

LOVE WAS  
CLOSER THAN  
THEY KNEW.

# *The* NEIGHBOR FAVOR

A NOVEL



KRISTINA FOREST

"Warm, witty, and deeply romantic."—Rachel Lynn Solomon,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Weather Girl*

## PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF KRISTINA FOREST



“A bighearted story about being brave enough to go for what you want, even when the rules tell you something different.”

—*The New York Times*

“Pleasant, with a swoon-worthy ending straight out of the movies.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This book is the perfect weekend read. If you love soft books about young black romance, genuine feelings, and a few stolen kisses and moments, then this is the book for you. There are few authors that I wholeheartedly support everything they write, but Kristina Forest is now definitely one of them.”

—Melanin Library

“Kristina Forest is such a ray of light . . . crafting such adorable stories that just are the book equivalent of a warm hug. The romance at the center of the book is just amazing as it has great chemistry and flirty, witty banter flying throughout.”

—The Nerd Daily

“If you’re looking for a heartfelt story that will leave your heart bursting at the seams by the end and is packed with adventure, then *Now That I’ve Found You* is the book for you.”

—The Reading Chemist

The  
Neighbor  
Favor

Kristina Forest

**BERKLEY ROMANCE**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*For my literary work wife, Alison*



# PROLOGUE

LILY GREENE ALWAYS IMAGINED THAT IF SHE WERE TO HAVE THE tragic misfortune of dying young, it would happen in a valiant, honorable way. Similar to the heroes in her beloved fantasy novels. Maybe she'd die while rescuing a child (or cat) from a burning building. Or darting into the street to save an elderly person from being hit by a speeding truck.

She didn't imagine that at twenty-five years old her final moments would be spent drenched in sweat, dehydrated out of her mind, on a crowded New York City subway train without AC during rush hour on one of the hottest days of the year. Because this was an event that she might not survive.

Lily gripped the subway pole and tried her best to avoid touching the five other hands that were wrapped around the pole as well. With her free hand, she dug through her tote bag and pulled out her empty water canister, as if liquid would magically appear inside. Usually, she was smart about filling it before she left the office, but today, her boss, Edith, vice president and publisher of Edith Pearson Books at the esteemed Mitchell & Milton Inc., had been in a particularly terrible mood after mistakenly falling for an email phishing scam, which meant IT had taken hold of Edith's computer and she couldn't sit in her own office, which meant she'd stood over Lily's shoulder in Lily's tiny cubicle, repeatedly proclaiming that she was an "innocent victim" of a "malicious scammer." All the while, Lily wondered if when someone emailed you, claiming to be the long-lost grandson of John F. Kennedy, and said person then claimed you

could read a draft of their memoir for publishing consideration by clicking an unsecure, highly suspicious link, could you really blame anyone but yourself for clicking said link and therefore unleashing a virus onto your computer?

Either way, for the rest of the afternoon, Lily suffered through Edith's complaining and micromanaging. She survived by drinking one too many cups of coffee, zero cups of water, and inhaling half a sleeve of crackers at her desk once Edith stepped away for lunch. Now Lily was hungry, dehydrated and very close to melting into a puddle right there on the downtown B train, which suddenly came to a halt. The conductor made a garbled announcement no one could understand, and a chorus of groans rang throughout the train. A man who'd already taken the liberty of removing his shirt banged on the subway doors as if the conductor could hear him. "Jesus fucking Christ, fix the AC! We're dying in here!"

A few others began to shout and complain, growing angrier as the train remained motionless. Lily grimaced. Nothing good ever happened when a bunch of people were pissed, hot and immobile. At least they'd stopped on the Manhattan Bridge, so she had cell service.

"What the fuck?" someone yelled. "Why is it so hot?"

"Global warming," a woman standing beside Lily grumbled. She was short and blonde, with flushed cheeks and a sweaty forehead. Lily could only imagine how *she* looked herself. It was only May, but this spring season was already giving unbearably hot summer vibes. Lily glanced down at her sleeveless white button-up, which now had sweat stains under her armpits. Her brown skin was dewy, but not in the cute-makeup-influencer way, and the flyaway curls that had escaped her bun were sticking to the back of her neck. Gross. She felt so horribly gross.

