

New York Times Bestselling Author

KATHERINE

CENTER

HELLO

STRANGER

A Novel



# Hello Stranger

KATHERINE CENTER



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  
NEW YORK

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*For my beautiful mom, Deborah Inez Detering.*

*Again.*

*It's such an honor to be your daughter.*

*How can I ever thank you enough?*

# One

THE FIRST PERSON I called after I found out I'd placed in the North American Portrait Society's huge career-making yearly contest was my dad.

Which is weird. Because I never called my dad.

Not voluntarily, anyway.

Sure, I called on birthdays or Father's Day or New Year's—hoping to get lucky and miss him so I could leave a singsongy message like “So sorry to miss you,” get the credit, and be done.

But I called only out of obligation. Never for fun. Never, ever just to talk. And never—god forbid—to *share things*.

My goal was always *not* to share things with my father. How broke I was. How I was still—endlessly—failing in my chosen career. How I'd given up on yet another relationship and moved into my not-fit-for-human-habitation art studio because I couldn't afford a place of my own.

That was all need-to-know information.

And he definitely didn't need to know.

It gave me some structure, in a way—crafting ongoing fake success stories about myself for him and my evil stepmother, Lucinda. I was always “doing great.” Or “crazy busy.” Or “thriving *so much*.”

I didn't actively make things up. I just worked devotedly to obscure the truth.

The truth was, I'd defied all my dad's instructions eight years before, dropping out of premed and switching my college major to Fine Arts.

“Fine Arts?” my father had said, like he'd never heard the term before. “How exactly are you supposed to make a living with that?”

I gave him a little shrug. “I'm just going to ... be an artist.”

Wow, those words did not land well.

“So you're telling me,” he demanded, that little vein in his forehead starting to darken, “that you want to be buried in a pauper's grave?”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t say I *want* that.”

It’s possible my dad wanted me to be a doctor because he was a doctor. And it’s possible my dad didn’t want me to be an artist because my mom had been an artist. But we didn’t talk about that.

He went on, “You’re throwing away a good career—a good living—so that you can waste your life doing something that doesn’t matter for no money?”

“When you put it that way, it sounds like a bad idea.”

“It’s a terrible idea!” he said, like that was all there was to it.

“But you’re forgetting two things,” I said.

My dad waited to be enlightened.

“I don’t like medicine,” I said, counting off on my fingers. “And I do like art.”

Suffice it to say, he didn’t think any of that was relevant. Then he went on to imply that I was spoiled and foolish and had never known true suffering.

Even though we both knew—on that last one, at least—he was lying.

Anyway, it didn’t matter. He didn’t get to decide what I did with my life.

I was the one who had to live it, after all.

My dad was not a big fan of losing. “Don’t ask me for help when you’re broke,” he said. “You’re on your own. If you choose this path for yourself, then you have to walk it.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t asked you for help since I was fourteen.”

At that, my dad stood up, scooting back his café chair with a honk that announced he was done. Done with this conversation—and possibly done with fatherhood, as well.

I still remember the determination I felt as I watched him leave. It seems almost quaint now. *I’ll show you*, I remember thinking, with a self-righteous fire in my eyes. *I’ll make you wish you’d believed in me all along*.

Spoiler alert: I did not show him. At least not so far.

That was eight years ago.

I’d gotten that BFA in Fine Arts. I’d graduated all alone, and then I’d marched past all the families taking proud pictures, and then I’d driven triumphantly out of the university parking lot in my banged-up Toyota that my friend Sue and I had painted hot pink with flames for the Art Car Parade.

And then?

I'd embarked on many endless years of ... *not showing him*.

I applied to contests and didn't win. I submitted my work for shows and didn't get accepted. I eked out a living selling portraits from photos (both human and pet) on Etsy at a hundred dollars a pop.

But it wasn't enough to make rent.

And whenever I talked to my dad, I pretended I was "thriving."

Because he might have been right that day. I might be headed for a pauper's grave. But I would be *under the dirt in that grave* before I'd ever admit it.

That must have been why I called him about placing in the contest.

The contest itself was a big deal—and huge prize money, if you could win it.

I guess the lure of having a genuine triumph to report kept me from thinking clearly.

Plus, don't we all, deep down, carry an inextinguishable longing for our parents to be proud of us? Even long after we've given up?

In the thrill of the moment, I forgot that he didn't care.

