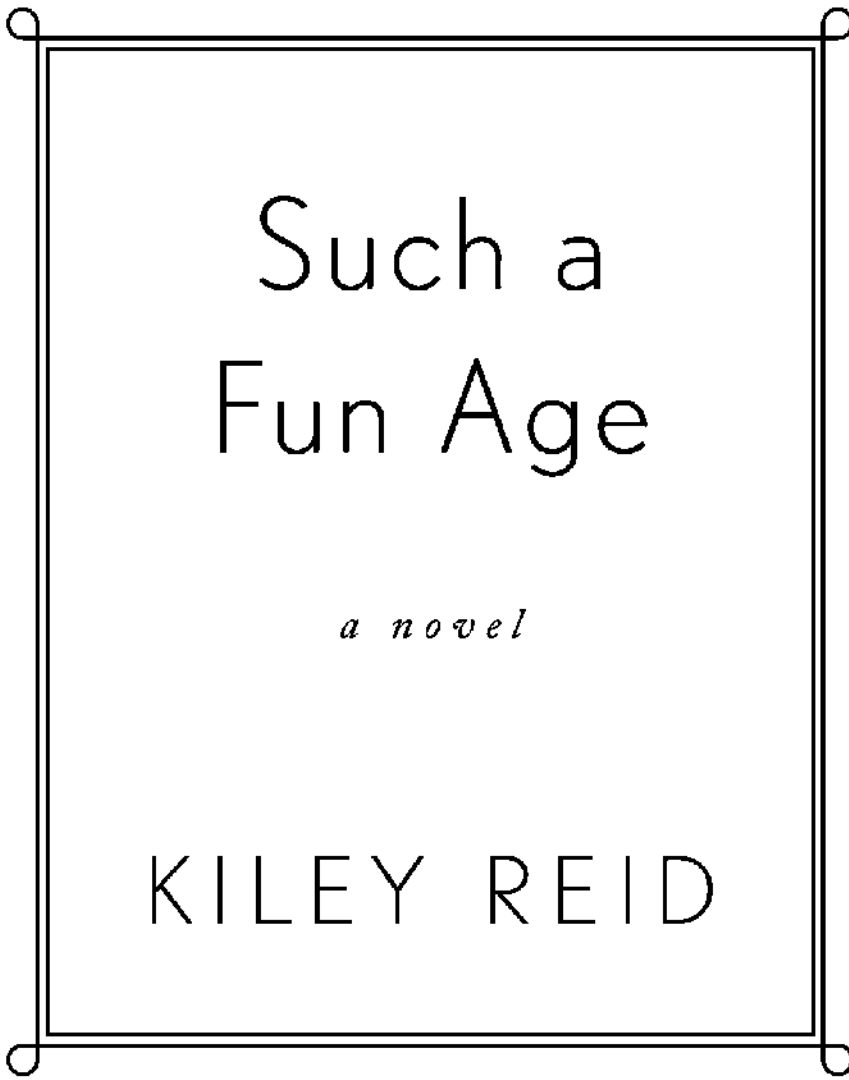




Such
a Fun
Age

a novel

KILEY REID



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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

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Publishers Since 1838

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For Patricia Adeline Olivier

“We definitely wait for birthdays. Or even an ice cream. Like [my daughter] has to earn it. Yesterday we promised her an ice cream, but then she behaved horribly. And I said, “Then I’m sorry, ice cream is for girls who behave. And that’s not you today. Maybe tomorrow.””

—RACHEL SHERMAN,
Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence

PART ONE

One

That night, when Mrs. Chamberlain called, Emira could only piece together the words “. . . take Briar somewhere . . .” and “. . . pay you double.”

In a crowded apartment and across from someone screaming “That’s my song!,” Emira stood next to her girlfriends Zara, Josefa, and Shaunie. It was a Saturday night in September, and there was a little over an hour left of Shaunie’s twenty-sixth birthday. Emira turned the volume up on her phone and asked Mrs. Chamberlain to say it again.

