

A close-up photograph of a person's hand and forearm. The hand is positioned with the index finger pointing towards the bottom right. The person is wearing a gold-colored metal bracelet with a textured, braided design. Their fingernails are painted black. On the back of the hand, the words "A NOVEL" are written in a black, sans-serif font. The background is a solid, vibrant green color.

noelle crooks

"Fast-paced . . . fun."
—USA Today bestselling
author Catherine McKenzie

under the

influence

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noelle crooks

**under the
influence**

a novel



GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To everyone who has always believed in me. But more important, to everyone who
didn't.

(Yep, it's that kind of book.)

1

Girl's Gotta Eat!

Girl, are you tired of everyone telling you what you can and can't do? Are you so over the patriarchy and middle-aged white dudes mansplaining how things work in the "real world"? Ever wish that people who talked so much about the real world actually lived in it so people like you and me could succeed?

I'm talking money, girl, like the money you need to pay your bills and your rent and to buy those cute outfits that you deserve to be wearing. Real money, not my-parents-are-rich-so-I-can-take-an-internship-and-still-make-it money, but I'm-gonna-earn-my-way-to-the-top-'cause-I-got-hustle-for-days-and-what-I-lack-in-connections-I-make-up-for-with-ambition kind of money. Money you earned and deserve, fair and square.

*We all gotta eat, girl, but we don't have to eat sh*t, if you know what I mean. So if you're more interested in getting sh*t done than taking it—and if you want to join a diverse community of like-minded badass babes who know that the world is better when we let everyone have a seat at the table—then this is the job for you. But we don't like to call this a job. It's more of a calling, an answer to the warrior woman who lives inside of you, the one who is willing to break barriers and shatter glass ceilings!*

We're manifesting a new Visionary Support Strategist to be the right hand to our superstar founder. As the newest team member, you'll be learning from the best and crushing the rest. From daily tasks to innovative asks, our fast-paced environment will give you countless opportunities to shine. So, if this sounds like something you'd be interested in, what are you waiting for, girl? Join us at The Greenhouse!

"You're not serious," Harper said, looking up from the screen at her roommate, Poppy, who was refilling their glasses of rosé and smiling.

"I'm totally serious, and you have to admit it's kind of dead-on about all the things you've been bitching about."

"I haven't been bitching," Harper said, stung, because yes, she had been bitching. If Harper were honest, it was the only thing she had been successful at for the last three months.

She accepted her refill and sat back on her end of the couch facing Poppy, their legs outstretched toward each other. They always sat like this, with Poppy's legs, which went on for days, hanging over the armrest on either side of Harper. In the middle, on the blanket draped over their knees, they propped up the ever-present bowl of popcorn that they picked at when reading magazines, books, their iPads, or, like tonight, job listings on a laptop they passed back and forth between them.

"I can't say I blame you for being fed up, and by the sound of this ad, you're not alone. And while I don't love being called out for being wealthy enough to work for free, it *is* true, so..."

"You work hard, Poppy; I've never seen anyone work as hard as you do. Besides, I'm grateful to your parents for letting me live here for so little. I wouldn't be able to live in Manhattan on a freelancer's salary if it weren't for them." It still nearly killed Harper to pay her share of the rent each month, cobbled together from the cater-waiter jobs she did on the weekends and the college essays she edited and overcharged for. After a series of bad luck that had seen Harper lose her job at a literary agency after it folded and then an entry-level job at a small publishing house when it was

gobbled up in a merger, she still hadn't been able to find a steady paying gig. She hadn't expected it to be so hard to find another job where she would be overworked and underpaid—New York was full of them. But at twenty-seven, when there were younger competitors who were willing to work more and get paid less, Harper's road seemed to be leading nowhere.

"My parents are fine with what you pay. Besides, they've had this place forever. They got it when my dad was doing his residency, and I'm sure they paid nothing for it back in the day."

It was true that the large, boxy two-bedroom apartment in a prewar doorman building on the Upper East Side had been acquired for a fraction of what it was worth now, but even that fraction was the kind of money that Harper had never known. Like everyone else who had only experienced New York City through movies or books, Harper Cruz had arrived in Manhattan looking to find the kind of real estate steal that characters in television shows always mentioned when justifying their giant apartments in prime neighborhoods—the ones they were supposedly house-sitting or that had been passed down to them or were miraculously rent-controlled.

Harper had chosen to believe that she was going to be lucky too, because Manhattan Harper's life was going to be far more glamorous than Poughkeepsie Harper's life. But she soon realized the only apartment she could afford was the one in New Jersey she ended up sharing with a cat-loving schoolteacher named Norma. The commute into the city was brutal.

