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— Tarryn Fisher, *New York Times* bestselling author



Verity



COLLEEN
HOOVER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Verity

**COLLEEN
HOOVER**

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VERITY

Editing by [Murphy Rae](#)

Cover Design by [Murphy Rae](#)

Interior Formatting by Elaine York, [Allusion Graphics, LLC](#)

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This book is dedicated to the only person this book could possibly be
dedicated to.

Tarryn Fisher, thank you for accepting the darkness in people as much as
you accept their light.



I hear the crack of his skull before the spattering of blood reaches me.

I gasp and take a quick step back onto the sidewalk. One of my heels doesn't clear the curb, so I grip the pole of a *No Parking* sign to steady myself.

The man was in front of me a matter of seconds ago. We were standing in a crowd of people waiting for the crosswalk light to illuminate when he stepped into the street prematurely, resulting in a run-in with a truck. I lunged forward in an attempt to stop him—grasping at nothing as he went down. I closed my eyes before his head went under the tire, but I heard it pop like the cork of a champagne bottle.

He was in the wrong, looking casually down at his phone, probably a side effect of crossing the same street without incident many times before. *Death by routine.*

People gasp, but no one screams. The passenger of the offending vehicle jumps out of the truck and is immediately on his knees near the man's body. I back away from the scene as several people rush forward to help. I don't have to look at the man under the tire to know he didn't survive that. I only have to look down at my once-white shirt—at the blood now splattered across it—to know that a hearse would serve him better than an ambulance.

I spin around to move away from the accident—to find a place to take a breath—but the crosswalk sign now says *walk* and the thick crowd takes heed, making it impossible for me to swim upstream in this Manhattan river. Some don't even look up from their cell phones as they pass right by the accident. I stop trying to move, and wait for the crowd to thin. I glance back toward the accident, careful not to look directly at the man. The driver of the truck is now at the rear of the vehicle, wide-eyed, on a cell phone. Three, maybe four, people are assisting them. A few are led by their morbid curiosities, filming the gruesome scene with their phones.

If I were still living in Virginia, this would play out in a completely different manner. Everyone around would stop. Panic would ensue, people would be screaming, a news crew would be on scene in a matter of minutes. But here in Manhattan, a pedestrian struck by a vehicle happens so often, it's not much more than an inconvenience. A delay in traffic for some, *a ruined wardrobe for others*. This probably happens so often, it won't even end up in print.

As much as the indifference in some of the people here disturbs me, it's exactly why I moved to this city ten years ago. People like me belong in overpopulated cities. The state of my life is irrelevant in a place this size. There are far more people here with stories much more pitiful than mine.

Here, I'm invisible. Unimportant. Manhattan is too crowded to give a shit about me, and I love her for it.

"Are you hurt?"

I look up at a man as he touches my arm and scans my shirt. Deep concern is embedded in his expression as he looks me up and down, assessing me for injuries. I can tell by his reaction that he isn't one of the more hardened New Yorkers. He might live here now, but wherever he's from, it's a place that didn't completely beat the empathy out of him.

"Are you hurt?" the stranger repeats, looking me in the eye this time.

"No. It's not my blood. I was standing near him when..." I stop speaking. *I just saw a man die*. I was so close to him, his blood is on me.

I moved to this city to be invisible, but I am certainly not impenetrable. It's something I've been working on—attempting to become as hardened as the concrete beneath my feet. It hasn't been working out so well. I can feel everything I just witnessed settling in my stomach.

I cover my mouth with my hand, but pull it away quickly when I feel something sticky on my lips. *More blood*. I look down at my shirt. So much blood, none of it mine. I pinch at my shirt and pull it away from my chest, but it sticks to my skin in spots where the blood splatters are beginning to dry.

I think I need water. I'm starting to feel light-headed, and I want to rub my forehead, pinch my nose, but I'm scared to touch myself. I look up at the man still gripping my arm.

"Is it on my face?" I ask him.

He presses his lips together and then darts his eyes away, scanning the street around us. He gestures toward a coffee shop a few doors down.

“They’ll have a bathroom,” he says, pressing his hand against the small of my back as he leads me in that direction.

I look across the street at the Pantem Press building I was headed to before the accident. I was so close. Fifteen—maybe twenty—feet away from a meeting I desperately need to be in.

I wonder how close the man who just died was from *his* destination?

The stranger holds the door open for me when we reach the coffee shop. A woman carrying a coffee in each hand attempts to squeeze past me through the doorway until she sees my shirt. She scurries backward to get away from me, allowing us both to enter the building. I move toward the women’s restroom, but the door is locked. The man pushes open the door to the men’s restroom and motions for me to follow him.

He doesn’t lock the door behind us as he walks to the sink and turns on the water. I look in the mirror, relieved to see it isn’t as bad as I’d feared. There are a few spatters of blood on my cheeks that are beginning to darken and dry, and a spray above my eyebrows. But luckily, the shirt took the brunt of it.

The man hands me wet paper towels, and I wipe at my face while he wets another handful. I can smell the blood now. The tanginess in the air sends my mind whirling back to when I was ten. The smell of blood was strong enough to remember it all these years later.