“Is there any way you can take Briar to the grocery store for a bit?” Mrs. Chamberlain said. “I’m so sorry to call. I know it’s late.”

It was almost astonishing that Emira’s daily babysitting job (a place of pricey onesies, colorful stacking toys, baby wipes, and sectioned dinner plates) could interrupt her current nighttime state (loud music, bodycon dresses, lip liner, and red Solo cups). But here was Mrs. Chamberlain, at 10:51 p.m., waiting for Emira to say yes. Under the veil of two strong mixed drinks, the intersection of these spaces almost seemed funny, but what wasn’t funny was Emira’s current bank balance: a total of seventy-nine dollars and sixteen cents. After a night of twenty-dollar entrées, birthday shots, and collective gifts for the birthday girl, Emira Tucker could really use the cash.

“Hang on,” she said. She set her drink down on a low coffee table and stuck her middle finger into her other ear. “You want me to take Briar right now?”

On the other side of the table, Shaunie placed her head on Josefa’s shoulder and slurred, “Does this mean I’m old now? Is twenty-six old?” Josefa pushed her off and said, “Shaunie, don’t start.” Next to Emira, Zara untwisted her bra strap. She made a disgusted face in Emira’s direction and mouthed, *Eww, is that your boss?*

“Peter accidentally—we had an incident with a broken window and . . . I just need to get Briar out of the house.” Mrs. Chamberlain’s voice was calm and strangely articulate, as if she were delivering a baby and saying, *Okay, mom, it’s time to push*. “I’m so sorry to call you this late,” she said. “I just don’t want her to see the police.”

“Oh wow. Okay, but, Mrs. Chamberlain?” Emira sat down at the edge of a couch. Two girls started dancing on the other side of the armrest. The front door of Shaunie’s apartment opened to Emira’s left, and four guys came in yelling, “Ayyeee!”

“Jesus,” Zara said. “All these niggas tryna stunt.”

“I don’t exactly look like a babysitter right now,” Emira warned. “I’m at a friend’s birthday.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry. You should stay—”

“No no, it’s not like that,” Emira said louder. “I can leave. I’m just letting you know that I’m in heels and I’ve like . . . had a drink or two. Is that okay?”

Baby Catherine, the youngest Chamberlain at five months old, wailed in the receiver. Mrs. Chamberlain said, “Peter, can you please take her?” and then, up close, “Emira, I don’t care what you look like. I’ll pay for your cab here and your cab home.”

Emira slipped her phone into the pouch of her crossbody bag, making sure all of her other belongings were present. When she stood and relayed the news of her early departure to her girlfriends, Josefa said, “You’re leaving to *babysit*? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Guys . . . listen. No one needs to babysit me,” Shaunie informed the group. One of her eyes was open and the other was trying very hard to match.

Josefa wasn’t through asking questions. “What kind of mom asks you to babysit this late?”

Emira didn’t feel like getting into specifics. “I need the cash,” she said. She knew it was highly unlikely, but she added, “I’ll come back if I get done, though.”

Zara nudged her and said, “Imma roll witchyou.”

Emira thought, *Oh, thank God*. Out loud, she said, “Okay, cool.”

The two girls finished their drinks in one long tip as Josefa crossed her arms. “I can’t believe you guys are leaving Shaunie’s birthday right now.”

Emira lifted her shoulders and quickly dropped them back down. “I think Shaunie is leaving Shaunie’s birthday right now,” she said, as Shaunie crawled down to the floor and announced she was taking a quick nap. Emira and Zara took to the stairs. As they waited outside for an Uber on a dimly lit sidewalk, Emira did the math in her head. *Sixteen times two . . . plus cab money . . . Fuck yes.*

Catherine was still crying from inside the Chamberlain house when Emira and Zara arrived. As Emira walked up the porch stairs, she spotted a small jagged hole in the front window that dripped with something transparent and slimy. At the top of the landing, Mrs. Chamberlain pulled Briar’s glossy blond hair into a ponytail. She thanked Emira, greeted Zara the exact same way she always did (“Hi, Zara, nice to see you again”), and then said to Briar, “You get to hang out with the big girls.”

