

New York Times Bestselling Author

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An illustration of a man and a woman standing in a field of flowers. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit and a red tie, with his arms crossed and looking to the right. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink dress and red boots, with her arms crossed and looking to the left. The background is a bright yellow field with stylized flowers in various colors (red, blue, white, pink) and a bright sun in the sky.

THE BODYGUARD

A Novel

*For my grandparents, Herman and Inez Detering
You left us many gifts to carry forward, and I am thankful for all of them—
most especially, these days: your hugs, your warmth and kindness, and all
my memories of a childhood spent scampering around your Texas ranch.
I miss you both—but in the best, most grateful way.*

One

MY MOTHER'S DYING wish was for me to take a vacation.

“Just do it, okay?” she’d said, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “Just book a trip and go. Like normal people do.”

I hadn’t taken a vacation in eight years.

But I’d said, “Okay,” the way you do when your sick mom asks for something. Then I’d added, as if we were negotiating, “I’ll take *one* vacation.”

Of course, I hadn’t realized it was her dying wish at the time. I thought we were just making middle-of-the-night hospital conversation.

But then, suddenly, it was the night after her funeral. I couldn’t sleep, and I kept thrashing around in my bed, and that moment kept coming back to me. The way she’d held my gaze and squeezed my hand to seal the deal—as if taking a vacation could be something that mattered.

Now it was three in the morning. My funeral clothes were draped over a chair. I’d been waiting to fall asleep since midnight.

“Fine. Fine,” I said, out loud in bed, to no one.

Then I belly-crawled across the covers to find my laptop on the floor, and, in the blue light of the screen, eyes half-closed, I did a quick search for “cheapest plane ticket to anywhere,” found a site that had a list of nonstop destinations for seventy-six dollars, scrolled like I was playing roulette, landed randomly on Toledo, Ohio—and clicked “purchase.”

Two tickets to Toledo. Nonrefundable, it would turn out. Some kind of Valentine’s Day lovebirds package.

Done.

Promise fulfilled.

The whole process took less than a minute.

Now all I had to do was force myself to go.

BUT I STILL couldn’t sleep.

At five in the morning, just as the sky was starting to lighten, I gave up, dragged all my sheets and blankets off the bed, shuffled to the walk-in closet, curled up on my side in a makeshift nest on the floor, and conked out, at last, in the windowless darkness.

When I woke, it was four in the afternoon.

I jumped up in a panic and stumbled around my room—buttoning my shirt wrong and kicking my shin on the footboard—as if I were late for work.

I wasn’t late for work, though.

My boss, Glenn, had told me not to come in. Had *forbidden* me to come in, actually. For a week.

“Don’t even think about coming to work,” he’d said. “Just stay home and grieve.”

Stay home? And grieve?

No way was I doing that.

Especially since—now that I’d bought these tickets to Toledo—I needed to find my boyfriend, Robby, and force him to come with me.

Right?

Nobody goes to Toledo alone. Especially not for Valentine’s Day.

It all seemed very urgent in the moment.

In another state of mind, I could have simply texted Robby to stop by after work and just pleasantly invited him to come with me. Over dinner and drinks. Like a sane person.

Maybe that would have been a better plan.

Or led to a better result.

But I wasn’t a sane person at the moment. I was a person who’d *slept in her closet*.

By the time I made it to the office that afternoon—just as the work day was ending—my hair was half-brushed, my shirt was half tucked in, and my funeral pantsuit still had a program with my mom’s high school graduation photo on the cover folded up in the jacket pocket.

I guess it’s weird to head in to work the day after your mom’s funeral.

I’d researched it, and the most common bereavement leave from work was three days—though Glenn was making me take five. Other things I’d researched as my sleepless night wore on: “how to sell your parents’ house,” “fun things to do in Toledo” (a surprisingly long list), and “how to beat insomnia.”

All to say: I wasn’t supposed to be here.

That’s why I hesitated at Glenn’s office door. And that’s how I wound up accidentally eavesdropping—and overhearing Robby and Glenn talking about me.

“Hannah’s going to shit an actual brick when you tell her” was the first thing I heard. Robby’s voice.