It was a good thing—and no surprise—that my call went straight to his voicemail. It meant I could make my next call. To somebody who did care.

"What!" my friend Sue shouted as soon as the words were out. "That's *huge!*" She stretched out the U for what felt like a full minute. *Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuge*.

And I just let myself enjoy it.

"The grand prize is ten thousand dollars," I added when she was done.

"Oh my god," she said. "Even huger."

"And guess what else?"

"What?"

"The big show—the juried show where they pick the winner—is here. In Houston."

"I thought it was Miami this year."

"That was last year."

"So you don't even have to travel!" Sue said.

"Which is perfect! Because I can't afford to!"

"It's meant to be!"

"But is it *too* meant to be? Is it so in my favor, it'll jinx me?"

"There's no such thing as too meant to be," Sue said. Then, as if there'd been a question, she said, "Anyway, it's settled."



“What’s settled?”

“We have to throw a party!” she said. Ever the extreme extrovert.

“A party?” I said, in a meek attempt at resistance.

“A party! A party!” Sue practically sang into the phone. “You’ve been tragically failing at life for years and years! We have to celebrate!”

*Tragically failing at life* seemed a bit harsh.

But *fine*. She wasn’t wrong.

“When?” I said, already dreading all the cleaning I’d have to do.

“Tonight!”

It was already close to sunset. “I can’t throw a—” I started, but before I even got to “party tonight,” it was decided.

“We’ll do it on your rooftop. You needed a housewarming party, anyway.”

“It’s not a house,” I corrected. “It’s a hovel.”

“A hovelwarming, then,” Sue went on, taking it in stride.

“Won’t your parents get mad?” I asked. Mr. and Mrs. Kim owned the building—and technically I wasn’t even supposed to be living there.

“Not if it’s a party for *you*.”

Sue, whose Korean given name, Soo Hyun, had been slightly Americanized by an immigration official, had also disappointed her parents by becoming an art major in college—which was how we’d bonded—although her parents were too softhearted to stay mad for long. Eventually they’d kind of adopted me, and they liked to tease Sue by calling me their favorite child.

All to say—this party was *happening*.

This was our Oscar and Felix dynamic. Sue always optimistically, energetically, and joyfully searched out ways for us to extrovert. And I always resisted. And then grudgingly gave in.

“You can’t organize a party in two hours,” I protested.

“Challenge accepted,” Sue said. Then she added, “I’ve already sent the group text.”

But I still kept protesting, even after I’d lost. “My place isn’t fit for a party. It’s not even fit for me.”

Sue wasn’t going to fight me on that. I was sleeping on a Murphy bed I’d found in the large trash. But she was also not brooking protests. “We’ll all stay outside. It’s fine. You can finally hang those bulb lights. We’ll invite everybody awesome. All you have to do is get some wine.”

“I can’t afford wine.”

But Sue wasn't liking my attitude. "How many people entered the first round?" she demanded.

"Two thousand," I said, already giving in.

"How many finalists are there?"

"Ten," I answered.

"Exactly," Sue said. "You've already annihilated one thousand nine hundred and ninety competitors." She paused for impact, then snapped her fingers as she said, "What's another nine?"

"How is that relevant?" I asked.

"You're about to win ten thousand dollars. You can afford *one* bottle of wine."

★ ★ ★

AND SO SUE set about making a last-minute party happen.

She invited all our art-major friends—with the exception of my ex-boyfriend, Ezra—and some of her art-teacher buddies, and her longtime boyfriend, Witt—not an artist: a business guy who'd been the captain of his track team in college. Sue's parents approved of him, even though he wasn't Korean, because he was sweet to her—and also because he made a good living and so, as her dad put it, she could be "a starving artist without having to starve."

Sue said—lovingly—that Witt could be our token jock.

My job was to put on the vintage pink party dress with appliquéd flowers that had once been my mother's and that I wore only on very, very special occasions ... and then to go off in search of the most wine I could get with a twenty-dollar bill.

I lived in the old, warehouse-y part of downtown, and the only grocery store within walking distance had been there since the 1970s—a cross between a bodega and a five-and-dime. There was fresh fruit up front, and old-time R&B played on the sound system, and Marie, the ever-present owner, sat by the register. She always wore bright-patterned caftans that lit up her warm brown skin, and she called everybody *baby*.

Just as I walked in, my phone rang. It was my dad calling me back.

Now that the initial rush had passed, I debated whether to answer. Maybe I was just setting us both up for disappointment.

