

EMILY HENRY

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author of
PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION and BEACH READ



BOOK LOVERS

"A rom-com lover's dream of a book."
—TAYLOR JENKINS REID

Praise for
BOOK LOVERS

“*Book Lovers* is a rom-com lover’s dream of a book. It is razor sharp and modern, featuring a fierce heroine who does not apologize for her ambition and heartfelt discussions of grief. Readers know that Emily Henry never fails to deliver great banter and a romance to swoon over, but this may just be her best yet. A breath of fresh air.”

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“You KNOW I love a book—and a writer—when I bust out my trusty ballpoint and absolutely maul the pages . . . and that’s exactly what I just did to the divine Emily Henry. I could not devour *Book Lovers* fast enough. Emily Henry is pure delight. I’m utterly enchanted by her wry, self-aware sense of humor, the relish that she brings to every cleverly crafted sentence, and her irrepressible love for love.”

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PRAISE FOR #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR EMILY HENRY

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“What Henry is especially skilled at is writing dialogue. The banter between Poppy and Alex is so natural, quick, and witty that it would make Shonda Rhimes do a slow clap.”

—The Associated Press on *People We Meet on Vacation*

“That Henry can manage to both pack a fierce emotional wallop and spear literary posturing in one go is a testament to her immense skill.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“The perfect poolside companion.”

—*Real Simple* on *People We Meet on Vacation*

“The strength of *People We Meet on Vacation* [is] the clever observations, the dialogue (which is laugh-out-loud funny), and, most particularly, the characters. Funny and fumbling and lovable, they’re most decidedly worth the trip.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

TITLES BY EMILY HENRY



Book Lovers
People We Meet on Vacation
Beach Read

BOOK LOVERS



EMILY HENRY

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Noosha, this book isn't for you. I already know which one will be for you,
so you have to wait.

This book is for Amanda, Dache', Danielle, Jessica, Sareer, and Taylor. This
book would not exist without you. And if somehow it did, then no one
would be reading it. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

PROLOGUE



WHEN BOOKS ARE your life—or in my case, your job— you get pretty good at guessing where a story is going. The tropes, the archetypes, the common plot twists all start to organize themselves into a catalogue inside your brain, divided by category and genre.

The husband is the killer.

The nerd gets a makeover, and without her glasses, she's smoking hot.

The guy gets the girl—or the other girl does.

Someone explains a complicated scientific concept, and someone else says, "Um, in English, *please?*"

The details may change from book to book, but there's nothing truly new under the sun.

Take, for example, the small-town love story.

The kind where a cynical hotshot from New York or Los Angeles gets shipped off to Smalltown, USA—to, like, run a family-owned Christmas tree farm out of business to make room for a soulless corporation.

But while said City Person is in town, things don't go to plan. Because, *of course*, the Christmas tree farm—or bakery, or whatever the hero's been sent to destroy—is owned and operated by someone ridiculously attractive and suitably available for wooing.

Back in the city, the lead *has* a romantic partner. Someone ruthless who encourages him to do what he's set out to do and ruin some lives in exchange for that big promotion. He fields calls from her, during which she interrupts him, barking heartless advice from the seat of her Peloton bike.

You can tell she's evil because her hair is an unnatural blond, slicked back à la Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, and also, she hates Christmas decorations.

As the hero spends more time with the charming baker/seamstress/tree farm . . . *person*, things change for him. He learns the true meaning of life!

He returns home, *transformed* by the love of a good woman. There he asks his ice-queen girlfriend to take a walk with him. She gapes, says something like, *In these Manolos?*

It will be fun, he tells her. On the walk, he might ask her to look up at the stars.

She snaps, *You know I can't look up right now! I just got Botox!*

And then he realizes: he can't go back to his old life. He doesn't want to! He ends his cold, unsatisfying relationship and proposes to his new sweetheart. (Who needs dating?)

At this point, you find yourself screaming at the book, *You don't even know her! What's her middle name, bitch?* From across the room, your sister, Libby, hushes you, throws popcorn at your head without lifting her gaze from her own crinkly-covered library book.

And that's why I'm running late to this lunch meeting.

Because that's my life. The trope that governs my days. The archetype over which my details are superimposed.

I'm the city person. Not the one who meets the hot farmer. The *other* one.

The uptight, manicured literary agent, reading manuscripts from atop her Peloton while a serene beach scene screen saver drifts, unnoticed, across her computer screen.

I'm the one who gets dumped.

I've read this story, and lived it, enough to know it's happening again right now, as I'm weaving through late-afternoon foot traffic in Midtown, my phone clutched to my ear.