I attempt to hold my breath at the onset of more nausea. I don’t want to puke. But I want this shirt off me. *Now.*

I unbutton it with trembling fingers, then pull it off and place it under the faucet. I let the water do its job while I take the other wet napkins from the stranger and begin wiping the blood off my chest.

He heads for the door, but instead of giving me privacy while I stand here in my least attractive bra, he locks us inside the bathroom so no one will walk in on me while I’m shirtless. It’s disturbingly chivalrous and leaves me feeling uneasy. I’m tense as I watch him through the reflection in the mirror.

Someone knocks.

“Be right out,” he says.

I relax a little, comforted by the thought that someone outside this door would hear me scream if I needed to.

I focus on the blood until I’m certain I’ve washed it all off my neck and chest. I inspect my hair next, turning left to right in the mirror, but find only

an inch of dark roots above fading caramel.

“Here,” the man says, fingering the last button on his crisp white shirt. “Put this on.”

He’s already removed his suit jacket, which is now hanging from the doorknob. He frees himself of his button-up shirt, revealing a white undershirt beneath it. He’s muscular, taller than me. His shirt will swallow me. I can’t wear this into my meeting, but I have no other option. I take the shirt when he hands it to me. I grab a few more dry paper towels and pat at my skin, then pull it on and begin buttoning it. It looks ridiculous, but at least it wasn’t *my* skull that exploded on someone else’s shirt. *Silver lining.*

I take my wet shirt out of the sink and accept there’s no saving it. I toss it in the trashcan, and then I grip the sink and stare at my reflection. Two tired, empty eyes stare back at me. The horror of what they’ve just witnessed have darkened the hazel to a murky brown. I rub my cheeks with the heels of my hands to inspire color, to no avail. I look like death.

I lean against the wall, turning away from the mirror. The man is wadding up his tie. He shoves it in the pocket of his suit and assesses me for a moment. “I can’t tell if you’re calm or in a state of shock.”

I’m not in shock, but I don’t know that I’m calm, either. “I’m not sure,” I admit. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says. “I’ve seen worse, unfortunately.”

I tilt my head as I attempt to dissect the layers of his cryptic reply. He breaks eye contact, and it only makes me stare even harder, wondering what he’s seen that tops a man’s head being crushed beneath a truck. Maybe he *is* a native New Yorker. Or maybe he works in a hospital. He has an air of competence that often accompanies people who are in charge of other people.

“Are you a doctor?”

He shakes his head. “I’m in real estate. Used to be, anyway.” He steps forward and reaches for my shoulder, brushing something away from my shirt. *His* shirt. When he drops his arm, he regards my face for a moment before taking a step back.

His eyes match the tie he just shoved in his pocket. *Chartreuse.* He’s handsome, but there’s something about him that makes me think he wishes he weren’t. Almost as if his looks might be an inconvenience to him. A part of him he doesn’t want anyone to notice. He wants to be invisible in this city. *Just like me.*

Most people come to New York to be discovered. The rest of us come here to hide.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Lowen.”

There’s a pause in him after I say my name, but it only lasts a couple seconds.

“Jeremy,” he says. He moves to the sink and runs the water again, and begins washing his hands. I continue to stare at him, unable to mute my curiosity. What did he mean when he said he’s seen worse than the accident we just witnessed? He said he used to be in real estate, but even the worst day on the job as a realtor wouldn’t fill someone with the kind of gloom that’s filling this man.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

He looks at me in the mirror. “What do you mean?”

“You said you’ve seen worse. What have you seen?”

He turns off the water and dries his hands, then faces me. “You actually want to know?”

I nod.

He tosses the paper towel into the trashcan and then shoves his hands in his pockets. His demeanor takes an even more sullen dive. He’s looking me in the eye, but there’s a disconnect between him and this moment. “I pulled my eight-year-old daughter’s body out of a lake five months ago.”

I suck in a rush of air and bring my hand to the base of my throat. *It wasn’t gloom at all in his expression. It was despair.* “I’m so sorry,” I whisper. And I am. Sorry about his daughter. Sorry for being curious.

“What about you?” he asks. He leans against the counter like this is a conversation he’s ready for. A conversation he’s been waiting for. Someone to come along and make his tragedies seem less tragic. It’s what you do when you’ve experienced the worst of the worst. You seek out people like you...people worse off than you...and you use them to make yourself feel better about the terrible things that have happened to you.

I swallow before I speak, because my tragedies are nothing compared to his. I think of the most recent one, embarrassed to speak it out loud because it seems so insignificant compared to his. “My mother died last week.”

He doesn’t react to my tragedy like I reacted to his. He doesn’t react at all, and I wonder if it’s because he was hoping mine was worse. It isn’t. *He wins.*

“How did she die?”

“Cancer. I’ve been caring for her in my apartment for the past year.” He’s the first person I’ve said that to out loud. I can feel my pulse throbbing in my wrist, so I clasp my other hand around it. “Today is the first time I’ve stepped outside in weeks.”