And nauseous? Her balance began to slip, and she clutched the pole tighter, attempting to keep the nausea and light-headedness at bay. She'd fainted a few times as a kid when heat and stress created

a menacing combination, and she couldn't afford to faint today. Not when she had to rush home and feed her cat and be back in Manhattan in a matter of hours because she was meeting her older sisters, Violet and Iris, for dinner in the Meatpacking District. Violet, ever the celebrity stylist social butterfly, recently heard about a new French fusion restaurant they just *had* to try. Lily hated going to trendy spots in the city because she always felt hilariously underdressed, but Iris, a worker bee, was actually pulling herself away from the office to join them, so Lily had no excuse to miss it.

Just then, Lily's phone vibrated in her bag. It was Violet calling. Lily answered, keeping her voice low. She didn't want to be one of those people who broadcasted her entire conversation to everyone on the train.

"Lily," Violet said, her voice its usual mix of pep and confidence. "There's been a change of plans."

"What do you mean?"

"Iris can't come. She has a work thing. Big surprise. Can you—hold on." Lily listened as Violet pulled the phone away from her ear and murmured to someone in her background. Violet might have been at a photo shoot or on the set of a music video with one of her clients. Her life moved at lightning speed and Lily could never keep up. "Hey, I'm back. Sorry. No one ever *listens* to me during these things. I put her in a pair of bright pink satin Versace platform pumps and what does the photographer say? 'Put her in black.' She looks best in bright colors! Why is that so hard for everyone to understand?"

"Who are we talking about?" Lily asked, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "Just so we're on the same page."

"Karamel Kitty. I told you about her before. She's the rapper I'm working with now."

"Oh, right," Lily said, vaguely remembering. "Isn't she the one who exposed that politician who sent her dick pics?"

“What? Oh yeah, that was last year. Anyway, I want you to meet me at this bar in the Village instead of going to the restaurant. I’ll send you the address.”

Lily almost said okay but she hesitated. She felt a catch coming on. “Will it just be the two of us?”

“Um,” Violet mumbled. “No.”

Lily sighed. “Who else will be there, Vi?”

“Nobody really . . . just my new friend Damien,” she said quickly. “He’s the assistant photographer at the photo shoot today, and I started talking about you and I showed him your picture and he said you were beautiful, which you *are*—”

“Nope.”

“But he’s so cute and sweet, and he really wants to meet you! For real, you’re not even going to give him a chance?”

Lily groaned. Her sisters were always trying to play matchmaker. Why couldn’t they just accept that Lily was terrible at dating and leave her alone in awkward peace?

“Violet, I’ve had the worst day. Really. I can’t deal with meeting someone new. I don’t have the energy.”

“I’ll buy you dinner too.”

Lily paused at that. On her salary, she didn’t often pass up free meals.

“*Fine*,” she finally said. “But don’t be disappointed when Damien and I don’t hit it off.”

“Okay, Negative Nancy. I’ll send you the address. See you in a bit. Love you!”

“Love you too,” Lily said, but Violet had already hung up.

Lily let out a full-body sigh and pulled her phone away from her ear, grimacing at the sweat left behind on the screen. In all the time that she’d spent on the phone with Violet, the train still hadn’t moved. How was that possible?

“Are you all right?”

Lily glanced up and the blonde girl was staring at her, sporting a concerned frown.

"You're swaying," she said. "You look like you're about to faint."

Lily noticed the people around them turn in her direction.

"I'm fine," she insisted, even though she was beginning to see spots everywhere she looked. Maybe the conversation with Violet, and agreeing to another blind date, had stressed her out more than she thought. *Why won't this freaking train move?* She forced a smile. "Thank you, though."