“Maybe I’ll make you tell her.” That was Glenn.

“Maybe you want to rethink it entirely.”

“There’s nothing to rethink.”

And that was enough. I pushed open the door. “What are you rethinking entirely? Who’s going to tell me what? Why exactly am I going to shit a brick?”

Later, I'd glimpse myself in the mirror and get a specific visual for what the two of them saw in that moment as they turned toward my voice—and let's just say it involved bloodshot eyes, half my shirt collar crumpled under my jacket lapel, and a significant amount of tear-smearred eye makeup left over from the day before.

Alarming. But Glenn wasn't easily alarmed. "What are you doing here?" he said. "Get out."

He also wasn't a coddler.

I staked my territory in the doorway with a power stance. "I need to talk to Robby."

"You can do that outside of work."

He wasn't wrong. We were practically living together. When we weren't working, that is. Which was most of the time.

But what was I supposed to do? Go stand in the parking lot?

"Five minutes," I bargained.

"Nope," Glenn said. "Go home."

"I need to get out of my house," I said. "I need something to do."

But Glenn didn't care. "Your mother just died," he said. "Go be with your family."

"She *was* my family," I said, careful to keep my voice steady.

"Exactly," Glenn said, like I'd made his point for him. "You need to grieve."

"I don't know how to do that," I said.

"Nobody does," Glenn said. "You want a manual?"

I gave him a look. "If you've got one."

"Your manual is: *Get out of here.*"

But I shook my head. "I know you think I need to"—I hesitated for a second, not exactly sure what he thought I needed to do—"sit around and think about my mom, or whatever.... But, honestly, I'm fine." Then I added, and this wasn't untrue: "We weren't even that close."

"You were close enough," Glenn said. "Scram."

"Just let me ... file things. Or something."

"No."

I wish I could say that Glenn—built like a tank with a bald head freckled like somebody had sprinkled them from a shaker—was one of those bosses who seemed gruff but really had your best interest at heart.

But Glenn mostly had Glenn's best interest at heart.

And Glenn had clearly decided I wasn't fit for work right now.

I got it.

It had been a strange time. I'd barely made it home from an

assignment in Dubai when I got a call from the ER that my mother had collapsed in a crosswalk.

Suddenly, I was arriving at the hospital to find that she couldn't stop throwing up, and she didn't know what year it was or who was president. Then getting a diagnosis from a doctor with lipstick on her teeth that my mom had end-stage cirrhosis—and trying to argue with the doctor, saying, “She doesn't drink anymore! She *does not* drink anymore!”

Then, that evening, going to her place to get her fuzzy socks and favorite throw blanket and finding her hidden stash of vodka. Frantically pouring every last bottle down the kitchen sink and running the faucet to wash away the smell, thinking all the while that my biggest challenge was going to be getting her to turn her life around.

Again.

Assuming there would be more time.

Like we all just always do.

But she was gone before I even fully realized that losing her was possible.

It was a lot. Even Glenn, who had the emotional intelligence of a jackhammer, understood that.

But the last thing I wanted to do was *stay home and think about it*.

I was going to talk him into letting me come back to work if it killed us both.

And then I was going to talk Robby into coming to Toledo.

And then maybe, just maybe, I could get some sleep.

In a power move that kind of dared either of them to stop me, I walked farther into the office and sat down in the empty chair across from Glenn's desk. “What are you talking about?” I asked, shifting the subject a little. “Are you having a meeting?”

“We're having a conversation,” Glenn said, like he knew I'd eavesdropped.

“You don't have conversations, boss,” I said. “You only have meetings.”

Robby, handsome as ever with black lashes edging his blue eyes, met my gaze like I'd made a good point.

I took a second to appreciate him. My mom had been so impressed the first time I introduced her. “He looks like an astronaut,” she'd said—and that was exactly right. He also had a buzz cut, drove a vintage Porsche, and was wildly overconfident. In the best, sexiest, most astronautish way. My mom was impressed with me for dating him. I was impressed with myself, to be honest.

Robby was not just the coolest person I'd ever dated—he was the coolest person I'd ever *met*.

But that wasn't the point. I turned back to Glenn. "What is it, exactly, that you're going to make Robby tell me?"

