke hadn't. Feeling the effects of the free beers her seemingly contrite boyfriend kept sending to her table, she went to the ladies' room—a misnomer because there was no evidence of a lady in recent occupancy. *How do women miss the seat?* Sarah chose the least hideous of the three stalls. She leaned her head against the graffiti-hatched partition and fought sleep. It was late, she'd had too much to drink, and she was already fried from working twelve hours straight.

"Don't be too late now," her boss had said, when, at seven thirty, he finally dragged his butt home to his wife and four kids. Sarah had stayed until eight to finish pasting up a church flyer and designing a menu for the deli down the block before racing home to pack and meet Jay. How she loved watching him on stage, the slow, sexy way he fingered his guitar. Never in her life had she been jealous of a block of wood. She couldn't wait to get to the hotel, take a hot shower, sink into a clean bed and maybe, if she was lucky, have Jay to herself for a little while. After leaving him at rehab the next morning, she wouldn't see him for three weeks.

The anticipation of sex dragged her up. She fixed her hair and makeup in the cracked, smoke-fogged mirror. She swiped on some extra lipstick and went out to watch Jay do what he did best.

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The house lights came up. Although it was after last call, Jay plopped two Bass Ales on Sarah's table, swung a chair around and sat