She'd be off this train soon. She just needed to distract herself in the meantime. Planting her feet, she dug in her bag and pulled out her copy of *The Elves of Ceradon*, her favorite fantasy novel. She'd discovered it two years ago while working at a bookstore, struggling to find a full-time job in any field that was willing to hire people with an English degree. She'd never read a book about a clan of Black elves before, a story that made it completely normal for Black people to exist in high fantasy. Lily realized then that she wanted to help bring more fantasy like this into the world, but for kids. So began her long journey to break into publishing. Currently, she was working with Edith on slightly depressing adult nonfiction, but soon she hoped she'd make the switch to children's books. And in her heart, she felt as though she had *The Elves of Ceradon* to thank for that inspiration.

The author, N.R. Strickland, was a mystery, though. The copy Lily discovered at the bookstore had been torn and tattered, published years ago by a now-defunct British press. N.R. Strickland's bio was sparse, saying that he was born and raised in London and that *The Elves of Ceradon* was his first novel. He didn't have a website or any social media. The plain, dark red book jacket didn't even have an author photo. In today's day and age, it was odd but a little admirable that he'd decided to forgo anything public-facing.

Lily carried the novel with her for moments like right now when she was stuck on a train and needed to kill time. She opened the

book and tried to focus on the words in front of her instead of the heat but found it difficult. The struggle to read was giving her a headache. In a moment of blissful relief, the train started to move, only to stop after what felt like a few feet. Someone opened a window and a bit of the hot air inside the train was exchanged for the hot air outside. Lily swallowed thickly and tried to concentrate but the words began to swim on the page. Okay, so reading wasn't going to help.

Instead, she pulled out her phone and googled N.R. Strickland on a whim, as she did occasionally, hoping to read news of a sequel, but ultimately expecting to find nothing. The search engine loaded and . . . wait, N.R. Strickland had a website now.

Shocked, Lily clicked on the link and his bare-bones website appeared. It didn't provide any information that she didn't already know from the bio on the back of his book. But what the website *did* have was a contact form. *Amazing*. Lily wiped the sweat from her forehead and grinned at her phone. Giddy and increasingly delirious, she typed out a message to N.R. Strickland, telling him just how much his book meant to her, how finding his story had changed the trajectory of her life.

Her heartbeat increased, and her palms grew clammy, but she chalked it up to her excitement. Even when her breaths turned shallow and black spots aggressively clouded her vision, she continued to type. It wasn't until her phone slipped out of her hand and the train seemed to tilt off-kilter that Lily realized she was falling. Fainting, to be more accurate.

"Oh my God!" the blonde shouted as Lily hit the floor, clutching her copy of *The Elves of Ceradon*.

Minutes later, after Lily came to, and kind strangers helped her up, and someone offered her a bottle of water, and a mom forced her to eat a pack of her child's fruit snacks, Lily was busy focusing on the fact that she'd just fainted. Her mind was so far from the email she'd

feverishly drafted, unaware that it had been sent prematurely and was already on its way through cyberspace for its intended recipient.



**OVER THREE THOUSAND** miles away in the city of Amsterdam, Nick Brown was trying his best not to embarrass himself and cry in a room full of people who'd been strangers to him only a month ago. But he couldn't help it. He was touched that they'd thrown him a goodbye party. And he felt slightly self-conscious to have so much attention on him.

"Remember us fondly, Nick," Jakob Davids said, raising his glass, his lips spread in a genuine smile. "We look forward to reading the article once it publishes. *Proost!*"

"*Proost!*" the rest of the Davids family shouted, clinking their glasses.

"*Proost!*" Nick said quietly, lifting his glass as well, although it was filled with only water.

Rubbing the back of his neck, feeling both grateful for the goodbye dinner but also that he wasn't worth the trouble, Nick looked around at the Davids family and tried to commit them to memory. He'd spent the last few weeks with them. They were an Afro-Dutch family who owned a Surinamese cuisine restaurant, and he'd been writing a piece about them and their business for his column with *World Traveler*. There was Jakob and his wife, Ada, who, at thirty, were only three years older than Nick, their young children, Jolijn and Christophe, and Jakob's mother, Ruth, who'd migrated from Suriname, South America, to Amsterdam in her early twenties. They lived in a small town house a few blocks away from Sarphatipark.