We stare at each other for a moment longer. I want to say something else, but I’ve never been involved in such a heavy conversation with a complete stranger before. I kind of want it to end, because where does the conversation even go from here?

It doesn’t. It just stops.

He faces the mirror again and looks at himself, pushing a strand of loose dark hair back in place. “I have a meeting I need to get to. You sure you’ll be okay?” He’s looking at my reflection in the mirror now.

“Yes. I’m alright.”

“*Alright?*” He turns, repeating the word like a question, as if being *alright* isn’t as reassuring to him as if I’d said I would be *okay*.

“I’ll be alright,” I repeat. “Thank you for the help.”

I want him to smile, but it doesn’t fit the moment. I’m curious what his smile would look like. Instead, he shrugs a little and says, “Alright, then.” He moves to unlock the door. He holds it open for me, but I don’t exit right away. Instead, I continue to watch him, not quite ready to face the world outside. I appreciate his kindness and want to say more, to thank him in some way, maybe over coffee or by returning his shirt to him. I find myself drawn to his altruism—a rarity these days. But it’s the flash of wedding ring on his left hand that propels me forward, out of the bathroom and coffee shop, onto the streets now buzzing with an even larger crowd.

An ambulance has arrived and is blocking traffic in both directions. I walk back toward the scene, wondering if I should give a statement. I wait near a cop who is jotting down other eyewitness accounts. They aren’t any different from mine, but I give them my statement and contact information. I’m not sure how much help my statement is since I didn’t actually see him get hit. I was merely close enough to hear it. Close enough to be painted like a Jackson Pollock canvas.

I look behind me and watch as Jeremy exits the coffee shop with a fresh coffee in his hand. He crosses the street, focused on wherever it is he’s going. His mind is somewhere else now, far away from me, probably on his wife and what he’ll say to her when he goes home missing a shirt.

I pull my phone out of my purse and look at the time. I still have fifteen minutes before my meeting with Corey and the editor from Pantem Press. My hands are shaking even worse now that the stranger is no longer here to distract me from my thoughts. Coffee may help. Morphine would *definitely* help, but hospice removed it all from my apartment last week when they came to retrieve their equipment after my mother passed. It's a shame I was too shaken to remember to hide it. I could really use some right about now.



When Corey texted me last night to let me know about the meeting today, it was the first time I'd heard from him in months. I was sitting at my computer desk, staring down at an ant as it crawled across my big toe.

The ant was alone, fluttering left and right, up and down, searching for food or friends. He seemed confused by his solitude. Or maybe he was excited for his newfound freedom. I couldn't help but wonder why he was alone. Ants usually travel with an army.

The fact that I was curious about the ant's current situation was a clear sign I needed to leave my apartment. I was worried that, after being cooped up caring for my mother for so long, once I stepped out into the hallway I would be just as confused as that ant. Left, right, inside, outside, *where are my friends, where is the food?*

The ant crawled off my toe and onto the hardwood floor. He disappeared beneath the wall when Corey's texts came through.

I was hoping when I drew a line in the sand months ago, he'd understand: since we no longer have sex, the most appropriate method of contact between a literary agent and his author is email.

His text read: *Meet me tomorrow morning at nine at the Pantem Press building, floor 14. I think we might have an offer.*

He didn't even ask about my mom in the text. I wasn't surprised. His lack of interest in anything other than his job and himself are the reasons we're no longer together. His lack of concern made me feel unjustly irritated. He doesn't owe me anything, but he could have at least acted like he cared.

I didn't text him back at all last night. Instead, I set down my phone and stared at the crack at the base of my wall—the one the ant had disappeared into. I wondered if he would find other ants in the wall, or if he was a loner. Maybe he was like me and had an aversion to other ants.

It's hard to say why I have such a deeply crippling aversion to other humans, but if I had to wager a bet, I'd say it's a direct result of my own mother being terrified of me.

Terrified may be a strong word. But she certainly didn't trust me as a child. She kept me fairly secluded from people outside of school because she was afraid of what I might be capable of during my many sleepwalking episodes. That paranoia bled into my adulthood, and by then, I was set in my ways. A loner. Very few friends and not much of a social life. Which is why this is the first morning I've left my apartment since weeks before she passed away.

I figured my first trip outside of my apartment would be somewhere I missed, like Central Park or a bookstore.

I certainly didn't think I'd find myself here, standing in line in the lobby of a publishing house, desperately praying whatever this offer is will catch me up on my rent and I won't be evicted. But here I am, one meeting away from either being homeless or receiving a job offer that will give me the means to look for a new apartment.

I look down and smooth out the white shirt Jeremy lent me in the bathroom across the street. I'm hoping I don't look too ridiculous. Maybe there's a chance I can pull it off, as if wearing men's shirts twice my size is some cool new fashion statement.

"Nice shirt," someone behind me says.

I turn at the sound of Jeremy's voice, shocked to see him.

Is he following me?

It's my turn in line, so I hand the security guard my driver's license and then look at Jeremy, taking in the new shirt he's wearing. "Do you keep spare shirts in your back pocket?" It hasn't been that long since he gave me the one off his back.