But in the end, I picked up.

"Sadie, what is it?" my dad said, all business. "I'm boarding a flight to

Singapore.”

“I was calling you with some good news,” I said, ducking into the cereal aisle and hushing my voice.

“I can’t hear you,” my dad said.

“I just have some good news,” I said a little louder. “That I wanted”—was I really doing this?—“to share.”

But my dad just sounded irritated. “They’ve got dueling announcements going over the loudspeakers and I’ve got one percent battery. Can it wait? I’ll be back in ten days.”

“Of course it can wait,” I said, already deciding that he’d forfeited his chance. Maybe I’d tell him when I had that ten-thousand-dollar check in my pocket. If he was lucky.

Or maybe not. Because right then the line went dead.

He hadn’t hung up on me, exactly. He’d just moved on to other things.

We were done here. Without a goodbye. As usual.

It was fine. I had a party to go to. And wine to buy.

As I moved into the wine aisle, Smokey Robinson came over the sound system with a song that had been one of my mom’s favorites—“I Second That Emotion.”

Normally I would never sing along out loud to anything in public—especially *in falsetto*. But I had many happy memories of singing along to that song with my mom, and I knew it was all too easy for me to stew over my dad’s toxicity, and it kind of felt, in that moment, like Smokey had showed up right then to throw me an emotional lifeline.

I glanced over at the owner. She was on the phone with somebody, laughing. And as far as I could tell, there was no one else in the store.

So I gave in and sang along—quietly at first, and then a little louder when Marie didn’t notice me at all. Shifting back and forth to the beat, there in my ballet flats and my mom’s pink party dress, I just gave in and let myself feel better—doing a shimmy my mom taught me and throwing in an occasional booty shake.

Just a little private, mood-lifting dance party for one.

And then something hit me, there in the aisle, singing an old favorite song while wearing my long-lost mother’s dress: My mother—also a portrait artist—had placed in this contest, too.

This exact same contest. The year I turned fourteen.

I’d known it when I applied. But to be honest, I applied to so many contests so often, and I got rejected so relentlessly, I hadn’t thought too

much about it.

But this was the one. The one she'd been painting a portrait for—of me, by the way—when she died. She never finished the portrait, and she never made it to the show.

What had happened to that portrait? I suddenly wondered.

If I had to bet? Lucinda threw it away.

I'm not a big weeper, in general. And I'm sure it was partly all the excitement of placing in the contest, and partly the unexpected harshness of my dad's voice just then, and partly the fact that I was wearing my long-lost mother's clothes, and partly the realization that this contest was her contest ... but as happy as I felt singing along to that old favorite song in an empty grocery store, I felt sad, too.

I felt my eyes spring with tears over and over, and I had to keep wiping them away. You wouldn't think you could do all those things at once, would you? Dancing, singing, *and* getting misty-eyed? But I'm here as proof: It's possible.

But maybe that song really was a talisman for joy, because just as the song was ending, I spotted a wine with a celebratory polka-dotted label on sale for six dollars a bottle.

By the time I made it to the register with my arms full of wine, I was feeling like Sue had the right idea. Of course we should celebrate! I'd have to put my dog Peanut—who was even more introverted than I was—in the closet with his dog bed for a few hours, but he'd forgive me. Probably.

I picked up some little taco-shaped dog treats as a preemptive apology. They'd take me over budget, but Peanut was worth it.

At the register, I eyed a little bouquet of white gerbera daisies, thinking it might be nice to have one to tuck behind my ear—something my mom used to do when I was little. It felt like she might like to see me celebrate that way. With a flower.

But then I decided it was too expensive.

Instead, I set the wine and dog treats on the counter, smiling at the store owner, and I reached around for my purse ...

Only to realize I didn't have it.

I looked down and then felt my other hip, to see if I might have slung it on backward. Then I glanced around at the floor to see if I'd dropped it. Then I left my wine and dog treats on the counter, holding my finger up like "one second" as I dashed to check the empty aisles.

Nothing. Huh. I'd left it at home.

Not all that surprising, given the flurry of today.

Marie had already started ringing up the wine by the time I got back and so, not wanting to interrupt her conversation, I shook my hands at her, like, *Never mind*.

She looked at me like, *Don't you want this?*

I shrugged back in a way that tried to convey, *I'm so sorry! I forgot my purse*.