Briar took Emira’s hand. “It was bedtime,” she said, “and now it’s not.” They stepped down the stairs, and as the three girls walked the three short blocks to Market Depot, Briar repeatedly complimented Zara’s shoes—an obvious but unsuccessful ploy to try them on.

Market Depot sold bone broths, truffle butters, smoothies from a station that was currently dark, and several types of nuts in bulk. The store was bright and empty, and the only open checkout lane was the one for ten items or fewer. Next to a dried-fruit section, Zara bent in her heels and held her dress down to retrieve a box of yogurt-covered raisins. “Umm . . . *eight dollars?*” She quickly placed them back on the shelf and stood up. “Goddamn. This is a rich people grocery store.”

Well, Emira mouthed with the toddler in her arms, *this is a rich-people baby.*

“I want dis.” Briar reached out with both hands for the copper-colored hoops that hung in Zara’s ears.

Emira inched closer. “How do you ask?”

“Peas I want dis now Mira peas.”

Zara’s mouth dropped open. “Why is her voice always so raspy and cute?”

“Move your braids,” Emira said. “I don’t want her to yank them.”

Zara tossed her long braids—a dozen of them were a whitish blond—over one shoulder and held her earring out to Briar. “Next weekend Imma get twists from that girl my cousin knows. Hi, Miss

Briar, you can touch.” Zara’s phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her bag and started typing, leaning into Briar’s little tugs.

Emira asked, “Are they all still there?”

“Ha!” Zara tipped her head back. “Shaunie just threw up in a plant and Josefa is pissed. How long do you have to stay?”

“I don’t know.” Emira set Briar back on the ground. “But homegirl can look at the nuts for hours so it’s whatever.”

“Mira’s makin’ money, Mira’s makin money . . .” Zara danced her way into the frozen-food aisle. Emira and Briar walked behind her as she put her hands on her knees and bounced in the faint reflection in the freezer doors, pastel ice cream logos mirrored on her thighs. Her phone buzzed again. “Ohmygod, I gave my number to that guy at Shaunie’s?” she said, looking at her screen. “He is so thirsty for me, it’s stupid.”

“You dancing.” Briar pointed up at Zara. She put two fingers into her mouth and said, “You . . . you dancing and no music.”

“You want music?” Zara’s thumb began to scroll. “I’ll play something but you gotta dance too.”

“No explicit content, please,” Emira said. “I’ll get fired if she repeats it.”

Zara waved three fingers in Emira’s direction. “I got this I got this.”

Seconds later, Zara’s phone exploded with sound. She flinched, said, “Whoops,” and turned the volume down. Synth filled the aisle, and as Whitney Houston began to sing, Zara began to twist her hips. Briar started to hop, holding her soft white elbows in her hands, and Emira leaned back on a freezer door, boxes of frozen breakfast sausages and waffles shining in waxy cardboard behind her.

Briar Chamberlain was not a silly child. Balloons never sent her into hysterics and she was more concerned than delighted when clowns threw themselves on the ground or lit their fingers on fire. At birthday parties and ballet class, Briar became sorely aware of herself when music played or magicians called for screaming participation, and she often looked to Emira with nervy blue eyes that said, *Do I really have to do this? Is this really necessary?* So when Briar effortlessly joined Zara and rocked back and forth to the eighties hit, Emira positioned herself, as she often did, as Briar’s out. Whenever Briar had had enough, Emira wanted her to know that she could stop, even though sweet things were currently happening to Emira’s heart. For a moment, twenty-five-year-old

Emira was being paid thirty-two dollars an hour to dance in a grocery store with her best friend and her favorite little human.

Zara seemed just as surprised as Emira. “Oop!” she said as Briar danced harder. “Okay, girl, I see you.”

Briar looked to Emira and said, “You go now too, Mira.”