He hasn't said it yet, but the hairs on the back of my neck are rising, the pit opening in my stomach as he maneuvers the conversation toward a cartoon-style drop off a cliff.

Grant was only supposed to be in Texas for two weeks, just long enough to help close a deal between his company and the boutique hotel they were trying to acquire outside San Antonio. Having already experienced two post-work trip breakups, I reacted to the news of his trip as if he'd announced he'd joined the navy and was shipping out in the morning.

Libby tried to convince me I was overreacting, but I wasn't surprised when Grant missed our nightly phone call three times in a row, or when he cut two others short. I knew how this ended.

And then, three days ago, hours before his return flight, it happened.

A force majeure intervened to keep him in San Antonio longer than planned. His appendix burst.

Theoretically, I could've booked a flight right then, met him at the hospital. But I was in the middle of a huge sale and needed to be glued to my phone with stable Wi-Fi access. My client was counting on me. This was a life-changing chance for her. And besides, Grant pointed out that an appendectomy was a routine procedure. His exact words were "no big deal."

So I stayed, and deep down, I knew I was releasing Grant to the small-town-romance-novel gods to do with what they do best.

Now, three days later, as I'm practically sprinting to lunch in my Good Luck heels, my knuckles white against my phone, the reverberation of the nail in my relationship's coffin rattles through me in the form of Grant's voice.

"Say that again." I mean to say it as a question. It comes out as an order.

Grant sighs. "I'm not coming back, Nora. Things have changed for me this past week." He chuckles. "I've changed."

A thud goes through my cold, city-person heart. "Is she a baker?" I ask.

He's silent for a beat. "What?"

"Is she a *baker*?" I say, like that's a perfectly reasonable first question to ask when your boyfriend dumps you over the phone. "The woman you're leaving me for."

After a brief silence, he gives in: "She's the daughter of the couple who own the hotel. They've decided not to sell. I'm going to stay on, help them

run it.”

I can't help it: I laugh. That's always been my reaction to bad news. It's probably how I won the role of Evil Villainess in my own life, but what else am I supposed to do? Melt into a crying puddle on this packed sidewalk? What good would that do?

I stop outside the restaurant and gently knead at my eyes. “So, to be clear,” I say, “you're giving up your amazing job, your amazing apartment, *and me*, and you're moving to Texas. To be with someone whose career can best be described as *the daughter of the couple who own the hotel?*”

“There's more important things in life than money and a fancy career, Nora,” he spits.

I laugh again. “I can't tell if you think you're being serious.”

Grant is the son of a billionaire hotel mogul. “Raised with a silver spoon” doesn't even begin to cover it. He probably had gold-leaf toilet paper.

For Grant, college was a formality. Internships were a formality. Hell, wearing *pants* was a formality! He got his job through sheer nepotism.

Which is precisely what makes his last comment so rich, both figuratively and literally.

I must say this last part aloud, because he demands, “What's that supposed to mean?”

I peer through the window of the restaurant, then check the time on my phone. I'm late—I'm *never* late. Not the first impression I was aiming for.

“Grant, you're a thirty-four-year-old heir. For most of us, our jobs are tied directly to our ability to eat.”

“See?” he says. “This is the kind of worldview I'm done with. You can be so cold sometimes, Nora. Chastity and I want to—”

It's not intentional—I'm not trying to be cutting—when I cackle out her name. It's just that, when hilariously bad things happen, I leave my body. I watch them happen from outside myself and think, *Really? This is what the universe has chosen to do? A bit on the nose, isn't it?*

In this case, it's chosen to guide my boyfriend into the arms of a woman named after the ability to keep a hymen intact. I mean, it *is* funny.

He huffs on the other end of the line. “These people are good people, Nora. They’re salt of the earth. That’s the kind of person I want to be. Look, Nora, don’t act upset—”

“Who’s acting?”

“You’ve never needed me—”

“Of course I don’t!” I’ve worked hard to build a life that’s my own, that no one else could pull a plug on to send me swirling down a cosmic drain.

“You’ve never even stayed over at my place—” he says.

“My mattress is objectively better!” I researched it for nine and a half months before buying it. Of course, that’s also pretty much how I date, and still, I end up here.

“—so don’t pretend you’re heartbroken,” Grant says. “I’m not sure you’re even capable of *being* heartbroken.”

Again, I have to laugh.

Because on this, he’s wrong. It’s just that once you’ve had your heart *truly* shattered, a phone call like this is nothing. A heart-twinge, maybe a murmur. Certainly not a break.

Grant’s on a roll now: “I’ve never even seen you cry.”

You’re welcome, I consider saying. How many times had Mom told us, laughing through her tears, that her latest beau had told her she was too emotional?