Glenn sighed, like *I guess we're doing this*. Then he said, "I was going to wait until you had"—he looked me over—"at least taken a shower ... but we're opening a branch in London."

I frowned.

"A branch in London?" I asked. "How is that bad news?"

But Glenn kept going. "And we're going to need somebody to—"

My hand flew up. "I'll take it! I've got it! I'm in!"

"—set up the office there and get it established," Glenn finished. "For two years."

Hello? London? Going to London with a huge project that would require so much workaholicism that nothing else would even matter for two whole years?

Screw the vacation. Sign me up.

Just the thought sent relief breaking over me like waves: *A life-obliterating work project like that could potentially distract me from all my problems forever.*

Yes, please.

But that's when I noticed Robby and Glenn looking at me funny.

"What?" I asked, glancing between them.

"It's going to be one of the two of you..." Glenn said then, gesturing between Robby and me.

Of course it was. I was the protégée Glenn had been grooming for years, and Robby was the sexy hotshot he'd stolen away from the competition. Who else would even be in the running?

I still didn't see the problem.

"And that means," Glenn went on, "that whoever doesn't go will need to stay here."

But that's how much I loved my job: Even the prospect of a two-year separation from my boyfriend didn't faze me. Like, at all.

That's also how desperate I was to get back to work.

"I'll announce the London decision after New Year's," Glenn said. "And until then, consider yourselves in competition for the spot."

There was no competition. I was getting that spot.

"It's fine," I said with a shrug, like *What?* "We've competed before." I nodded at Robby. "We like competing. And two years is not that long, no matter who wins. We can make that work, right?"

If I'd been paying better attention, I might have noticed that Robby was less eager about everything than I was. But I was a little too desperate in that moment to think about anyone but myself.

I was afraid to feel the full impact of losing my mother. I was terrified to get stuck at home with nothing to distract me. I was tunnel-visioned on escaping—preferably to a distant country—as soon as possible.

Next week, Robby and I were scheduled for a three-week assignment in Madrid together, but I wasn't even sure how I'd make it that long.

First, I had to survive my remaining bereavement days.

"From what I just eavesdropped," I said, gesturing back at the doorway, "I was expecting bad news."

"That wasn't the bad news," Robby said, glancing at Glenn.

I looked over at Glenn, too. "What's the bad news?"

Glenn refused to hesitate. "The bad news is I'm taking you off Madrid."

Looking back, me showing up at the office like that—all wild-eyed and bed-heady and desperate—probably wasn't helping. Maybe I should've seen it coming.

But I didn't.

"Off Madrid?" I asked, thinking I must have heard wrong.

Robby fixed his gaze at the window.

"Off Madrid," Glenn confirmed. Then he added, "You're not in the right headspace."

"But..." I didn't even know how to protest. How could I say, *That's the only thing I have to look forward to?*

Glenn shoved his hands into his pockets. Robby stared out the window.

Finally, I asked, "Who are you sending in my place?"

Glenn glanced at Robby. Then he said, "I'm sending Taylor."

"You're sending ... Taylor?"

Glenn nodded. "She's our next best thing," he said, like that should settle it.

It didn't.

"You're sending my best friend and my boyfriend away and leaving me alone for three weeks? Just *days* after my mother died?"

"I thought you said you weren't that close."

"I thought *you* said we were close enough."

"Look," Glenn said. "This is what they call a business decision."

But I shook my head. This wasn't going to work. "You can't just ground me and dismantle my entire support system. That's my trip. Those

are my clients.”

Glenn sighed. “You’ll go next time.”

“I want to go this time.”

Glenn shrugged. “I want to win the lottery. But it’s not going to happen.”

Glenn was the kind of guy who believed adversity only made you stronger.

I took a minute to breathe. Then I said, “If Taylor’s going on my trip, where am I going?”

“Nowhere,” Glenn said.

“*Nowhere?*”

He nodded. “You need to rest. Plus, everywhere’s full.” He scrolled through his laptop. “Jakarta’s taken. Colombia’s taken. Bahrain. Those oil execs in the Philippines. All taken.”

“But ... what am I supposed to do?”