Nick's job made it so that he was constantly on the go. It was what he liked most about it. His life was a revolving door of faces and places. But something about the Davidses had latched on to

him. Maybe it was because they were a close-knit family who actually enjoyed spending time together, something Nick had always craved. He didn't want to leave the Davidses and wished he could soak in their togetherness for a little while longer. But he was off to Munich in the morning for his next assignment. He'd have to leave the Davidses behind.

And that was probably for the best anyway. The past few weeks had been nice. But almost *too* nice. It was making Nick anxious. He found that he was constantly waiting for the inevitable dropping of the other shoe.

"Thank you for all of this," Nick said to the Davidses. "I'm grateful that you allowed me into your home and your lives." He took a deep breath, fighting off the strong wave of surprising emotions. "I'm really going to miss you."

"We'll miss you too. You're basically family now!" Jakob barked out a laugh, unaware of the effect that his words had on Nick. He clapped his hand onto Christophe's shoulder. "Isn't he, son?"

Christophe grinned and nodded.

Nick felt a little twinge in his stomach, watching that small interaction between father and son. He shook it off and smiled at the Davidses, feeling slightly relieved when Ada began to play some music and beckoned Jakob to dance with her in the middle of the living room. Ruth, who was awake way past her normal bedtime, sat down on the couch and promptly fell asleep.

Then Christophe and Jolijn, the nine-year-old twins, suddenly appeared in front of Nick with a mischievous twinkle in their eyes.

"You won't forget us, will you?" Jolijn asked, raising an eyebrow. She was the taller of the two. She tugged on one of her thick braids. Nick noticed she did this whenever she felt especially inquisitive. "Promise you won't. Swear on your notebook."

Nick laughed. "Why my notebook?"

"Because you always carry it with you. It must be your favorite thing."



“And what will we do without your stories?” Christophe asked, hip-checking his sister out of the way to get Nick’s full attention. He was young, but he already had a booming voice like his father’s. “You never told us what happened to Deko the elf prince after he was bit by a life leech.”

Two weeks ago, when the twins had been antsy as their parents closed the restaurant, Nick had entertained them with a story he’d written years ago about an elf prince named Deko and his journey through a magical land called Ceradon.

“You’re right,” Nick said, nodding. “We never finished that story, did we? What do *you* think happened to Deko?”

Christophe frowned. “I think he’s gravely injured. Near death.”

“Not me,” Jolijn said. “I think Deko survived and then met a warrior elf queen, who is stronger and faster than him, and she becomes the ruler of the kingdom.”

“That’s stupid,” Christophe said, rolling his eyes. “Deko is obviously going to die and then be revived by a sorceress and with her help, he’ll seek vengeance on those who harmed him and his people!”

The twins began to argue, and Nick laughed. Quite honestly, they fascinated him. He’d been a lonely-ass only child, no one to bicker with.

“I’ll leave the ending up to your interpretation,” he said, finally intervening. “Whatever you want to happen to Deko is what happens.”

“You mean you don’t know the ending to your *own* story?” Jolijn asked, wide-eyed.

Nick shook his head. “Nope.”

“But you must know,” Christophe insisted, disappointed.

Nick wasn’t lying. He’d written that story in another life and had purposely ended Deko’s fate on a cliff-hanger, thinking he’d have the chance to continue Deko’s journey. But now, he had no intention of doing so. As far as he was concerned, the story belonged to N.R.

Strickland, the silly pen name he'd created. But he observed the twins' forlorn expressions. They didn't want to hear his sorry backstory. They wanted to know what happened to Deko. So Nick came up with a special ending, just for them.

"Okay, the truth is that Deko does die from the life leech bite," Nick said, and Jolijn gasped. "But then he's revived by a sorceress who's also a warrior queen, and she rules over the kingdom while Deko goes on a journey to kill the life leeches who murdered his clan."