Emira joined them as Zara sang the chorus, that she wanted to feel the heat with somebody. She spun Briar around and crisscrossed her chest as another body began to come down the aisle. Emira felt relieved to see a middle-aged woman with short gray hair in sporty leggings and a T-shirt reading *St. Paul’s Pumpkinfest 5K*. She looked like she had definitely danced with a child or two at some point in her life, so Emira kept going. The woman put a pint of ice cream into her basket and grinned at the dancing trio. Briar screamed, “You dance like Mama!”

As the last key change of the song started to play, a cart came into the aisle pushed by someone much taller. His shirt read *Penn State* and his eyes were sleepy and cute, but Emira was too far into the choreography to stop without seeming completely affected. She did the Dougie as she caught bananas in his moving cart. She dusted off her shoulders as he reached for a frozen vegetable medley. When Zara told Briar to take a bow, the man silently clapped four times in their direction before he left the aisle. Emira centered her skirt back onto her hips.

“Dang, you got me sweatin’.” Zara leaned down. “Gimme high five. Yes, girl. That’s it for me.”

Emira said, “You out?”

Zara was back on her phone, typing manically. “Someone just might get it tonight.”

Emira placed her long black hair over one shoulder. “Girl, you do you but that boy is *real* white.”

Zara shoved her. “It’s 2015, *Emira!* Yes we *can!*”

“Uh-huh.”

“Thanks for the cab ride, though. Bye, sister.”

Zara tickled the top of Briar’s head before turning to leave. As her heels ticked toward the front of the store, Market Depot suddenly seemed very white and very still.

Briar didn’t realize Zara was leaving until she was out of sight. “You friend,” she said, and pointed to an empty space. Her two front teeth hung out over her bottom lip.

“She has to go to bed,” Emira said. “You wanna look at some nuts?”

“It’s my bedtime.” Briar held Emira’s hand as she hopped forward on the shiny tile. “We sleep in the grocery store?”

“Uh-uh,” Emira said. “We’ll just hang out here for a little while longer.”

“I want . . . I want to smell the tea.”

Briar was always worried about the sequence of upcoming events, so Emira began to slowly clarify that they could look at the nuts first, and then smell the tea after. But as she began to explain, a voice cut her off with, “Excuse me, ma’am.” Footsteps followed and when Emira turned around, a gold security badge blinked and glittered in her face. On top it read *Public Safety* and the bottom curve read *Philadelphia*.

Briar pointed up at his face. “That,” she said, “is *not* the mailman.”

Emira swallowed and heard herself say, “Oh, hi.” The man stood in front of her and placed his thumbs in his belt loops, but he did not say hello back.

Emira touched her hair and said, “Are you guys closing or something?” She knew this store would stay open for another forty-five minutes—it stayed open, clean, and stocked until midnight on weekends—but she wanted him to hear the way she could talk. From behind the security guard’s dark sideburns, at the other end of the aisle, Emira saw another face. The gray-haired, athletic-looking woman, who had appeared to be touched by Briar’s dancing, folded her arms over her chest. She’d set her grocery basket down by her feet.

“Ma’am,” the guard said. Emira looked up at his large mouth and small eyes. He looked like the type of person to have a big family, the kind that spends holidays together for the entire day from start to finish, and not the type of person to use *ma’am* in passing. “It’s very late for someone this small,” he said. “Is this your child?”

“No.” Emira laughed. “I’m her babysitter.”

“Alright, well . . .” he said, “with all due respect, you don’t look like you’ve been babysitting tonight.”

Emira found herself arranging her mouth as if she’d ingested something too hot. She caught a morphed reflection in a freezer door, and she saw herself in her entirety. Her face—full brown lips, a tiny nose, and a high forehead covered with black bangs—barely

showed up in the reflection. Her black skirt, her slinky V-neck top, and her liquid eyeliner refused to take shape in the panels of thick glass. All she could see was something very dark and skinny, and the top of a small, blond stick of hair that belonged to Briar Chamberlain.