That’s the thing about women. There’s no good way to be one. Wear your emotions on your sleeve and you’re hysterical. Keep them tucked away where your boyfriend doesn’t have to tend to them and you’re a heartless bitch.

“I’ve got to go, Grant,” I say.

“Of course you do,” he replies.

Apparently my following through with prior commitments is just more proof that I am a frigid, evil robot who sleeps in a bed of hundred-dollar bills and raw diamonds. (If only.)

I hang up without a goodbye and tuck myself beneath the restaurant’s awning. As I take a steadying breath, I wait to see if the tears will come. They don’t. They never do. I’m okay with that.

I have a job to do, and unlike Grant, I'm going to do it, for myself and everyone else at Nguyen Literary Agency.

I smooth my hair, square my shoulders, and head inside, the blast of air-conditioning scrubbing goose bumps over my arms.

It's late in the day for lunch, so the crowd is thin, and I spot Charlie Lastra near the back, dressed in all black like publishing's own metropolitan vampire.

We've never met in person, but I double-checked the *Publishers Weekly* announcement about his promotion to executive editor at Wharton House Books and committed his photograph to memory: the stern, dark brows; the light brown eyes; the slight crease in his chin beneath his full lips. He has the kind of dark mole on one cheek that, if he were a woman, would definitely be considered a beauty mark.

He can't be much past his midthirties, with the kind of face you might describe as boyish, if not for how tired he looks and the gray that thoroughly peppers his black hair.

Also, he's scowling. Or pouting. His mouth is pouting. His forehead is scowling. Powling.

He glances at his watch.

Not a good sign. Right before I left the office, my boss, Amy, warned me Charlie is famously testy, but I wasn't worried. I'm always punctual.

Except when I'm getting dumped over the phone. Then I'm six and a half minutes late, apparently.

"Hi!" I stick out my palm to shake his as I approach. "Nora Stephens. So nice to meet you in person, finally."

He stands, his chair scraping over the floor. His black clothes, dark features, and general demeanor have the approximate effect on the room of a black hole, sucking all the light out of it and swallowing it entirely.

Most people wear black as a form of lazy professionalism, but he makes it look like a capital-c Choice, the combination of his relaxed merino sweater, trousers, and brogues giving him the air of a celebrity caught on the street by a paparazzo. I catch myself calculating how many American dollars he's wearing. Libby calls it my "disturbing middle-class party trick,"

but really it's just that I love pretty things and often online window-shop to self-soothe after a stressful day.

I'd put Charlie's outfit at somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand. Right in the range of mine, frankly, though everything I'm wearing except my shoes was purchased secondhand.

He examines my outstretched palm for two long seconds before shaking it. "You're late." He sits without bothering to meet my gaze.

Is there anything worse than a man who thinks he's above the laws of the social contract just because he was born with a decent face and a fat wallet? Grant has burned through my daily tolerance for self-important asshats. Still, I have to play this game, for my authors' sakes.

"I know," I say, beaming apologetically but not actually apologizing. "Thank you for waiting for me. My train got stopped on the tracks. You know how it is."

His eyes lift to mine. They look darker now, so dark I'm not sure there are irises around those pupils. His expression says he does *not* know how it is, re: trains stopping on the tracks for reasons both grisly and mundane.

Probably, he doesn't take the subway.

Probably, he goes everywhere in a shiny black limo, or a Gothic carriage pulled by a team of Clydesdales.

I shuck off my blazer (herringbone, Isabel Marant) and take the seat across from him. "Have you ordered?"

"No," he says. Nothing else.

My hopes sink lower.

We'd scheduled this get-to-know-you lunch weeks ago. But last Friday, I'd sent him a new manuscript from one of my oldest clients, Dusty Fielding. Now I'm second-guessing whether I could subject one of my authors to this man.

I pick up my menu. "They have a goat cheese salad that's phenomenal."

Charlie closes his menu and regards me. "Before we go any further," he says, thick black brows furrowing, his voice low and innately hoarse, "I should just tell you, I found Fielding's new book unreadable."

My jaw drops. I'm not sure what to say. For one thing, I hadn't planned on bringing the book up. If Charlie wanted to reject it, he could've just done so in an email. And without using the word *unreadable*.

But even aside from that, any decent person would at least wait until there was some bread on the table before throwing out insults.

I close my own menu and fold my hands on the table. "I think it's her best yet."

Dusty's already published three others, each of them fantastic, though none sold well. Her last publisher wasn't willing to take another chance on her, so she's back in the water, looking for a new home for her next novel.