"My hotel is a block away. Walked back to change."

His hotel. That's promising. If he's staying in a hotel, maybe he doesn't work here. And if he doesn't work here, maybe he isn't in the publishing industry. I'm not sure why I don't want him to be in the publishing industry. I just have no idea who my meeting is with, and I'm hoping it has nothing to do with him after the morning we've already had. "Does that mean you don't work in this building?"

He pulls out his identification and hands it to the security guard. "No, I don't work here. I have a meeting on the fourteenth floor."

Of course he does.

“So do I,” I say.

A fleeting smile appears on his mouth and disappears just as quickly, as if he remembered what happened across the street and realized it’s still too soon to not be affected. “What are the chances we’re heading to the same meeting?” He takes his identification back from the guard who points us in the direction of the elevators.

“I wouldn’t know,” I say. “I haven’t been told exactly why I’m here yet.” We walk onto the elevator, and he presses the button for the fourteenth floor. He faces me as he pulls his tie out of his pocket and begins to put it on.

I can’t stop staring at his wedding ring.

“Are you a writer?” he asks.

I nod. “Are you?”

“No. My wife is.” He pulls at his tie until it’s secured in place. “Have you written anything I would know?”

“I doubt it. No one reads my books.”

His lips turn up. “There aren’t many Lowens in the world. I’m sure I can figure out which books you’ve written.”

Why? Does he actually want to read them? He looks down at his phone and begins to type.

“I never said I write under my real name.”

He doesn’t look up from his phone until the elevator doors open. He moves toward them, turning in the doorway to face me. He holds up his phone and smiles. “You don’t write under a pen name. You write under Lowen Ashleigh, which, funny enough, is the name of the author I’m meeting at nine thirty.”

I finally get that smile, and as gorgeous as it is, I don’t want it anymore.

He just Googled me. And even though my meeting is at nine, not nine thirty, he seems to know more about it than I do. If we really are headed to the same meeting, it makes our chance meeting on the street seem somewhat suspicious. But I guess the odds of us both being in the same place at the same time aren’t all that inconceivable, considering we were headed in the same direction to the same meeting, and therefore, witnessed the same accident.

Jeremy steps aside, and I exit the elevator. I open my mouth, preparing to speak, but he takes a few steps, walking backward. “See you in a few.”

I don't know him at all, nor do I know how he relates to the meeting I'm about to have, but even without being privy to any details of what's happening this morning, I can't help but like the guy. The man literally gave me the shirt off his back, so I doubt he has a vindictive nature.

I smile before he rounds the corner. "Alright. See you in a few."

He returns the smile. "Alright."

I watch him until he makes a left and disappears. As soon as I'm out of his line of sight, I'm able to relax a little. This morning has just been...a lot. Between the accident I witnessed and being in enclosed spaces with that confusing man, I'm feeling so strange. I press my palm against the wall and lean into it. What the hell—

"You're on time," Corey says. His voice startles me. I spin around, and he's walking up to me from the opposite hallway. He leans in and kisses me on the cheek. I stiffen.

"You're never on time."

"I would have been here sooner, but..." I shut up. I don't explain what prevented me from being early. He seems disinterested as he heads in the same direction as Jeremy.

"The actual meeting isn't until nine thirty, but I figured you'd be late, so I told you nine."

I pause, staring at the back of his head. *What the hell, Corey?* If he'd told me nine thirty rather than nine, I wouldn't have witnessed the accident across the street. I wouldn't have been subjected to a stranger's blood.

"You coming?" Corey asks, pausing to look back at me.

I bury my irritation. I'm used to doing that when it comes to him.

We make it to an empty conference room. Corey closes the door behind us, and I take a seat at the conference table. He sits next to me at the head of the table, positioning himself so that he's staring at me. I try not to frown as I take in the sight of him after our months-long hiatus, but he hasn't changed. Still very clean, groomed, wearing a tie, glasses, a smile. Always such a stark contrast to myself.

"You look terrible." I say it because he doesn't look terrible. He never does, and he knows it.

"You look refreshed and ravishing." He says it because I never look refreshed and ravishing. I always look tired, and maybe even perpetually bored. I've heard of Resting Bitch Face, but I relate more to Resting *Bored* Face.

“How’s your mother?”

“She died last week.”

He wasn’t expecting that. He leans back in his chair and tilts his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Why haven’t you bothered asking until now? I shrug. “I’m still processing.”

My mother had been living with me for the past nine months—since she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. She passed away last Wednesday after three months on hospice. It was difficult to leave the apartment in those last few months because she relied on me for everything—from drinking, to eating, to turning her over in her bed. When she took a turn for the worse, I wasn’t able to leave her alone at all, which is why I didn’t step foot outside of my apartment for weeks. Luckily, a Wi-Fi connection and a credit card make it easy to live life completely indoors in Manhattan. Anything and everything a person could possibly need can be delivered.

Funny how one of the most populated cities in the world can double as a paradise for agoraphobics.

“You okay?” Corey asks.