"I knew it!" Christophe said, punching his fist in the air, and Jolijn grinned, satisfied.

"Okay, time for bed," Ada said, gathering the twins. "Say goodbye to Nick."

"Bye, Nick," they sang, hugging him. Nick felt himself get choked up again and wished he'd get a fucking grip on his emotions. He hugged the twins back, already missing them and their banter.

"I swear on my notebook I won't forget you," he said as they pulled away.

"Good." Jolijn nodded, very serious.

"You sure you don't want my sister's number?" Ada asked Nick, raising an eyebrow. "She's in Munich, and I'm sure she'd love to meet a handsome man like yourself."

"I heard that!" Jakob called from the kitchen, and Ada laughed.

"No, but thank you," Nick said, smiling. If Ada's sister was anything at all like Ada: kind and patient and caring, then it would be best if Nick stayed far away from her. Because he'd inevitably find a way to fuck things up.

"All right then," Ada said, giving Nick a hug. He waved goodbye to her and the twins as she ushered them upstairs.

It was almost one a.m., Amsterdam time. Nick's flight was in six hours. He at least needed to attempt to get some sleep. He stood and walked over to Jakob to say his last goodbye.

"Keep in touch," Jakob said earnestly.

Nick promised he would. But the reality was that he'd most likely never see or speak to Jakob or the rest of the Davidses again. That was just the way of things.

"Thanks for everything," Nick said, taking one final glance around the Davidses' house, already anticipating the loneliness that awaited him at his Airbnb. He flashed one last kind smile at Jakob and left.

It was drizzling when he stepped outside. He grabbed the bike he'd rented for the month and cautiously pedaled down the street. The night was still, peaceful. Just the sound of his churning tires and the rain softly hitting the ground. It was during moments like this that Nick quietly marveled over the fact that he was in a foreign country, far from North Carolina, a state he'd never thought he'd leave. Now look at him. Riding a bike through the streets of Amsterdam, leaving a goodbye party that had been thrown in his honor. *Him*. Someone who'd never even had so much as a birthday party. It had been such a good night, one of the best he'd had in a long time.

So of course right when Nick was on the brink of forming an optimistic outlook, the chain popped on his bike and he went skidding across the wet street, losing control. He crashed into a pole and tumbled off the bike, falling flat on his back. He stared up at the sky, heaving for air, wincing at the pain he felt all over his body. He took several moments to get his bearings, then he slowly stood, wincing. He wheeled his bike down the street, and right on cue, it began to pour in heavy sheets. Even in pain, all Nick could do was laugh. *Of course* this was how his last night in Amsterdam would end. Something had to bring him back down to earth and remind him that good things, be they feelings or experiences, didn't last very long in his life.

When he finally reached his Airbnb, he felt like he'd been run over by a wet truck. He stripped down to his underwear and examined his limbs. He couldn't see any bruises on his brown skin, but they'd surely appear in a few hours. Grimacing, he sat on the couch and reached for his laptop, expecting to see an email from his

boss, asking why he hadn't sent in his piece about the Davidses yet, and Nick would have to say, *Sorry, Thomas, I crashed my bike into a pole because 90 percent of the time, my life just sucks that way. Can I have an extension, please?*

But when Nick opened his email, he didn't see a message from Thomas. Instead, he had a notification that someone had contacted him through his website. Or rather, the website his best friend and newly self-appointed literary agent, Marcus, had created for him. Nick stared at the screen, perplexed. Had someone really discovered his website? Was there a person in the world who'd actually read his book? *Get the fuck out of here.* If anything, it was spam. Or someone had managed to find a copy of *The Elves of Ceradon*, read it, and hated it so much they felt the need to tell him so. No good could come from checking that email.

Nick pushed his laptop aside, wishing he had a frozen bag of vegetables to put on his aching knee. And he glanced at the laptop screen again. The subject of the person's email was "You have a website!" Would a person who hated his book sound so optimistic?

Nick frowned, undecided.