Glenn shrugged. “Help out around the office?”

“I’m serious.”

But Glenn kept going. “Take up knitting? Start a succulent garden? Double down on personal growth?”

Nope, nope, nope.

But Glenn held fast. “You need some time off.”

“I hate time off. I don’t want time off.”

“It’s not about what you want. It’s about what you need.”

What was he—my therapist? “I need to work,” I said. “I do better when I’m working.”

“You can work here.”

But I also needed to escape.

Now I felt a flutter of panic in my throat. “Hey. You know me. You know I need to move. I can’t just sit here and—and ... and *marinate* in all my misery. I need to be in motion. I need to go somewhere. I’m like a shark, you know? I just always have to be moving. I need to get water through my gills.” My hands gestured at my ribcage, as if to show him where my gills were located. “If I stay here,” I finally said, “I’ll die.”

“Bullshit,” Glenn said. “Dying’s a lot harder than you think.”

Glenn hated it when people begged.

I begged anyway.

“Send me somewhere. Anywhere. I need to get out.”

“You can’t spend your entire life running away,” Glenn said.

“Yes, I can. I absolutely can.”

I could tell from his face we’d hit the wall. But I still had some fight

left in me.

“What about the thing in Burkina Faso?” I asked.

“I’m sending Doghouse.”

“I’ve got three years on Doghouse!”

“But he speaks French.”

“What about the wedding in Nigeria?”

“I’m sending Amadi.”

“He hasn’t even been here six months!”

“But his family’s from Nigeria. And he speaks—”

“Fine. Forget it.”

“—Yoruba and a little bit of Igbo.”

That was the crux of it. Glenn had a rep to protect. “I’ll send you,” he said like we were done here, “when it’s a good fit. I’ll send you when it’s best for the agency. I’ll never send you over somebody more qualified.”

I narrowed my eyes at Glenn in a way that just dared him to fight me. “There’s nobody more qualified than me,” I said.

Glenn looked me over, using his well-honed powers of observation like a weapon.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said at last. “But you buried your mother yesterday.”

I met his eyes.

He went on. “Your pulse is elevated, your eyes are bloodshot, and your makeup is smeared. Your speech is rapid, and your voice is hoarse. You haven’t brushed your hair, your hands are shaking, and you’re out of breath. You’re a mess. So go home, take a shower, eat some comfort food, grieve the death of your mom, and then figure out some goddamned hobbies—because I guarantee you this: You’re sure as hell not going anywhere until you get your shit together.”

I knew that tone in his voice.

I didn’t argue.

But how, exactly, was I supposed to get back to work if he wouldn’t let me get back to work?

Two

HAVE I EXPLAINED what I do for a living?

I usually try to put that off as long as possible. Because once you know—once I actually name the profession—you’ll make a long list of assumptions about me ... and all of them will be wrong.

But I guess there’s no more avoiding it.

My life doesn’t make much sense if you don’t know what my job is. So here goes: I am an Executive Protection Agent.

But nobody ever knows what that is.

Let’s just say I’m a bodyguard.

Lots of people get it wrong and call me a “security guard,” but to be clear: That’s not even remotely what I do.

I don’t sit in a golf cart in a supermarket parking lot.

What I do is elite. It takes years of training. It demands highly specialized skills. It’s tough to break into. And it’s a strange combination of glamorous (first-class travel, luxury hotels, off-the-charts wealthy people) and utterly mundane (spreadsheets, checklists, counting carpet squares in hotel hallways).

Mostly, we protect the very rich (and occasionally famous) from all the people who want to harm them. And we get paid really well to do it.

I know what you’re thinking.

You’re thinking I’m five-foot-five, and female, and nothing even close to brawny. You’re conjuring a stereotype of a bodyguard—maybe a club bouncer with skintight shirtsleeves squeezing his biceps—and you’re noting that I’m pretty much the opposite of that. You’re wondering how I could possibly be any good.

Let’s clear that up.

Steroid-inflated bruisers *are* one type of bodyguard: a bodyguard for people who want the whole world to know they have a bodyguard.

But the thing is, most people don’t.

Most clients who need executive protection don’t want anyone to know about it.