“K,” she exhaled. “I’m her babysitter, and her mom called me because—”

“Hi, I’m so sorry, I just . . . hi.” From the end of the aisle, the woman came forward, and her very used tennis shoes squeaked against the tile floor. She put a hand to her chest. “I’m a mom. And I heard the little girl say that she’s not with *her* mom, and since it’s so late I got a little nervous.”

Emira looked at the woman and half laughed. The sentiment felt childish, but all she could think was, *You really just told on me right now?*

“Where . . .”—Briar pointed to one side of the aisle—“Where these doors go?”

“One second, mama. Okay . . .” Emira said. “I’m her sitter and her mom asked me to take her because they had an emergency and she wanted me to get her out of the house. They are three blocks away.” She felt her skin becoming tight at her neck. “We just came here to look at the nuts. Well, we don’t touch them or anything. We’re just . . . we’re really into nuts right now, so . . . yeah.”

For a moment, the security guard’s nostrils expanded. He nodded to himself, as if he’d been asked a question, and said, “Any chance you’ve been drinking tonight, ma’am?” Emira closed her mouth and took a step back. The woman next to him winced and said, “Oh, geez.”

The poultry and meat section came into view. There, the Penn State shopper from earlier was very much paused and attuned to Emira’s conversation. All at once, on top of the surreptitious accusations, this entire interaction seemed completely humiliating, as if she’d been loudly told that her name was not on a guest list. “You know what—it’s cool,” she said. “We can just leave.”

“Now wait a minute.” The guard held out his hand. “I can’t let you leave, because a child is involved.”

“But she’s *my* child right now.” Emira laughed again. “I’m her sitter. I’m technically her nanny . . .” This was a lie, but Emira wanted to imply that paperwork had been done concerning her employment, and that it connected her to the child in question.

“Hi, sweetie.” The woman bent and pressed her hands into her knees. “Do you know where your mommy is?”

“Her mom is at *home*.” Emira tapped her collarbone twice as she said, “You can just talk to *me*.”

“So you’re saying,” the guard clarified, “that a random woman, three blocks away, asked you to watch her child this late at night?”

“Ohmygod, no. That’s not what I said. I’m her *nanny*.”

“There was another girl here a few minutes ago,” the woman said to the guard. “I think she just left.” Emira’s face checked into amazement. As it seemed, her entire existence had become annulled. Emira felt like raising her arm as if she were finding a friend in a large crowd, with a phone to her ear, and saying, *Do you see me? I’m waving my hand*. The woman shook her head. “They were doing some . . . I don’t even know . . . some booty dancing or whatnot? And I thought, okay, this doesn’t feel right.”

“Ummm.” Emira’s voice went high as she said, “Are you serious right now?” Briar sneezed into the side of her leg.

The Penn State man came up and into view. His cell phone was raised and recording in front of his chest.

“Ohmygod.” Emira shielded her face with chipped black nails as if she’d accidentally walked into a group photo. “Can you step off?”

“I think you’re gonna want this filmed,” he said. “Do you want me to call the police?”

Emira dropped her arm and said, “For what?”

“Hey, big girl.” The security guard got down on one knee; his voice was gentle and practiced. “Who’s this right here?”

“Sweetheart?” the woman said softly. “Is this your friend?”

Emira wanted to bend down and hold Briar—maybe if Briar could see her face more clearly, she’d be able to deliver her name?—but she knew her skirt was gravely short, and now there was a cell phone involved. It suddenly seemed like her fate was in the hands of a toddler who believed broccolis were baby trees, and that placing yourself underneath a blanket made it difficult to be found. Emira held her breath as Briar stuck her fingers in her mouth. Briar said, “Meer,” and Emira thought, *Thank God*.

But the guard said, “Not you, honey. Your friend right here. What’s her name?”

Briar screamed, “*Meer!*”

“She’s saying my name,” Emira told him. “It’s Emira.”

The security guard asked, “Can you spell that for me?”