I mask my disquiet with a smile, even if his concern is only a formality. “I’m fine. It helps that it was expected.” I’m only saying what I think he wants to hear. I’m not sure how he’d react to the truth—that I’m relieved she’s gone. My mother only ever brought guilt into my life. Nothing less, nothing more. Just consistent guilt.

Corey heads for the counter lined with breakfast pastries, bottles of water, and a coffee carafe. “You hungry? Thirsty?”

“Water’s fine.”

He grabs two waters and hands one to me, then returns to his seat. “Do you need help with the will? I’m sure Edward can help.”

Edward is the lawyer at Corey’s literary agency. It’s a small agency, so a lot of the writers use Edward’s expertise in other areas. Sadly, I won’t be needing it. Corey tried to tell me when I signed the lease on my two-bedroom last year that I wouldn’t be able to afford it. But my mother insisted she die with dignity—in her own room. Not in a nursing home. Not in a hospital. Not in a hospital bed in the middle of my efficiency apartment. She wanted her own bedroom with her own things.

She promised what was left in her bank account after her death would help me catch up on all the time off I had to take from my writing career. For the past year, I've lived off what little advance I had left over from my last publishing contract. But it's all gone now, and apparently, so is my mother's money. It was one of the last things she confessed to me before she finally succumbed to the cancer. I would have cared for her regardless of her financial situation. She was my mother. But the fact that she felt she needed to lie to me in order for me to agree to take her in proves how disconnected we were from one another.

I take a sip of my water and then shake my head. "I don't really need a lawyer. All she left me was debt, but thanks for the offer."

Corey purses his lips. He knows my financial situation because, as my literary agent, he's the one who sends my royalty checks. Which is why he's looking at me with pity now. "You have a foreign royalty check coming soon," he says, as if I'm not aware of every penny coming in my direction for the next six months. *As if I haven't already spent it.*

"I know. I'll be fine." I don't want to talk about my financial issues with Corey. With anyone.

Corey shrugs a little, unconvinced. He looks down and straightens up his tie. "Hopefully this offer will be good for both of us," he says.

I'm relieved the subject is changing. "Why are we meeting in person with a publisher? You know I prefer to do things over email."

"They requested the meeting yesterday. Said they have a job they'd like to discuss with you, but they wouldn't give me any details over the phone."

"I thought you were working on getting another contract with my last publisher."

"Your books do okay, but not well enough to secure another contract without sacrificing some of your time. You have to agree to engage in social media, go on tour, build a fan base. Your sales alone aren't cutting it in the current market."

I was afraid of this. A contract renewal with my current publisher was all the financial hope I had left. The royalty checks from my previous books have dwindled along with my book sales. I've done very little writing this past year because of my commitment to my mother, so I have nothing to sell to a publisher.

"I have no idea what Pantem will offer, or if it's even something you'll be interested in," Corey says. "We have to sign a non-disclosure agreement

before they'll give us more details. The secrecy has me curious, though. I'm trying not to get my hopes up, but there are a lot of possibilities and I have a good feeling. We need this."

He says *we* because whatever the offer is, he gets fifteen percent if I accept. It's the agent-client standard. What *isn't* the agent-client standard would be the six months we spent in a relationship and the two years of sex that followed our breakup.

Our sexual relationship only lasted as long as it did because he wasn't serious about anyone else and neither was I. It was convenient until it wasn't. But the reason our *actual* relationship was so short-lived is because he was in love with another woman.

Never mind that the other woman in our relationship was also me.

It has to be confusing, falling in love with a writer's words before you meet the actual writer. Some people find it difficult to separate a character from the individual who created them. Corey, surprisingly, is one of those people, despite being a literary agent. He met and fell in love with the female protagonist of my first novel, *Open Ended*, before he ever spoke to me. He assumed my character's personality was a close reflection of my own, when in fact, I couldn't be more opposite from her.

Corey was the only agent to respond to my query, and even that response took months to receive. His email was only a few sentences long, but enough to breathe life back into my dying hope.

I read your manuscript, Open Ended, in a matter of hours. I believe in this book. If you're still looking for an agent, give me a call.

His email came on a Thursday morning. We were having an in-depth phone conversation about my manuscript two hours later. By Friday afternoon, we had met for coffee and signed a contract.

By Saturday night, we had fucked three times.

I'm sure our relationship broke a code of ethics somewhere, but I'm not sure that contributed to how short-lived it was. As soon as Corey figured out that I wasn't the person my character was based on, he realized we weren't compatible. I wasn't heroic. I wasn't simple. I was difficult. An emotionally challenging puzzle he wasn't up for solving.

Which was fine. I wasn't in the mood to be solved.

As difficult as it was being in a relationship with him, it is surprisingly easy being his client. It's why I chose not to switch agencies after our breakup, because he's been loyal and unbiased when it comes to my career.

"You look a little frazzled," Corey says, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Are you nervous?"

I nod, hoping he'll accept my behavior as nerves because I don't want to explain why I'm frazzled. It's been two hours since I left my apartment this morning, but it feels like more has happened in that two hours than in the entire rest of this year. I look down at my hands...my arms...searching for traces of blood. It's no longer there, but I can still feel it. *Smell* it.