If life were a movie, a handsome, wealthy man would have bumped into our young, fish-out-of-water protagonist on the subway, asking her: *Hey, what's with all the hives on your face?* She'd tell him it turned out that she was allergic to her roommate's cats, but she couldn't leave now because she'd given her first and last months' rent, which was really all the money she had left. She'd assure him that the two-hour commute wasn't all that bad because it gave her time to read in the mornings. She could just take an antihistamine every day, even though that made her drowsy. And he'd look at her like he was charmed by her weird logic, swollen face, and puffy eyes, and say something like, *You know, my roommate is moving out, and if you wanted, you could take his room. You'd only have to pay the maintenance fee on the apartment, 'cause my rich parents aren't looking to make money on the place. They just want me to have someone who is stable and nice and normal to live with, no strings attached, no funny stuff...* So *what do you say, Hives?* And of course, our heroine would say *yes!* and we would all feel butterflies in our stomachs because clearly, sparks are going to fly between these two, and we cannot wait to see it all unfold!

In real life, that handsome young stranger had been Poppy, Harper's gorgeous coworker at the now-defunct literary agency they met at. Standing just shy of six foot two, Poppy was the type of beauty that required no makeup and looked like a long-lost Hadid sister. The departing roommate, who was actually a model, spent all her time partying and always ended up bringing the party home, so anyone compared to her looked pretty great to Poppy's parents. And instead of a romance, a friendship flourished because it turned out that Poppy was even nicer than she was beautiful. So it all worked out in the end... at least until Harper lost her job twice and discovered just how hard it was to get another one. Whether she liked it or not, Harper had entered the beggars-can't-be-choosers phase of her job hunt.

"I don't know," Harper said, reading the ad again. "*Girl? Badass babe?* Can you imagine Gretchen calling us that?"

"I can't imagine Gretchen remembering our names, which is why she called us *Lady* all the time," Poppy said, adding chili-lime salt to her palmful of popcorn. "Come to think of it, I don't

think she remembered anyone's names, not even her authors, which is probably why her literary agency folded."

"Hey, *Lady*, I need you to do something for me," Harper said, imitating her former boss. "I'm not sure which is worse—lady or girl?"

"Lady," Poppy said, rolling her eyes.

"You're just saying that to make me feel better. I told you, you don't have to feel bad about your promotion. You deserve it. You're a great editor." Harper meant it, although she would be lying if she didn't admit that part of her found it hard to watch Poppy's obstacle-free ascent to associate editor at a major publishing house. Having financial security meant that Poppy didn't have to take on extra work after hours to make ends meet. She was free to attend as many literary events and network with her well-connected parents' even more well-connected friends as much as she wanted, without ever worrying about her credit card being rejected at lunches or cocktails. "If there's anyone I want to see killing it out there, it's you and not some—"

"Other rich girl who can afford to work fourteen-hour days for fifty thousand a year?" Poppy said, knocking Harper's shoulder with her foot.

"Exactly. Those other girls suck." Harper said it to make her roommate laugh, and it worked.

Even though Poppy was privileged, she did her best to make the most of it by volunteering what little time she had at the nearest library, where she ran adult literacy programs and handled preschool story time the third Tuesday of every month. She was passionate about the work she did, but nothing was going to change the fact that Poppy didn't actually *have* to work for a living. And if things went the way Poppy's parents expected them to, starting with her marrying her doctor-boyfriend, Charles, and moving back to Connecticut to raise a family, she might actually stop working one day. But unlike Poppy, Harper *needed* to make money... *like the money you need to pay your bills and your rent and to buy those cute outfits that you deserve to be wearing.*

Harper took another look at the ad, which was obnoxious but catchy. She had to admit: it did feel like it was speaking directly to her.

"I don't even know what this job is for," she said, scanning the listing for more details.

"It's *not* for a small press in Poughkeepsie," Poppy said, tilting her head and looking Harper in the eye.

A job as an editor at the *Poughkeepsie Press*, the town's tiny literary magazine, had just opened, and Harper's parents weren't exactly subtle about wanting her to apply for it. She knew they were only trying to help, especially since they were no longer going to be able to support her financially anymore, but the thought of moving back home still made her want to die a little. It was bad enough she had to ask for help after she lost both jobs, hoping she'd be able to find something else quickly. But now that she knew her parents' business was struggling, that was no longer an option. And if she wanted to avoid moving back home, she would have to change her situation—fast.

"Point taken," Harper said.