“Hey hey hey.” The man behind the cell phone tried to get Emira’s attention. “Even if they ask, you don’t have to show your ID. It’s Pennsylvania state law.”

Emira said, “I know my rights, dude.”

“Sir?” The security guard stood and turned. “You do not have the right to interfere with a crime.”

“Holup holup, a *crime*?!” Emira felt as if she were plummeting. All the blood in her body seemed to be buzzing and sloshing inside her ears and behind her eyes. She reached down to swing Briar into her arms, placed her feet apart for balance, and flipped her hair onto her back. “What crime is being committed right now? I’m *working*. I’m making money right now, and I bet I’m making more than you. We came here to look at some nuts, so are we under arrest or are we free to go?” As she spoke, Emira covered the child’s ear. Briar slipped her hand into the V of her blouse.

Once again, the tattletale woman took her hand to her mouth. This time, she said, “Oh man, oh shoot.”

“Okay, ma’am?” The security guard widened his stance to match hers. “You are being held and questioned because the safety of a child is at risk. Please put the child on the ground—”

“Alright, you know what?” Emira’s left ankle shook as she retrieved her cell phone from her tiny purse. “I’ll call her father and he can come down here. He’s an old white guy so I’m sure everyone will feel better.”

“Ma’am, I need you to calm down.” With his palms to Emira, the security guard locked eyes with Briar again. “Okay, honey, how old are you?”

Emira typed the first four letters of *Peter Chamberlain* and clicked on his bright blue phone number. Against Briar’s hand, she felt her heart bounce underneath her skin.

“How many are you, honey?” the woman asked. “Two? Three?” To the guard she said, “She looks about two.”

“Ohmygod, she’s almost three,” Emira muttered.

“Ma’am?” The security guard pointed a finger at her face. “*I am speaking to the child.*”

“Oh right, okay. ’Cause she’s the one to ask. BB, look at me.” Emira forced a gleeful expression into her lips and bounced the toddler twice. “How many are you?”

“One two fee four fie!”

“How old am I?”

“Happy birthday!”

Emira looked back to the security guard and said, “You good?” In her cell phone, the ringing stopped. “Mr. Chamberlain?” Something clicked in the earpiece but she didn’t hear a voice. “It’s Emira, hello? Can you hear me?”

“I’d like to speak to her father.” The security guard reached out for her phone.

“The fuck are you doing? Don’t touch me!” Emira turned her body. At this motion, Briar gasped. She held Emira’s black, synthetic hair against her chest like rosary beads.

“You don’t wanna touch her, dude,” Penn State warned. “She’s not resisting. She’s calling the kid’s dad.”

“Ma’am, I am asking you to kindly hand over the phone.”

“Come on, man, you can’t take her phone.”

The guard turned with a hand outstretched and yelled, “Back up, sir!”

With her phone pressed to her face and Briar’s hands in her hair, Emira screamed, “You’re not even a real cop, so you back up, son!” And then she watched his face shift. His eyes said, *I see you now. I know exactly who you are*, and Emira held her breath as he began to call for backup.

Emira heard Mr. Chamberlain’s voice at the top of her cell phone. He said, “Emira?” and then, “Hello?”

“Mr. Chamberlain? Can you please come to Market Depot?” In the same controlled panic that started her night, she said, “Because they think I stole Briar. Can you please hurry?” He said something between *What* and *Oh God*, and then he said, “I’m coming right now.”

Emira hadn’t anticipated that the heated accusations would be favorable to the silence that followed. The five of them stood there, appearing more annoyed than justified, as they waited to see who would win. As Emira began a staring contest with the floor, Briar patted the hair on Emira’s shoulders. “Dis is like my horsey hair,” Briar said. Emira bounced her and said, “Mm-hmm. It was very expensive so please be careful.” Finally, she heard the glide of an automatic door. With quick footsteps, Mr. Chamberlain emerged from the cereal aisle. Briar pointed with one finger and said, “That’s Dada.”