My hands haven't stopped shaking, so I keep hiding them under the table. Now that I'm here, I realize I probably shouldn't have come. I can't pass up a potential contract, though. It's not like offers are pouring in, and if I don't secure something soon, I'll have to get a day job. If I get a day job, it'll barely leave me time to write. But at least I'll be able to pay my bills.

Corey pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes sweat from his forehead. He only sweats when he's nervous. The fact that he's nervous is now making me even more nervous. "Do we need a secret signal if you aren't interested in whatever the offer is?" he asks.

"Let's listen to what they have to say, and then we can request to speak in private."

Corey clicks his pen and straightens in his chair as though he's cocking a gun for battle. "Let me do the talking."

I planned to anyway. He's charismatic and charming. I'd be hard-pressed to find someone who could categorize me as either of those things. It's best if I just sit back and listen.

"What are you *wearing*?" Corey is staring down at my shirt, perplexed, just now noticing it despite having spent the last fifteen minutes with me.

I look down at my oversized shirt. For a moment, I forgot how ridiculous I look. "I spilled coffee on my other shirt this morning and had to change."

"Whose shirt is that?"

I shrug. "Probably yours. It was in my closet."

"You left your house in that? There wasn't something else you could have worn?"

"It doesn't look high fashion?" I'm being sarcastic, but he doesn't catch it.

He makes a face. “No. Is it supposed to?”

Such an ass. But he’s good in bed, like most assholes.

I’m actually relieved when the conference room door opens and a woman walks in. She’s followed, almost comically, by an older man walking so closely behind her, he bumps into the back of her when she stops.

“Goddammit, Barron,” I hear her mumble.

I almost smile at the idea of *Goddammit Barron* actually being his name.

Jeremy enters last. He gives me a small nod that goes unnoticed by everyone else.

The woman is dressed more appropriately than I am on my best day, with short black hair and lipstick so red, it’s a little jarring at nine thirty in the morning. She seems to be the one in charge as she reaches for Corey’s hand, and then mine, while Goddammit Barron looks on. “Amanda Thomas,” she says. “I’m an editor with Pantem Press. This is Barron Stephens, our lawyer, and Jeremy Crawford, our client.”

Jeremy and I shake hands, and he does a good job of pretending we didn’t share an extremely bizarre morning. He quietly takes the seat across from me. I try not to look at him, but it’s the only place my eyes seem to want to travel. I have no idea why I’m more curious about him than I am about this meeting.

Amanda pulls folders out of her briefcase and slides them in front of Corey and me.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” she says. “We don’t want to waste your time, so I’ll cut right to the chase. One of our authors is unable to fulfill a contract due to medical reasons, and we’re in search of a writer with experience in the same genre who may be interested in completing the three remaining books in her series.”

I glance at Jeremy, but his stoic expression doesn’t hint at his role in this meeting.

“Who is the author?” Corey asks.

“We’re happy to go over the details and terms with you, but we do ask that you sign the non-disclosure agreement. We would like to keep our author’s current situation out of the media.”

“Of course,” Corey says.

I acquiesce, but I say nothing as we both look over the forms and then sign them. Corey slides them back to Amanda.

“Her name is Verity Crawford,” she says. “I’m sure you’re familiar with her work.”

Corey stiffens as soon as they mention Verity’s name. *Of course* we’re familiar with her work. Everyone is. I hazard a glance in Jeremy’s direction. *Is Verity his wife?* They share a last name. He said downstairs that his wife is a writer. But why would he be in a meeting about her? A meeting she isn’t even here for?

“We’re familiar with the name,” Corey says, holding his cards close.

“Verity has a very successful series we would hate to see go unfinished,” Amanda continues. “Our goal is to bring in a writer who is willing to step in, finish the series, complete the book tours, press releases, and whatever else is normally required of Verity. We plan to put out a press release introducing the new co-writer while also preserving as much of Verity’s privacy as possible.”

Book tours? Press releases?

Corey is looking at me now. He knows I’m not okay with that aspect. A lot of authors excel in reader interaction, but I’m so awkward I’m afraid once my readers meet me in person, they’ll swear off my books forever. I’ve only done one signing, and I didn’t sleep for the week leading up to it. I was so scared during the signing that it was hard for me to speak. The next day, I received an email from a reader who said I was a stuck-up bitch to her and she’d never read my books again.

And that’s why I stay at home and write. I think the idea of me is better than the reality of me.

Corey says nothing as he opens the folder Amanda hands him. “What is Mrs. Crawford’s compensation for three novels?”

Goddammit Barron answers this question. “The terms of Verity’s contract will remain the same with her publisher and, understandably, won’t be disclosed. All royalties will go to Verity. But my client, Jeremy Crawford, is willing to offer a flat payment of seventy-five thousand per book.”

My stomach leaps at the mention of that kind of payout. But as quickly as the excitement lifts my spirits, they sink again when I accept the enormity of it all. Going from being a nobody writer to co-author of a

literary sensation is too much of a jump for me. I can already feel my anxiety sinking in just thinking about it.