Ah, fuck it. He'd let curiosity get the best of him.

He opened the message and braced himself for hate mail. Instead, to his surprise, he read the first line and felt himself smile.

PART ONE

# THE EMAILS

# 1

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>  
**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>  
**DATE:** May 9, 6:21 pm  
**SUBJECT:** You have a website!

Dear Mr. Strickland,

Have you ever been stuck on a subway train without air-conditioning on a 92-degree weather day? If not, count yourself lucky, because that's what I'm experiencing right now and it's absolute torture.

Okay, now that I have that off my chest, I want it to be clear that I never do stuff like this. And by stuff, I mean cold emailing a stranger. Chances are you probably won't read this message, so my nerves might be for nothing. You did *just* create a website even though *The Elves of Ceradon* was published five years ago, so my assumption is that you don't spend too much time online, which isn't really a bad thing.

My name is Lily and I read your novel almost two years ago while working at a used bookstore. I'd never heard of your book and neither had my boss, so he told me to toss it. Mostly because this particular copy looked like a dog had chewed the bottom-right corner, which basically meant we couldn't sell it. But the thought of throwing books away feels like a crime, and I was curious, so I started reading on my lunch break. Then I kept reading throughout the rest of my shift, on the bus ride home, all through dinner, and I stayed up until 3am to finish. Reading your book made me remember why I loved reading so much growing up. At the time, I'd been out of college for a year and hadn't considered working

with books outside of being a bookseller, but I realized maybe I could edit books like yours, but for children. Once I had that goal, everything changed. I work in book publishing now—not in the role I want, necessarily, but it's a foot in the door. I think I have you and your book to thank, in a way. It got me through a tough and confusing time in my life.

Anyway, I won't bore you with the details of my previous existential crisis. (Again, not sure you'll even end up reading this.) I'm emailing you because I wanted to tell you that I loved your book. I thought Deko was one of the most interesting protagonists I've read in a long time. Do you plan to write a sequel? It ended on such a cliff-hanger with Deko, delirious and battle weary, finally reaching Ceradon but getting attacked by a life leech as soon as he touched the city gates! Did he survive? Did he die? I've been wondering this for two years.

I'm sure you're inundated with messages thanks to your new website and contact form, but I hope

**FROM:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>

**TO:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>

**DATE:** May 14, 10:42pm

**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Lily—

You hope what? Did you mean to leave that sentence unfinished?

Either way, thank you for your kind message. It was really nice and surprising to read. You're wrong in assuming that I'm inundated with emails. Yours is the first email I've ever received through my website, and to be honest, I thought you were someone sending me hate mail. You're probably the only person who ever visits the site, other than my agent, who made the site for me.

I'm glad that my book served as an inspiration for you and your career. That's probably the only way my book has ever inspired another person.

To answer your first question, no, I've never been stuck on a subway when it was 92 degrees outside. However, I did once find myself locked inside of a loo on a submarine in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Long story.

To answer your second question, no, I don't plan to write a sequel. I don't think of myself as an author anymore. More like a one-hit wonder, sans the hit. As far as I'm concerned, *The Elves of Ceradon* was written in another life, back when I was 22 and naive and thought I'd be the Black George R. R. Martin. Did Deko die lying there at the city gates? Did a Ceradonian elf come to his rescue? I don't know. I'll leave that up to your interpretation.

Wishing you luck in life.

~NRS

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>

**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>

**DATE:** May 15, 7:13am

**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Dear Mr. Strickland,

Oh my God. I had no idea I actually sent that email to you. I wrote it in a delirious, dehydrated state, right before I literally fainted. I was serious about that hot subway. Reading over my email, I can tell just how out of it I was. And I didn't even finish it! I'm *mortified*.

And shocked?? I can't believe that you actually read my email and that you *replied*. I was honestly starting to think that maybe you didn't exist. I'm the only person I know who has read your book. Whenever I mention it to people, they have no idea what I'm talking about, which is really disappointing, because they don't know what they're missing, and I love my copy too much to loan it out. I have no idea where I'd find another if someone didn't give it back. It looks like the book went out of print only a few months after publication.