I’m not saying that the big guys don’t have value. They can have a deterrent effect. But they can also do the opposite.

It all depends on the type of threat, to be honest.

Most of the time, you’re safer if your protection goes unnoticed. And I am fantastic at going unnoticed. All women EP agents are, which is why we’re in high demand. No one ever suspects us.

Everyone always thinks we’re the nanny.

I do the kind of protection most people never even know is happening—even the client. And I'm the least lethal-looking person in the world. You'd think I was a kindergarten teacher before you'd ever suspect that I could kill you with a corkscrew.

I *could* kill you with a corkscrew, by the way.

Or a ballpoint pen. Or a dinner napkin.

But I'm not going to.

Because if things ever get to the point where I have to kill you, or anybody else, I haven't done my job. My job is to anticipate harm before it ever materializes—and avoid it.

If I have to stab you in the eye with a dinner fork, I've already failed.

And I don't fail.

Not in my professional life, at least.

All to say, my job is not about violence, it's about avoiding violence. It's much more about brains than brawn. It's about preparation, observation, and constant vigilance.

It's about predictions, and patterns, and reading the room before you're even in it.

It's not just something you do, it's something you are—and my destiny was most likely set in fourth grade, when I was first recruited as a carpool monitor and got a Day-Glo sash and a badge. (I still have that badge on my nightstand.) Or maybe it was set in seventh grade when we moved into an apartment that was around the corner from a jujitsu studio, and I convinced my mom to let me take classes. Or maybe it was set by all those terrible boyfriends my mother could never stop bringing home.

Whatever it was, when I saw a recruiting booth near the campus jobs kiosk during my freshman year of college with a navy and white sign that read ESCAPE TO THE FBI, it was pretty much a done deal. Escape was my favorite thing. When I tested off the charts on conscientiousness, pattern recognition, observational skills, listening retention, and altruism, they recruited me right up.

That is, until Glenn Schultz came along and poached me away.

And the rest became history. He taught me everything he knew, I started traveling the world, this job became my entire life, and I never looked back.

The point is, I loved it.

You have to love it. You have to give it everything. You have to be willing to step in front of a bullet—and that's no small choice, because some of these people are not exactly lovable—and getting shot hurts. It's high stakes and high stress, and if you're going to do it right, it has to be

about something bigger than you.

That's really why people who love this job love this job: It's about who you choose—over and over every day—to be.

The luxury travel is pretty great, too.

Mostly, it's a lot of work. A lot of paperwork, a lot of advance site visits, a lot of procedural notes. You have to write everything down. You're constantly on guard. It's not exactly relaxing.

But you get addicted.

This life makes regular life seem pretty dull.

Even the boredom in this job is exciting somehow.

You're on the move. You're never still. And you're too busy to be lonely.

Which always suited me just fine.

That is, until Glenn grounded me in Houston—at the very moment when I needed an escape the most.

THAT SAME DAY Glenn took me off the Madrid gig, my car wouldn't start—and so Robby wound up driving me home in his vintage Porsche in the pouring rain.

Which was fine. Better, actually. Because I still hadn't invited him to Toledo.

Maybe it was the rain—coming down so hard that the wipers, even on the highest setting, could barely clear it—but it wasn't until we made it to my house that I noticed Robby had been weirdly quiet on the drive home.

It was too wet for me to get out right then, so Robby turned off the car entirely and we just watched the water coat the windows like we were at a car wash.

That's when I turned to him and said, "Let's go on a trip."

Robby frowned. "What?"

"That's why I came to the office today. To invite you on vacation."

"On vacation where?"

Now I was regretting the randomness of the choice. How, exactly, do you sell Toledo?

"With me," I answered, like he'd asked a different question.

"I don't understand," Robby said.

"I've decided to take a vacation," I said, like *This isn't hard*. "And I'd like you come with me."

"You never take vacations," Robby said.

"Well, now I do."

"I've invited you on three different trips, and you've weaseled out of

all of them.”

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

Before my mother died. Before I got grounded. Before I got taken off Madrid. “Before I bought nonrefundable tickets to Toledo.”