She dropped her shoulders in a sigh, but before she could start to cancel everything, a man's voice from behind me said, "I'll get it."

I turned around in surprise, frowning at him, like, *How did you get in here?*

But he just gave me a nod and turned back to the owner. "I can cover that."

This isn't relevant ... but he was cute.

He was a generic white guy—you know, the kind that's practically a Ken doll. But a really, really appealing version.

Because of my job as a portrait artist, I can never look at a face for the first time without mentally assessing it for its shapes and structure and most compelling features—and I can tell you exactly why he was handsome and also why he was basic. Artistically, I mean.

Everything about him was generically, perfectly proportional. He didn't have an outsize chin, for example, or cavernous nostrils or Dumbo ears. He didn't have Steven Tyler lips or crazy teeth or a unibrow. Not that any of those things are *bad*. Distinctive features make a face unique, and that's a good thing. But it's also true that the most generic faces are consistently rated as the best-looking.

Like, the more you look like a composite of everyone, the more we all like you.

This guy was as close to a composite as I'd seen in a while. Short, neat hair. A proportional forehead, nose bridge, jaw, and chin. Perfectly placed cheekbones. A straight nose with stunningly symmetrical nostrils. And you couldn't draw better ears. Flawless. Not too flat, but not too protruding. With perfect plump little earlobes.

I am a bit of an earlobe snob. Bad earlobes could really be a deal-breaker for me.

Not kidding: I've complimented people on their earlobes before. Out loud.

Which never goes well, by the way.

There are tricks to making a face look appealing when you're drawing a portrait. Humans seem to find certain elements universally appealing, and if you emphasize those, the person looks that much better. This is a scientific thing. It's been studied. The theory is that certain features and proportions elicit feelings of "aww, that's adorable" in us, which prompts caregiving behaviors, affection, and an urge to move closer. In theory, we evolved this reaction in response to baby faces, so we'd feel compelled to take care of our young, but when those same features and patterns crop up in other places, on other faces, we like them there, too.

We can even find sea cucumbers adorable, from the right angle.

Or the man who's attempting to pay for our wine and dog treats.

Because in addition to his generic handsomeness, this guy also had elements in his features—invisible to the untrained eye—that subliminally established cuteness. His lips were smooth, and full, and a warm, friendly pink that signified youth. His skin was clear in a way that evoked good health. And the real clincher was the eyes—slightly bigger than average (always a crowd-pleaser) with a slight melancholic downturn at their corners that gave him an irresistible sweet puppy-dog look.

I guarantee this guy got every woman he ever wanted.

But that was his business.

I had a forgotten-wallet situation to deal with. And a last-minute party to host.

"It's fine," I said, waving my hands at him and rejecting his offer to pay for my stuff.

"I don't mind," he said, pulling his wallet out of his jeans.

"I don't need your help," I said, and it came out a little harsher-sounding than I meant.

He looked from me—purseless—to the counter of stuff I had yet to pay for. "I think maybe you do."

But I wasn't having it. "I can just run home for my purse," I said. "It's no problem."

"But you don't have to."

"But I want to."

What part of *I don't need your help* did this guy not understand?

"I appreciate the gesture, sir," I said then. "But I'm fine."

"Why are you calling me *sir*? We're, like, the same age."

"*Sir* is not an age thing."

"It absolutely is. *Sir* is for old men. And butlers."

“Sir is also for strangers.”

“But we’re not strangers.”

“Gotta disagree with you there, sir.”

“But I’m rescuing you,” he said, like that made us friends.

I wrinkled my nose. “I prefer to rescue myself.”

For the record, I recognized that he was trying to do something nice. I also recognized that most of humanity would’ve let him do it, thanked him gratefully, and called it a day. This is the kind of moment that could wind up on the internet, getting passed around with captions like *See? People aren’t so terrible after all!*

But I wasn’t like most of humanity. I didn’t like being helped. Is that a crime?

Surely I’m not the only person on this planet who prefers to handle things on her own.

It wasn’t *him* I was opposed to. He was appealing. Strongly, viscerally appealing.

But the helping—including his pushiness about it—was not.

We stared at each other for a second—at an impasse. And then, for no reason, he said, “That’s a great dress, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I said suspiciously, like he might be using a compliment to lower my defenses. Then without really meaning to, I said, “It was my mother’s.”

“And you do a great Smokey Robinson, by the way.”