I'm sorry to hear that you no longer think of yourself as an author. I didn't realize how young you were when you wrote *Elves*. That's so impressive. When I was 22, I was hiding from my roommates in our senior hall suite so that they wouldn't force me to go to parties.

Your reply came at just the right time. It's exactly the energy booster I need for my job interview later this afternoon. I'm taking it as a good omen. 😊

Sincerely,  
Lily G.

**FROM:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>  
**TO:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>  
**DATE:** June 12, 11:01pm  
**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Lily—

Apologies, I'm over a month late. So you're saying you emailed me when you weren't in a clear state of mind, literal seconds before you fainted. That's mad! I hope you were okay afterward. And I have to be honest, getting an email from you in the first place makes a lot more sense now. I guess someone would have to be a little delirious to go out of their way to email me.

I'm glad you love your copy of *Elves* so much that you wouldn't let anyone else borrow it. And yes, Labyrinth Press closed its doors the same year I signed my contract. They were able to print a few copies of *Elves* beforehand. It wasn't an ideal career start, but I've come to accept my path. Again, not an author anymore.

How did that interview go?  
~NRS

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>

**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>

**DATE:** June 13, 8:21am

**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Dear Mr. Strickland,

I wasn't expecting you to email back the first time, and I definitely wasn't expecting to hear from you *twice*. This just made my day.

The interview didn't go so well, unfortunately. I didn't make it past the first round, which kind of sucks because it was an assistant editor position with a well-known children's publisher.

I've gone on a handful of interviews within the past year, and I never make it very far in the process. For one, even though I know so much about children's books, that knowledge leaves my brain as soon as I sit down and I just start blabbering. The other issue is that most interviewers don't think I have enough experience, which isn't wrong. For two years, I've been an editorial assistant at an adult nonfiction imprint. I spend my days reading manuscripts about plagues and genocides and dictators, among other topics. Working on a book about the Satanic Panic doesn't clearly translate to working with children's authors who could be the next Rick Riordan. At least that's what I'm told during interviews.

Anyway, that's my life career-wise. You said you were on assignment. If you're not an author anymore, what do you do?

Sincerely,

Lily G.

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>

**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>

**DATE:** June 13, 8:26am

**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Dear Mr. Strickland,

Please let me apologize for my last email. It was so presumptuous. I'm sure you don't care to hear about my career problems. You don't even have to respond. In fact, I hope you don't, because it will save me a ton of embarrassment.

The email made me sound really ungrateful. I'm not, I swear. I have a job at one of the most well-known North American publishers. And I know how hard it is to break into publishing, especially if you're Black. I applied to hundreds of positions for a year and got nowhere, until a distant, loopy connection through my mom's church scored me an internship with my boss. Her assistant quit three weeks into my internship and she didn't want to be bothered with another interview process, so she hired me. I got this job through dumb luck and timing.

I am grateful. The work is important. It's just not the work I want to be doing, and reading that tough and depressing material every day is starting to get to me. Most days I don't leave the office until after 7pm. I go to sleep dreaming about epidemics and assassinations.

I'm only 25 and there's plenty of time for me to follow my dream to edit children's books. I know that. I just keep thinking that this would be easier to get through if my boss was at least a semidecent person.

Sincerely,  
Lily G.

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>  
**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>  
**DATE:** June 13, 8:27am  
**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Dear Mr. Strickland,  
SORRY. I apologized about oversharing and then overshared even more, because treating emails like taxicab confessionals is something I do now, apparently! It felt safe to share because you don't really know me, and it's not like we'll ever meet. Once I started writing, it was hard to stop.

I'm aware that I've made things incredibly awkward. I hope you've decided to stop checking your emails indefinitely, and my cringeworthy musings can be left unread in your inbox forever.