Corey leans forward, folding his arms over the table in front of him. “I’m assuming the pay is negotiable.”

I try to catch Corey’s attention. I want to let him know that negotiations aren’t necessary. There’s no way I’m accepting an offer to finish a series of books that I’d feel too nervous to write.

Goddammit Barron straightens up in his chair. “With all due respect, Verity Crawford has spent the past thirteen years building her brand. A brand that wouldn’t exist otherwise. The offer is for three books. Seventy-five thousand per book, which comes to a total of two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Corey drops a pen on the table, leaning back in his chair, appearing to be unimpressed. “What’s the time frame for submission?”

“We’re already behind, so we’re looking to have the first book submitted six months from the contract signing date.”

I can’t stop staring at the red lipstick smeared across her teeth as she speaks.

“The timeline for the other two is up for discussion. Ideally, we would like to see the contract completed within the next twenty-four months.”

I can sense Corey doing the math in his head. It makes me wonder if he’s calculating to see what his cut would be or what *my* cut would be. Corey would get fifteen percent. That’s almost thirty-four thousand dollars, simply for representing me in this meeting as my agent. Half would go to taxes. That’s just under one hundred thousand that would end up in my bank account. Fifty grand per year.

It’s more than double the advance I’ve received for my past novels, but it’s not enough to convince me to attach myself to such a successful series. The conversation moves back and forth pointlessly, since I already know I’ll be declining. When Amanda pulls out the official contract, I clear my throat and speak up.

“I appreciate the offer,” I say. I look directly at Jeremy so he’ll know I’m being sincere. “Really, I do. But if your plan is to bring in someone to become the new face of the series, I’m sure there are other authors who would be a much better fit.”

Jeremy says nothing, but he is looking at me with a lot more curiosity than he was before I spoke up. I stand up, ready to leave. I’m disappointed

in the outcome, but even more disappointed that my first day outside of my apartment has been a complete disaster in so many ways. I'm ready to go home and take a shower.

"I'd like a moment with my client," Corey says, standing quickly.

Amanda nods, closing her briefcase as they both stand. "We'll step out," she says. "The terms are detailed in your folders. We have two other writers in mind if this doesn't seem like it would be a good fit for you, so try to let us know something by tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

Jeremy is the only one still seated at this point. He hasn't said a single word this entire time. Amanda leans forward to shake my hand. "If you have any questions, please reach out. I'm happy to help."

"Thank you," I say. Amanda and Goddammit Barron walk out, but Jeremy continues to stare at me. Corey looks back and forth between us, waiting for Jeremy to exit. Instead, Jeremy leans forward, focusing on me.

"Could we possibly have a word in private?" Jeremy asks me. He looks at Corey, but not for permission—it's more of a dismissal.

Corey stares back at Jeremy, caught off guard by his brazen request. I can tell by the way Corey slowly turns his head and narrows his eyes that he wants me to decline. He's all but saying, "*Can you believe this guy?*"

What he doesn't realize is that I'm craving to be alone in this room with Jeremy. I want them all out of this room, especially Corey, because I suddenly have so many more questions for Jeremy. About his wife, about why they reached out to me, about why she's no longer able to finish her own series.

"It's fine," I say to Corey.

The vein in his forehead protrudes as he attempts to hide his irritation. His jaw hardens, but he yields and eventually exits the conference room.

It's just Jeremy and me.

Again.

Counting the elevator, this is the third time we've been alone in a room together since we crossed paths this morning. But this is the first time I've felt this much nervous energy. I'm sure it's all mine. Jeremy somehow looks as calm as he did while he was helping me clean pieces of a pedestrian off of myself less than an hour ago.

Jeremy leans back in his chair, dragging his hands down his face. "Jesus," he mutters. "Are meetings with publishers always this stiff?"

I laugh quietly. "I wouldn't know. I usually do these things over email."

“I can see why.” He stands and grabs a bottle of water. Maybe it’s because I’m sitting now and he’s so tall, but I don’t remember feeling this small in his presence earlier. Knowing he’s married to Verity Crawford makes me feel intimidated by him even more than when I was standing in front of him in my skirt and bra.

He remains standing as he leans against the counter, crossing his legs at the ankles. “You okay? You didn’t really have much time to adjust to what happened across the street before walking into this.”

“Neither did you.”

“I’m alright.” *There’s that word again.* “I’m sure you have questions.”

“A ton,” I admit.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why can’t your wife finish the series?”

“She was in a car accident,” he says. His response is mechanical, as if he’s forcing himself to detach from any emotion right now.

“I’m sorry. I hadn’t heard.” I shift in my seat, not knowing what else to say.

“I wasn’t on board with the idea of someone else finishing out her contract at first. I had hope she would fully recover. But—” He pauses. “Here we are.”

His demeanor makes sense to me now. He seemed a little reserved and quiet, but now I realize all the quiet parts of him are just grief. Palpable grief. I’m not sure if it’s because of what happened to his wife, or what he told me in the bathroom earlier—that his daughter passed away several months ago. But this man is obviously out of his element here as he’s challenged with making decisions heavier than anything most people ever have to face. “I’m so sorry.”