Oh god. He’d heard me. I lowered my eyes to half-mast, displeased. “Thanks.”

“I mean it,” he said.

“That sounded sarcastic.”

“No, it was great. It was ... mesmerizing.”

“You were watching me?”

But he shook his head. “I was just shopping for cereal. You were the one doing a cabaret show in a grocery aisle.”

“I thought the store was empty.”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t.”

“You should have stopped me.”

“Why would I do that?” he asked, seeming genuinely befuddled. Then, at the memory, something like tenderness lit his expression. He gave a little shrug. “You were a joy.”

I had no idea what to make of this guy.

Was he being sarcastic or serious? Was he handsome or generic? Was he kind to help or too pushy? Was he flirting with me or being a pain? Had he already won me over, or did I still have a choice?

Finally I circled back to: “Fine. Just ... don’t help me.”

His expression shifted to wry. “I’m getting the sense that you don’t want me to help you.”

But I played it straight. “That’s correct.”

Then before I could lose any more ground, I turned to the owner at the counter—still chatting away with her friend—and stage-whispered, “I’ll be back in five with my purse.”

Then I zipped out the door.

Case closed.



I WAS WAITING at the crosswalk for the light to change when I turned back to see the grocery store guy walking out with a paper bag that looked suspiciously like it might have three very cheap wine bottles and some dog tacos in it.

I stared at him until he saw me.

Then he gave me a big unapologetic *ya got me* smile.

Fine. I had my answers: *Yes*.

When he arrived next to me to wait for the same crosswalk, I kept my gaze straight ahead, but said, like we were spies or something, “Is that bag full of what I think it’s full of?”

He didn’t turn my way, either. “Do you think it’s full of human kindness?”

“I think it’s full of unwanted help.”

He looked down to examine the inside of the bag. “Or maybe I just really, really love ... six-dollar wine.”

“And dog treats,” I said, glancing his way.

I could see the sides of his eyes crinkle up at that.

“Fine,” I said, accepting my defeat and holding out my arms for the bag.

But he shook his head. “I got it.”

“Are you going to be stubborn about this, too?”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *chivalrous*.”

“Is it?” I said, tilting my head.



Then, as if the question had answered itself, I held my arms out for the bag again.

“Why should I give this to you?” he asked.

“Because you got what you wanted last time,” I said, tilting my head back toward the store, “and now it’s my turn.”

He considered that.

So I added, “It’s only fair.”

He nodded at that, and then, like he’d been totally reasonable all along, he turned, stepped closer, and released the bag into my arms.

“Thank you,” I said when I had possession.

The light had turned, and the crowd around us was moving into the street. As I started to move with it, I looked down to check the bag’s contents, and I saw a bouquet of white gerbera daisies. I started to turn to him next to me, but he wasn’t there—and when I spun back, he was still at the curb looking down at his phone like maybe he’d stopped for a text.

“Hey!” I called from the middle of the street. “You forgot your flowers!”

But he looked up and shook his head. “Those are for you.”

I didn’t fight him. It was his turn, after all.

If I’d known what was going to happen next, I might have handled that moment differently. I might have kept arguing just so we could keep talking. Or I might have asked him his name so I’d have some way of remembering him—so that he wouldn’t just remain, in my memory after that, the Grocery Store Guy who got away.

Of course, if I’d known what would happen next, I would never have stepped into the street in the first place.

But I didn’t know. The same way none of us ever know. The same way we all just move through the world on guesswork and hope.

Instead, I just shrugged, like, *Okay*, and then turned and kept walking—noting that he was the first man I’d been attracted to in all the months since my breakup, and half hoping he would jog to catch up with me in a minute or two.

But that’s not what happened next.

Next, I froze right there in the crosswalk, my arms still hugging my bag of wine.

And I don’t remember anything after that.

## Two

I WOKE UP in the hospital with my evil stepmother Lucinda by my bed.

And you *know* it was bad if Lucinda showed up.

I opened my eyes, and I saw one of my least favorite people on the planet leaning forward, elbows on knees, peering over the bed rail, flaring her nostrils and staring at me like she'd never seen me before.

“What happened?” was all I could think of to say.

At that, Lucinda went into full gossip mode, filling me in on the details as if she were talking to a random neighbor—and I can't tell you how weird it was to be getting the story of my life from the person who had ruined it.

Anyhoo.