Robby looked me over. “Toledo?” If he’d been confused before, now he shifted to full-on befuddled. “People don’t go on vacation to Toledo.”

“Actually, they have world-renowned botanical gardens.”

But Robby sighed. “There’s no way we’re going there.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll cancel.”

“What part of ‘nonrefundable’ don’t you understand?”

“You really don’t know yourself very well, do you?”

“I don’t see the problem,” I said. “You wanted to do this, and now we’re doing it. Can’t you just say *Awesome* and accept?”

“I actually can’t.”

His voice had a strange intensity to it. And in the wake of those words, he leaned forward and ran his fingers over the grooves of the steering wheel in a way that got my attention.

Did I mention that I read body language the way other people read books? I can speak body language better than English. For real. I could list it on my résumé as my native tongue.

Growing up as my mother’s child had forced me to learn the opposite of language: all the things we say without words. I had turned it into a pretty great career, to be honest. But if you asked me if it was a blessing or a curse, I wouldn’t know what to say.

Things I read about Robby in that one second: He wasn’t happy. He dreaded what he was about to do. He was doing it anyway.

Yep. Got all that from his fingers on the steering wheel.

And the tightness in his posture. And the force of the next breath he took. And the tilt of his head. And the way his eyes seemed to be using his lashes like a shield.

“Why?” I asked next. “Why can’t you accept?”

Robby looked down. Then a half-breath, a quick clench of the jaw, a steeling of the shoulders. “Because,” he said, “I think we should break up.”

Impossible, but true: He shocked me.

I turned to look at the dashboard. It was textured to look like leather.

I really hadn’t seen that coming.

And I always saw everything coming.

Robby kept going. “We both know this isn’t working.”

Did we both know that? Does anybody ever *know* a relationship isn't working? Is that something you *can* know? Or do all relationships require a certain amount of unreasonable optimism just to survive?

I said the only thing I could think of. "You're breaking up with me? On the night after my mother's funeral?"

He acted like I was catching him on a technicality. "Is my timing the most important thing here?"

"Your *appalling* timing?" I asked, stalling for my brain to catch up. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Or maybe not," Robby said. "Because don't forget. You weren't even all that close."

Just because it was true didn't make it right. "That's not relevant," I said.

I guess timing really does matter. I'd been sleeping on a hospital sofa for days, up five times a night while my mother retched into a plastic bucket. I'd watched her shrink to a skeleton in that flimsy hospital gown.

I'd watched the life that had given me life drain away before my eyes.

After that, I'd arranged the funeral. All the details. The music, the food. I'd played host all day to high school friends, coworkers, ex-boyfriends, AA friends, and drinking buddies. I'd ordered the flowers, and zipped the back zipper on my black dress all by myself, and even put together a slideshow.

Robby had it wrong.

Because, despite everything, I loved her.

I didn't *like* her, but I loved her.

And he'd underestimated me, as well. Because it's so much harder to love someone who's difficult than to love someone who's easy.

I was stronger than even I knew. Probably.

But I guess I was about to find out.

Because as the rain started to ease up, and as I pressed the pads of my fingers to the window glass, I heard myself say, in a soft, uncertain voice that even I barely recognized, "I don't want to break up. I love you."

"You only say that," Robby said then, his voice tinged with a certainty I'll never forget, "because you don't know what love is."

GLENN HAD WARNED us about this a year ago—back when it all started.

As soon as he'd heard the gossip, he called us into the conference room, and shut the door, and lowered the mini blinds.

"Is this really happening?" he demanded.

“Is what really happening?” Robby asked.

But this was the legendary Glenn Schultz. He wasn’t falling for that. “You tell me.”

Robby held his best poker face, so Glenn turned to me.

But mine was even better.

“I’m not going to stop you,” Glenn said. “But we need a plan in place.”

“For what?” Robby asked, and that was his first mistake.

“For when you break up,” Glenn said.

“Maybe we won’t break up,” Robby said, but Glenn refused to insult us all by responding.

Instead, like a man who’d seen it all and then some, he just looked back and forth between the two of us and sighed. “It was the rescue assignment, wasn’t it?”