Poppy reached for the laptop. "*Visionary Support Strategist*. You have to admit, that sounds way cooler than *Entry Level Editorial Assistant*."

Harper had to admit that it did.

"And what does it pay?" Harper asked. She'd missed it the first time.

"*Better than average, with perks*," Poppy said, reading aloud. "And, wait for it, a housing allowance *because living in the city ain't cheap*."

"You're kidding."

“I’m not!” Poppy said. “You should apply! What do you have to lose?”

“I don’t know...”

“Look, I attached your résumé. You can always hit send. If you get contacted, do the interview, and if it’s not for you, you don’t have to take it. I can float you for another month, it’s no big deal.” She reached over and patted Harper’s hand. “Now, I’m going to call Charles and have him get us some more wine and some food on his way over. And don’t worry, I’ve got this,” she said, getting up to call her incredibly nice boyfriend. Soon he would arrive with food and drinks and flowers and probably even something for Harper, because he was thoughtful that way, but after that would soon follow another night of Harper being forced to listen to Poppy and Charles having loud sex through their bedrooms’ thin shared wall, and getting a crick in her neck from the noise-canceling headphones she would have to wear if she wanted to get any sleep.

In the morning, they’d invite her to breakfast after they went jogging because she had no plans, and offer to pay because she had no money, and she’d decline and go to Central Park instead with her everything bagel with cream cheese. She’d sit on the same sad bench she used to share with Dylan, her high school boyfriend turned college boyfriend turned ex, who dumped her after they graduated from NYU because he didn’t love New York City the way she did and wanted to move back home. He liked his small-town life and his small-town dreams. Apparently, he also liked wasting her time.

Harper had waited for that moment when he would come back to tell her he had made a mistake—a real-life rom-com—but he never did. Then she waited for someone else to take his place, but that didn’t happen either. Then she’d vowed that she’d show them all, *them* being an umbrella category that would go beyond her ex and the guys she went on terrible dates with to include employers and coworkers of all kinds by *becoming* a giant success. But instead, here she was, a little tipsy, a lot broke, and desperate to turn things around.

Harper exhaled loudly, polished off her glass of wine, and pulled the laptop close. The words *what are you waiting for* shone up at her, demanding an answer. Realizing she didn’t have one, she hit send.

2

#Girlbosses

Welcome to the team, girl! You got this! Hit me back for meeting deets!

Harper checked the time on her phone—7:30 a.m., too early to be getting texts on a Sunday morning, especially when they contained this many exclamation points. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and tried to bend her ear to her shoulder. She had indeed fallen asleep with her headphones on again. It had been a busy night for Poppy and Charles. She was just about to text back *Who is this?* when her screen lit up again.

FYI-Bella here, by the way, Charlotte Green's Support Superstar at The Greenhouse. We're so excited to meet you! We're wheels up at 9:30 am, so text me back ASAP.

Wheels up? Welcome to the team? There must be some kind of mistake. Harper had only submitted her résumé the night before. She was about to go back to bed when Poppy appeared in her doorway, already in her Alo Yoga running gear, holding up her phone.

"Someone named Bella is on the phone for you. She said she's been trying to reach you all morning about the job and hasn't heard back."

"All morning?" Harper whispered incredulously. "She just texted me. Why is she calling you? And how did she get your number?"

"I'm one of your references, remember?" Poppy passed her the phone, looking excited.

"Hi, this is Harper Cruz."

"Oh, Harper, thank God, I thought something happened to you when I didn't hear back."

"You only texted me a few minutes ago," Harper said, stunned.

"I know, right? Anything could've happened in that time. You could've fallen in the shower, been mugged, or choked on a bagel. Hashtag New York problems! Anyway, I'm just glad you're okay. So now, more importantly, *loved* your application, *loved* your references, *loved* your Insta and Facebook profiles, though they are a bit sparse..."

"Wait, you checked my..."

"Totally jelly that you have a rad pad in Manhattan, but it'll still be there when you get back."

"Get back from where?"

“We’ll be at your place in thirty minutes. I thought you could meet Charlotte on the way to the airport, do your interview, then have some one-on-one time. If all goes well, you can get a flight out to Nashville tonight and get settled, and tomorrow we can hit the ground running!” Bella’s cheerful voice rang in Harper’s ears.

“Wait, hold up—*Nashville?*” Harper asked. She didn’t remember the ad saying anything about Nashville.

“You’ll love it.”

“I don’t even know what my responsibilities are, or what the starting salary is.”

Harper looked up to see Poppy, who was giving her a reassuring thumbs-up.