Mr. Chamberlain looked as if he’d jogged the whole way—tiny beads of sweat on his nose—and he placed a hand on Emira’s

shoulder. “What’s going on here?”

Emira responded by holding out his daughter. The woman took a step back and said, “Okay, great. I’ll just leave you guys to it.” The security guard began to explain and apologize. He took off his hat as his backup arrived.

Emira didn’t wait for Mr. Chamberlain to finish lecturing the guards about how long he had been coming to the store, how they cannot detain people without reasonable cause, or how inappropriate it was that they question his decisions as a parent. Instead she whispered, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Emira,” he said. “Wait. Let me pay you.”

She waved no with both hands. “I get paid on Fridays. I’ll see you at your birthday, Bri.” But Briar had begun to fall asleep on Mr. Chamberlain’s shoulder.

Outside, Emira jogged around the corner, in the opposite direction of the Chamberlain home. She stopped and stood in front of a closed bakery with cupcakes on display behind a gridded security gate; her hands were still shaking as she texted no one. Breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth, Emira scanned through hundreds of songs. She shimmied her hips and pulled her skirt back down.

“Hey hey hey.” Penn State appeared at the street corner. He made his way toward her and said, “Hey, are you okay?”

Emira slumped her shoulders in a miserable lift that said *I don’t know*. With her phone in front of her stomach, she bit the inside of her cheek.

“Listen, that was super fucked up,” he said. “I got the whole thing on tape. I would turn it in to a news station if I were you and then you can—”

“Oof. Yeah . . . no,” she said. She pushed her hair out of her face. “No way, but . . . thanks anyway, though.”

He paused and ran his tongue over his front teeth. “Okay, that guy was a dick to you. Don’t you wanna get him fired?”

Emira laughed and said, “For what?” She shifted in her heels and put her phone back in her purse. “So he can go to another grocery store and get some other nine-dollar-an-hour bullshit job? Please. I’m not tryna have people Google my name and see me lit, with a baby that isn’t mine, at a fucking grocery store in Washington Square.”

The man exhaled and held up one hand in surrender. Underneath his other arm was a Market Depot paper bag. “I mean . . .” He put his free hand on his hip. “At the very least, you could probably get free groceries for a year.”

“Oh, right. So I can stock up on kombucha and shit?”

He laughed and said, “Fair.”

“Lemme see your phone.” Emira jiggled her ring and middle finger as she held out her palm. “You need to delete that thing.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” he asked carefully. “I’m serious. This would definitely get you an op-ed or something.”

“I’m not a writer,” Emira said. “And I don’t mess with the Internet, so give it.”

“Wait, how about this?” He took out his phone. “It’s your business and I’m happy to delete it. But let me email it to you first, in case you ever change your mind.”

“I won’t, though—”

“Just in case . . . here. Type your email in.”

Because it seemed easier to share her email than convince him otherwise, Emira held the strap of her purse in one hand and began to type with the other. When she saw the email address in the From section, reading *KelleyTCopeland@gmail.com*, she stopped and said, “Hold up, who the fuck is Kelley?”

He blinked. “I’m Kelley.”

“Oh.” As she finished typing her email, Emira looked up and said, “Really?”

“Alright, alright.” He took the phone back from her. “I’ve been to middle school so you can’t really hurt me.”

Emira smiled. “No wonder you shop here.”

“Hey, I don’t usually shop here.” He laughed. “But don’t make me feel worse. I have two types of kombucha in this bag right now.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Did you delete it?”

“It’s gone.” He showed her the screen and scrolled backward. The most recent photo was a man she didn’t know with a Post-it stuck to his face. She couldn’t read what it said.

“K.” Emira pulled a string of hair from the gloss on her lips. She gave him a sad *I don’t know* grin, and said, “K. Bye, then.”

“Okay, yeah, have a good night, take care.” It was clear he hadn’t seen this exit coming, but Emira didn’t care. She walked toward the train while texting Zara, Come over when you’re done.