Robby and I met each other’s eyes. Had we fallen for each other in the wake of an assignment to rescue a custody kidnap in Iraq? Had we survived gunfire, a car chase, and a death-defying midnight border crossing only to fall into bed together at the end—if for no other reason than to celebrate the fact that we were, against all odds, still alive? And was the adrenaline of that assignment still powering our semisecret office romance all these months later?

Obviously.

But we admitted nothing.

Glenn had been in this business too long to need something as pedestrian as verbal confirmation. “I know better than to interfere,” he said. “So I’m just going to ask you one question. It’s the easiest thing in the world for agents to get together—and it’s the hardest thing for them to *stay* together. What are you going to do when it ends?”

I should have held eye contact. That’s Negotiations 101. *Never look down.*

But I looked down.

“Really?” Glenn said to me, leaning a little closer. “You think it’s going to *last*? You think you’re going to buy a house with a picket fence and go to the farmers market on weekends? Get a dog? Buy sweaters at the mall?”

“You don’t know the future,” Robby said.

“No, but I know the two of you.”

Glenn was pretty pissed, and that was not unreasonable. We were his investment, his kids, his favorites, and his retirement portfolio all rolled into one.

Glenn rubbed his eyes and when he looked up, he was breathing in that noisy way that had earned him the nickname “The Warthog.”

He stared us down. “I can’t stop you,” he said, “and I’m not going to try. But I’ll tell you this right now. There’ll be no ‘leaving the company’ when this crashes and burns. You’ll get no pity from me, and you won’t get a letter of recommendation, either. If you apply somewhere else, I’ll torpedo you with the worst reference in the history of time. You’re mine. I made you, I own you, and goddammit nobody in this room gets to quit. Not even me. Understood?”

“Understood,” we both said, in unison.

“Now get out of my sight,” Glenn said, “or I’ll send you both to Afghanistan.”

THAT WAS A year ago.

It’s funny to think how much I’d pitied Glenn’s pessimism back then. His third wife had just left him—not uncommon in this job, since you’re gone more than you’re home. I remember mentally shaking my head at him as I walked away from the conversation. I remember thinking that Robby and I were going to prove him wrong.

Smash cut to a year later: Robby dumping me in the rain, like he was doing us both a favor.

“It’s for the best,” he said. “You need to grieve, anyway.”

“You don’t deserve my grief,” I said.

“I meant your mother.”

Oh. Her. “Don’t tell me what I need.”

Robby had the nerve to look wounded. “Be civil about this.”

“Why should I?”

“Because we’re both adults. Because we know what’s at stake. Because we never really liked each other all that much, anyway.”

That stung like a slap. I met his eyes for the first time and tried not to sound surprised: “We didn’t, huh?”

“That’s fair to say, right?”

Um, no. That wasn’t fair to say. It was incredibly crass. And wrong. And probably a lie, too—a way for Robby to absolve himself. Sure, he’d dumped me the day after my mother’s funeral, but what did that matter if “we never really liked each other all that much, anyway”?

But fine. Whatever.

Though I could think of a hotel room in Costa Rica that might claim otherwise.

In the humiliation of that moment—*Had I really just told a man I*

loved him while he was breaking up with me?—it was as if Robby wasn't just taking his love away ... but all love.

That's what it felt like.

What can I say? It's hard to think straight in a crisis, and the conclusion I landed on was that my only way to keep going was to get back to work. I didn't need hobbies. I didn't need to learn crochet. I needed to get back to the office, and get a new assignment, and win that position running the branch in London. It was as clear as needing air. I needed to do something. Go somewhere. Flee. Now more than ever.

But before I could step out of the car into the rain and forget him entirely, there was one question I still had to ask.

I looked straight into Robby's eyes. And then, in a tone like I was just calmly curious, I said, "You said things between us aren't working. Why is that again?"

He nodded, like that was a fair enough question. "I've given some thought to that over the past few months—"

"Months?"

"—and I've decided, ultimately, it comes down to one thing."

"Which is?"

"You."

My head gave an involuntary shake. "Me?"

Robby nodded, like saying it out loud had confirmed it. "It's you." And then, in a tone like he might even be giving me helpful advice, he said, "You have three deal-breaker flaws."