Sincerely,  
Lily

**FROM:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>

**TO:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>

**DATE:** July 15, 9:32pm

**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Lily—

Cringeworthy is the shitty short stories I used to submit during creative writing workshop. Your emails about your career aren't nearly as bad. You haven't made things awkward and you don't have to apologize. The subject matter you currently edit does sound bleak, though. I'd want to leave that job too.

Here's a story that will make you feel better. When I was at university, my literary agent (who wasn't my literary agent back then, just my flatmate), encouraged me to go to a novel-pitching conference. I'd been working on *Elves* for over a year in my creative writing courses, and my professors seemed to like what I was doing, so I scrounged together the conference attendance fee. I printed out copies of the first few chapters and pitched *Elves* to at least thirty editors, and no one was interested. I was told that adult fantasy wasn't selling, which I didn't think made sense because *Game of Thrones* was the biggest show on television. A few editors asked, "But the elves are *Black*?" It was an enormous waste of money. Right when I decided to leave, a man walked up to me and said he'd overheard my pitch. He was working at a small press that specifically published fantasy and science fiction. He said *Elves* sounded right up their alley. That's how I got my chance.

Eventually, this turned out to be a terrible decision because I signed a dodgy contract, and the book, along with my career, went nowhere, and then the publisher closed down by the end of the year and I never got paid my full advance. But I think you get my point. Sometimes it only takes one yes. Hopefully your yes doesn't leave you worse off like me.

About my current work, I've been writing for a travel magazine since I graduated. I often find myself having very in-depth conversations with people I don't know very well in different parts of the world, so I don't find it weird that you've shared bits of your life with me. I agree there's something cathartic about it, which I guess is why I keep responding to you now that I think about it. Other than my boss and agent, you're the only person who emails me consistently.

I'm currently on assignment in Iceland. Have you ever been? It's not as cold as I thought it would be. The name is misleading.

Attached is a picture of the waterfall Skógafoss. I read online that this is the most "stereotypical" waterfall in Iceland. Doesn't look all that stereotypical to me. I hope it cheers you up.

~NRS

P.S. You can stop calling me Mr. Strickland. It makes me sound elderly. I'm 27, only two years older than you.

**FROM:** Lily G. <lilyg@gmail.com>  
**TO:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>  
**DATE:** July 15, 10:59pm  
**SUBJECT:** Re: You have a website!

Dear [insert name],

If you don't want me to call you Mr. Strickland, what should I call you?

I'm relieved that oversharing my personal woes didn't scare you off. From my emails, you would think that I'm used to speaking so freely, but I'm really not talkative at all. In middle school, my classmates called me

the Mouse. Middle school was torture for a number of reasons, and I at least wish they would have come up with a more creative nickname.

I've never been to Iceland. I've actually never traveled outside of the US. It's so cool that you write for a travel magazine. I guess you're probably never in the same place for long periods of time. Do you have any favorite cities or countries?

The waterfall definitely does *not* look stereotypical to me. Thank you for sharing the picture. It did cheer me up. That interview was almost a month ago now, and I still get sad thinking about how much I wanted that job, but there will be others. I just have to keep trying.

Getting out of the city helps (I live in Brooklyn). I've spent most of today at my parents' house in New Jersey for their annual July 15th birthday barbecue (they have the same birthday). Other than Christmas, it's the one time of year that we're all together. My sister Violet is based in New York, but at any given time, she could be anywhere in the world. And my other sister Iris lives in the same neighborhood as my parents with her daughter, but she's always working, so I hardly see her. On July 15th, everyone is home and it's nice. Violet is a stylist, so she forces us to participate in fashion shows, and my dad and uncles sit on the patio and play Spades (a card game that I have no idea how to play). It's a good time.

And yikes. I'm sorry you signed a bad contract with Labyrinth Press. I'm sad you don't think of yourself as an author and don't plan to write a sequel to *Elves*, but I'm glad you're still writing in a way with the travel magazine.

Sincerely,  
Lily

P.S.—It's not a waterfall but attached is a picture of my niece's tiny feet in my sister's high heels during our "fashion show."

**FROM:** N.R. Strickland <nrs@nrstrickland.com>