Apparently, I'd had what they call a nonconvulsive seizure, right there in the middle of the crosswalk in front of my building. I froze into an empty stare in the street and was almost mowed down by a Volkswagen Beetle before a mysterious Good Samaritan shoved me to the curb at the last second and saved my life.

Next, after not getting run over, I passed out on the sidewalk in front of my building.

The Good Samaritan then called 911 and handed me off to the paramedics when they arrived. According to the nurse at the hospital, I was semiconscious when they wheeled me in and was asking everyone to find my father—though that's another thing I don't remember.

I really must have been out of it to ask for my dad. Of all people. A person I would never voluntarily turn to in need.

But over and over, apparently, I asked for him, saying his name. Which the nurses recognized. Because my dad was, to be honest, a bit of a celebrity surgeon.

The staff called his office, according to that same nurse, but he was “unavailable.”

Which is how Lucinda wound up here.

She was absolutely the last person I'd want at my bedside—besides perhaps her daughter. Honestly, I'd rather have woken up to Miranda Priestly. Or Mommie Dearest. Or Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*.

And from the looks of those nostrils of hers, Lucinda wasn't too thrilled to be seeing me, either.

Still, she kind of liked the drama.

Her tone was a little bit incredulous as she brought me up to speed, like how I could've chosen the crosswalk of a busy street, of all places, to have that nonconvulsive seizure was beyond her. "If that Good Samaritan hadn't saved you, you'd be flat as a pancake right now." She paused and tilted her head, like she might be picturing that. "I was at my Whining & Wine-ing group when they called, but it's okay. It's fine. Of course I dropped everything and came here right away."

Her tone made me wonder if that was true. Like maybe she'd tossed back one last glass of chardonnay.

I shook my baffled head again, like, *Wait*. "What happened?"

She leaned in a little, like I hadn't been paying attention. "You almost died in the road."

"But what caused the seizure?" I asked at last, my wits starting to come back.

"They don't know. Could even just be dehydration. But they want to do an MRI before they release you. Looks like you'll have to stay overnight."

And then, quickly, to snuff out even the possibility that I might ask her to stay—which I would absolutely never do—she added, "I'll be back first thing in the morning."

I waited for it all to sink in while Lucinda checked her texts and then gathered up her things.

She was one of those put-together ladies who always matched her shoes to her purse. She kept her hair no-nonsense and short, but she always had a full face of makeup. I'd always suspected she focused hard on her surface because there wasn't much underneath. But I really didn't know her that well. Even after all these years.

I did not anticipate, for example, that when her daughter, Parker, also known as my evil stepsister, FaceTimed her right then, Lucinda would answer the call. Or that she'd proceed to fill Parker in on everything that had just happened like she was relating the hottest of hot-off-the-press

gossip. And then, when Parker said, “Let me see,” that Lucinda would turn the phone around and train it on me.

I frowned at Lucinda and shook my head. But it was too late.

There was Parker’s catlike face—as scary at iPhone size as it was in real life.

How long had it been since I’d seen her? Years.

I could go my whole life, and it wouldn’t be too long.

“Oh my god!” Parker shrieked. “I can’t believe you almost got killed by a Volkswagen Beetle! I mean, at least pick something cool, like a Tesla.”

“Noted,” I said.

It was strange to see her again. She’d highlighted the hell out of her hair. And she’d really taken a deep dive into the world of eye shadow. She had better style than she had in high school—in a newscaster-ish way. The sight of her kind of stung my eyes. But I couldn’t deny that technically—and I say this as a professional in the industry—she had a pretty face.

Too bad she ruined it by being ... pure evil.

“You look terrible,” Parker said, squinting in faux sympathy. “Did you land on your face?”

I looked at Lucinda, like, *Seriously?*

But Lucinda just smiled and gestured for me to answer, like she thought this might be a nice conversation.

I sighed and shifted my eyes back to the screen. “I did not land on my face,” I answered robotically.

“You just look so bloated,” she went on.

“I’m fine.”

“Did they have to pump you full of saline or something?”

“What? No.”

“You just kind of look like James Gandolfini right now. That’s all I’m saying.”

Okay. We were done here.

“Hoo-boy,” I said, checking the nonexistent watch on my wrist. “Look at the time.”

Then I rolled over to face the wall.

“Is she pouting?” Parker demanded as Lucinda took the phone back.

“You’d be fussy, too, if it had happened to you.”

“But it would never happen to me. If I ever get run over, it’ll be by an Aston Martin.”