Bella was quiet on the other end of the phone for a moment and then spoke, her voice serious. “Look, I know it seems fast, but when Charlotte knows, she knows, and out of all the applications, she picked yours personally. She’s a one-woman empire with three bestselling books, a series of webinars, sold-out conferences, and more meaningful collaborations than anyone else I know. So when she says she knows, people listen. I listen. *You* should listen. But if working for a powerhouse for a starting salary of a hundred and twenty thousand dollars at a company that believes women crush it literally every damn day isn’t for you, then tell me now. But we had fifteen hundred applicants apply to our job posting and it was only up for an hour, and to be honest, I’d really rather not go through all of them.”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say.”

“Take a second. Think about it,” Bella said. “I’ll call you back.” She hung up the phone, and in answer to the look of curiosity on Poppy’s face, Harper blurted out, “Fifteen hundred applicants, Charlotte Green picked me personally, one hundred and twenty k—” But before she could say anything else, the phone was ringing. Clearly, when Bella said to take a second, she meant literally.

Harper looked up at Poppy, who looked at Charles as he joined her in the doorway, having overheard the whole thing from the living room. He gave Harper a big encouraging smile, then leaned in and kissed Poppy on the neck. He whispered something in her ear, making her blush. Unwittingly, Harper reached her hand to her own neck and wondered when the last time was that someone had kissed her that tenderly. For a brief time, Harper had really believed that all her dreams were going to come true—but now it felt like she had nothing. Everything good that she had was thanks to Poppy, and how much longer could this living situation possibly last? Charles was always sleeping over, and Harper wouldn’t be surprised if Poppy got engaged by the spring, and then what did she expect them to do? Let her stay living with them forever? Adopt her?

She picked up the phone. Bella’s voice bursting with energy on the other end of the line. “So what do you say, girl—are you ready to crush this interview?”

It was nice to be wanted for a change, it was nice to hear yes, and 120k was more than triple what she would’ve made if she’d been promoted before the publishing company ended. Not to mention that every penny would go a lot further in Nashville. She could pay Poppy back, she could make her student loan payments on time, she could stop being a burden to her parents, she could find a new calling... A little voice inside her said, *Slow down, you don’t even know who this Charlotte Green is. You took a long time making New York work, spent years doing it, don’t rush into anything.* But the idea of starting her twenty-seventh year with a brand-new job and an exciting new place to live was a hell of a lot more appealing than going home to Poughkeepsie and telling her parents she was still unemployed and broke, or having Poppy and Charles take her somewhere nice and try to

cheer her up with stories that the best was yet to come. Maybe the best had just arrived with this insane job offer? Maybe this time it really was her time. At this point, she had nothing left to lose.

She made eye contact with Poppy and smiled, giving her a thumbs-up. Poppy clapped her hands together in excitement.

“You know what, *girl?*” she said. “I am ready to crush that interview!”

While Harper ran around getting ready, Poppy sat on the edge of Harper’s bed, scrolling the internet for information about Charlotte and shouting it out.

“She’s big,” Poppy said, her eyes scanning the screen. “She has almost two million followers, three bestselling books, and a series of self-help webinars.”

“Really? So why do I know nothing about her?” Harper asked, coming over to look at Poppy’s phone. There was a photo of Charlotte holding up a green smoothie in a perfectly clean, all-white kitchen—#drinkyourGREENS—and another of the Green family on a boat for the Fourth of July, all of them wearing coordinating red, white, and blue stripes—#ProudToBeAnAmerican; #ProudToBeAGreen—and Charlotte at some influencer summit in Aspen—#girlbosses.

“I don’t know. How many self-help influencer gurus do you follow?”

“Follow? None,” Harper replied. Ask her about her favorite authors or the best book of the year, and she could tell you. But when it came to social media, Harper had about as much knowledge as cat-loving Norma.

“I’ve heard of her,” Charles said, bringing them coffee. “She’s this tiny little powerhouse with long blond hair, married to this giant New England Ken doll. And she always wears these green Vans—it’s her trademark. She used to wear black stilettos all the time, but then she changed it up to stand out from all the other heel-wearing influencers.”

“*Why* do you know all of this?” Poppy asked, slightly horrified.

“Because my aunt Minnie loves her.”

“Aunt Minnie, the one who lives in Texas with the boozy book club?”

“Red, white, and true,” Charles said. He handed Harper a mug. “They only do romance novels about true love and inspirational nonfiction books. And they drink red and white wine. A *lot* of it.”

“Okay...” Harper said, trying to keep up.