And okay, maybe it's not *my* favorite of hers, but it has immense commercial appeal. With the right editor, I know what this book can be.

Charlie sits back, the heavy, discerning quality of his gaze sending a prickling down my backbone. It feels like he's looking right through me, past the shiny politeness to the jagged edges underneath. His look says, *Wipe that frozen smile off your face. You're not that nice.*

He turns his water glass in place. "Her best is *The Glory of Small Things*," he says, like three seconds of eye contact was enough to read my innermost thoughts and he knows he's speaking for both of us.

Frankly, *Glory* was one of my favorite books in the last decade, but that doesn't make this one chopped liver.

I say, "This book is every bit as good. It's just different—less subdued, maybe, but that gives it a cinematic edge."

"Less subdued?" Charlie squints. At least the golden brown has seeped back into his eyes so I feel less like they're going to burn holes in me. "That's like saying Charles Manson was a lifestyle guru. It might be true, but it's hardly the point. This book feels like someone watched that Sarah McLachlan commercial for animal cruelty prevention and thought, *But what if all the puppies died on camera?*"

An irritable laugh lurches out of me. "Fine. It's not your cup of tea. But maybe it would be helpful," I fume, "if you told me what you *liked* about the book. Then I know what to send you in the future."

Liar, my brain says. *You're not sending him more books.*

Liar, Charlie's unsettling, owlish eyes say. *You're not sending me more books.*

This lunch—this potential working relationship—is dead in the water.

Charlie doesn't want to work with me, and I don't want to work with him, but I guess he hasn't entirely abandoned the social contract, because he considers my question.

"It's overly sentimental for my taste," he says eventually. "And the cast is caricatured—"

"*Quirky*," I disagree. "We could scale them back, but it's a large cast—their quirks help distinguish them."

"And the setting—"

"What's wrong with the setting?" The setting in *Once in a Lifetime* sells the whole book. "Sunshine Falls is charming."

Charlie scoffs, literally rolls his eyes. "It's completely unrealistic."

"It's a real place," I counter. Dusty had made the little mountain town sound so idyllic I'd actually googled it. Sunshine Falls, North Carolina, sits just a little ways outside Asheville.

Charlie shakes his head. He seems irritable. Well, that makes two of us.

I do not like him. If I'm the archetypical City Person, he is the Dour, Unappeasable Stick-in-the-Mud. He's the Growly Misanthrope, Oscar the Grouch, second-act Heathcliff, the worst parts of Mr. Knightley.

Which is a shame, because he's also got a reputation for having a magic touch. Several of my agent friends call him Midas. As in, "Everything he touches turns to gold." (Though admittedly, some others refer to him as the Storm Cloud. As in, "He makes it rain money, but at what cost?")

The point is, Charlie Lastra picks winners. And he isn't picking *Once in a Lifetime*. Determined to bolster my confidence, if not his, I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm telling you, no matter how contrived you found it, Sunshine Falls is real."

"It might exist," Charlie says, "but *I'm* telling you Dusty Fielding has never been there."

"Why does that matter?" I ask, no longer feigning politeness.

Charlie's mouth twitches in reaction to my outburst. "You wanted to know what I disliked about the book—"

"What you *liked*," I correct him.

"—and I disliked the setting."

The sting of anger races down my windpipe, rooting through my lungs. "So how about you just tell me what kind of books you *do* want, Mr. Lastra?"

He relaxes until he's leaned back, languid and sprawling like some jungle cat toying with its prey. He turns his water glass again. I'd thought it was a nervous tic, but maybe it's a low-grade torture tactic. I want to knock it off the table.

"I want," Charlie says, "*early* Fielding. *The Glory of Small Things*."

"That book didn't sell."

"Because her publisher didn't know how to sell it," Charlie says. "Wharton House could. I could."

My eyebrow arches, and I do my best to school it back into place.

Just then, the server approaches our table. "Can I get you anything while you're perusing the menu?" she asks sweetly.

"Goat cheese salad for me," Charlie says, without looking at either of us.

Probably he's looking forward to pronouncing my favorite salad in the city *inedible*.

"And for you, ma'am?" the server asks.

I stifle the shiver that runs down my spine whenever a twentysomething calls me *ma'am*. This must be how ghosts feel when people walk over their graves.

"I'll have that too," I say, and then, because this has been one hell of a day and there is no one here to impress—and because I'm trapped here for at least forty more minutes with a man I have no intention of *ever* working with—I say, "And a gin martini. Dirty."

Charlie's brow just barely lifts. It's three p.m. on a Thursday, not exactly happy hour, but given that publishing shuts down in the summer and most people take Fridays off, it's practically the weekend.