He nods, but he offers nothing further. He returns to his seat, which makes me wonder if he thinks I’m still contemplating the offer. I don’t want to waste his time any more than I already have.

“I appreciate the offer, Jeremy, but honestly, it’s not something I’m comfortable with. I’m not good with publicity. I’m not even sure why your wife’s publisher reached out to me as an option in the first place.”

“Open Ended,” Jeremy says.

I stiffen when he mentions one of the books I’ve written.

“It was one of Verity’s favorite books.”

“Your wife read one of my books?”

“She said you were going to be the next big thing. I’m the one who gave her editor your name because Verity thinks your writing styles are similar. If anyone is going to take over Verity’s series, I want it to be someone whose work she respects.”

I shake my head. “Wow. I’m flattered, but...I can’t.”

Jeremy watches me silently, probably wondering why I’m not reacting as most writers would to this opportunity. He can’t figure me out. Normally, I would be proud of that. I don’t like being easily read, but it feels wrong in this situation. I feel like I should be more transparent, simply because he showed me courtesy this morning. I wouldn’t even know where to start, though.

Jeremy leans forward, his eyes swimming with curiosity. He stares at me a moment, then taps his fist on the table as he stands. I assume the meeting is over and start to stand as well, but Jeremy doesn’t walk toward the door. He walks toward a wall lined with framed awards, so I sink back into my chair. He stares at the awards, his back to me. It isn’t until he runs his fingers over one of them that I realize it’s one of his wife’s. He sighs and then faces me again.

“Have you ever heard of people referred to as *Chronics*?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“I think Verity might have made up the term. After our daughters died, she said we were *Chronics*. Prone to chronic tragedy. One terrible thing after another.”

I stare at him a moment, allowing his words to percolate. He said he’d lost a daughter earlier, but he’s using the term in plural form. “Daughters?”

He inhales a breath. Releases it with defeat. “Yeah. Twins. We lost Chastin six months before Harper passed. It’s been...” He isn’t detaching himself from his emotions as well as he was earlier. He runs a hand down his face and then returns to his chair. “Some families are lucky enough to never experience a single tragedy. But then there are those families that seem to have tragedies waiting on the back burner. What can go wrong, goes wrong. And then gets worse.”

I don’t know why he’s telling me this, but I don’t question it. I like hearing him speak, even if the words coming out of his mouth are dismal.

He’s twirling his water bottle in a circle on the table, staring down at it in thought. I’m getting the impression he didn’t request to be alone with me to change my mind. He just wanted to be alone. Maybe he couldn’t stand

another second of discussing his wife in that manner, and he wanted them all to leave. I find that comforting—that being alone with me in the room still feels like being alone to him.

Or maybe he always feels alone. Like our old next-door neighbor who, from what it sounds like, was definitely a Chronic.

“I grew up in Richmond,” I say. “Our next-door neighbor lost all three members of his family in less than two years. His son died in combat. His wife died six months later of cancer. Then his daughter died in a car wreck.”

Jeremy stops moving the water bottle and slides it a few inches away from him. “Where’s the man now?”

I stiffen. I wasn’t expecting that question.

The truth is, the man couldn’t take losing everyone that meant anything to him. He killed himself a few months after his daughter died, but to say that out loud to Jeremy, who is still grieving the deaths of his own daughters, would be cruel.

“He still lives in the same town. He remarried a few years later. Has a few stepkids and grandchildren.”

There’s something in Jeremy’s expression that makes me think he knows I’m lying, but he seems appreciative that I did.

“You’ll need to spend time in Verity’s office going through her things. She has years of notes and outlines—stuff I wouldn’t know how to make sense of.”

I shake my head. *Did he not hear anything I said?* “Jeremy, I told you, I can’t—”

“The lawyer is lowballing you. Tell your agent to ask for half a million. Tell them you’ll do it with no press, under a pen name, with an ironclad non-disclosure. That way, whatever it is you’re trying to hide can stay hidden.”

I want to tell him I’m not trying to hide anything other than my awkwardness, but before I can say anything, he’s moving toward the door.

“We live in Vermont,” he continues. “I’ll give you the address after you sign the contract. You’re welcome to stay for however long it takes to go through her office.”

He pauses with his hand on the door. I open my mouth to object again, but the only word that comes out is a very unsure “*Alright.*”

He stares at me a moment, as if he has more to say. Then he says, “Alright.”

He opens the door and walks out into the hallway where Corey is waiting. Corey slips past him, back into the conference room where he closes the door.

I look down at the table, confused by what just happened. Confused as to why I’m being offered such a substantial amount of money for a job I’m not even sure I can do. *Half a million dollars? And I can do it under a pen name with no tour or publicity commitment? What on earth did I say that led to that?*

“I don’t like him,” Corey says, plopping down in his seat. “What did he say to you?”

“He said they’re lowballing me and to ask for half a million with no publicity.”

I turn in time to watch Corey choke on air. He grabs my bottle of water and takes a drink. “Shit.”