The words echoed in my head as I braced for them. *Three deal-breaker flaws.*

"One," Robby said, "you work all the time."

Okay. He *also* worked all the time. But fine.

"Two," Robby went on, "you're not fun, you know? You're so serious every minute."

Um. Holy shit. How do you argue with that?

"And three," Robby said with anticipation, like we were really getting to the clincher, "you're a bad kisser."

Three

A MONTH LATER, I was still enraged about it.

A bad kisser? A *bad kisser*?

I mean, “workaholic”? Fine. There’s no shame in being fantastic at your job.

“Not fun”? Whatever. Fun was overrated.

But a “bad kisser”?

That was the kind of insult that would haunt me to my grave.

Unacceptable.

Just like the state of my entire life.

My mother died. Then I got grounded from my job. Then the longest relationship of my life ended with the most insulting insult in the world. And there was nothing I could do about any of it. My mother stayed dead, my ex-boyfriend and my best friend left for three weeks on my assignment to Madrid, and I stayed home. In Houston. With nothing to do and no one to do it with.

It’s a blur how I even survived.

Mostly, I did anything at all to keep busy. I reorganized the file room at the office. I did local mini assignments. I repainted my bathroom tangerine orange without asking my landlord. I cleaned out my mother’s place and listed it for sale. I took six-mile runs after work in hopes of tuckering myself out. I counted the purgatory-like seconds until I could get the hell out of town.

Oh, and I slept every night on the floor of my closet.

Those four weeks took a thousand years. And in all that time, I can only remember one truly good thing that happened.

Going through my mother’s jewelry box, I found something I thought was lost—something that would have seemed like junk to anybody else. Buried under a tangled necklace, I found a little silver beaded safety pin that I’d made at school on my eighth birthday.

The colors were just like I remembered: red, orange, yellow, pale green, baby blue, violet, white.

Beaded friendship pins had been big at school that year—we all made them and pinned them to our shoelaces—and so on the day our teacher brought in pins and beads, we were ecstatic. She let us spend recess making them, and I’d saved my favorite to give to my mom. I loved the idea of surprising her on a day she’d be giving me presents with a present of my own for her. But I never got to give it to her in the end.

Somehow, before the next morning, it was gone.

In the wake of that day, I'd looked for it for weeks. Checking and double-checking the floor of my closet, the pockets of my backpack, under the hallway rug. It had been one of those long, unsolved mysteries in my life—a question I'd carried for so long: How had I lost something so important?

But fast-forward twenty years and there it was, safely stashed in my mom's jewelry box, waiting for me like a long-hidden answer. Like she'd been keeping it safe for me the whole time.

Like maybe I'd underestimated her a little bit.

And myself, too.

Right then and there, I'd looked through her necklaces to find a sturdy gold chain, then I'd clipped the beaded pin to it like a pendant.

And then I wore it. Every day after that. Like a talisman. I even slept in it.

I found myself touching it all the time, spinning the smooth beads under my fingertips to feel their cheery little rattle. Something about it was comforting. It made me feel like maybe things were never quite as lost as they seemed.

On the morning when Robby and Taylor were coming back from Madrid—a morning when we were having a meeting in the conference room where Glenn had promised to give me a new assignment, at last—I touched that pin so much I wondered if I might wear it out.

The point was: I was about to get an assignment. I was about to escape. It didn't matter where I was going. Even just the idea of leaving turned my heart into a rippling field of relief.

Now I would disappear from here.

And then, for the first time in so long, I would feel okay.

All I had to do was survive seeing Robby again.

We're very dismissive, as a culture, about heartbreak. We talk about it like it's funny, or silly, or cute. As if it can be cured by a pint of Häagen-Dazs and a set of flannel pajamas.

But of course, a breakup is a type of grief. It's the death of not just any relationship—but the most important one in your life.

There's nothing cute about it.

“Dumped” is also a word that falls short of its true meaning. It sounds so quick—like a moment in time. But getting dumped lasts forever. Because *a person who loved you decided not to love you anymore*.

Does that ever really go away?

As I waited at the table in the conference room, the first person there by a mile, that's what hit me: Robby leaving had felt like a confirmation of