“Anyway, the last time I visited her, Charlotte was all she would talk about. Quotes her all the time! *Give yourself the Greenlight. Stop saying no and start saying go.* Charlotte’s big on self-transformation, and my aunt credits her with transforming her from being a sad housewife to a rich divorcée—and inspiring her to wear more comfortable shoes.”

“Okay, well, I’m happy for your aunt Minnie, but I should probably do a bit more research,” Harper said, sipping her coffee.

“You don’t have much time for research; she’ll be here soon,” Poppy said. “But look, you’re smart, you’re hardworking, and if you can work for Gretchen, you can work for anyone. There’s a reason she picked you out of all those other applicants, so don’t worry. You’ll figure it out as you go, *girl!*”

“*Girl*, you know I will!” Harper said, hoping that if she said it like she meant it, it could be true.

3

Flying High

Charlotte Green rolled up to Harper's apartment building exactly twenty-nine minutes later. Charlotte was always early, Bella had told Harper via text, except when she was late, which didn't really count because it meant that she had a really good reason or was putting out some fire or dealing with something so important that it couldn't wait. But because she was always early for her people her people always needed to be early for her.

"Cute outfit," Charlotte said, giving Harper the once-over and nodding approvingly after Harper had settled into the back seat of the Lincoln Navigator. Charlotte was so tiny that her green Vans barely touched the floor. She twirled one of her strategically waved strands of long blond hair and tucked it behind an ear that was studded with a series of small diamonds and pearls. Pursing her glossy lips, she narrowed her eyes and took Harper in.

"*Super* cute," she emphasized, then adjusted her oversize soft tan cashmere sweater wrap and brushed an imaginary piece of lint off her jeans.

Harper had done the best she could in the time she had. She'd sprayed her hair with dry shampoo, pulled it back into a messy bun, slapped on some tinted moisturizer and mascara, and gave herself bright red lips and gold hoop earrings. She'd put on a black jumpsuit, white VEJA sneakers, and her tortoiseshell glasses.

"Thank you," Harper said, trying to figure out why Charlotte was being so fidgety. But then she caught a look in Bella's giant dark brown eyes, a look of pleading. Bella tilted her head toward Charlotte, her mouth silently saying, *Compliment her*. Oh.

"I love your sweater," Harper blurted out. "That color is amazing on you."

Harper had never before complimented a boss on their appearance, never mind one she'd never met before. It was a weird thing to do, but she could feel the energy shift in the car the moment she did, Charlotte brightening and Bella's whole face relaxing.

"Thank you. It's part of my upcoming collaboration with Target," Charlotte said with a happy sigh. "The ones in the store won't be cashmere because *hashtag price point*, but they'll have the same great color and feel. It's like wrapping yourself up in a great big hug, or better yet, it's like getting a great big hug from *me*. No, it's like..." She pursed her mouth and furrowed her brow, looking at Bella.

"It's like a... *community* hug?" Bella offered, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder.

Charlotte shook her head and turned to Harper, her blue eyes wide, waiting.

"It's like... a *group hug* because we're all in this together, *girl*?" she said, not exactly sure how to play this particular game.

“Yes, love that. That’s it. Write that down, Bella. I love how we just jammed on that, how you took what *I* came up with and used it as inspiration to build on.”

“Well, you make it easy because you always have the best ideas, so there’s just so much to work with,” Bella said, fawning.

“It’s true, I do give you a lot. It’s just who I am,” Charlotte replied. She placed her hand on Harper’s and squeezed it. “I’m a really generous boss. My team is the best because I handpick them myself, and because we work so closely together, they get a chance to grow from my mentorship and realize their full potential. We’re like a family, minus the screaming kids. Child labor and all.”

“Right,” Harper said, slowly.

“Although I sure wouldn’t mind sending my little buggers off to work once in a while, the spoiled brats.”

Before Harper could say anything, Charlotte laughed and slapped her arm. “I’m kidding! I love my kids, all five of them.”

“Six,” Bella corrected.

“Right— I mean the five that I gave birth to. The one step-kid’s easy to forget because he lives with his mom in Connecticut and hates my guts. The point is, I’m a family person, and not only do I treat every one of my employees like family, I make it my mission to give them as many opportunities as I can to help them be the best they can be. Not every boss is like that, but I’m not like any other boss. I *really* care.” Charlotte tapped her fist to her heart. She closed her eyes and started to rock back and forth, pumping herself up, her face full of emotion. She put her finger in the air and moved it in a circle, the way people did on film sets to say that the cameras were rolling. Bella pulled out her phone to film whatever impromptu inspirational speech was about to happen, her face mirroring the emotion on Charlotte’s. Harper, having no idea what was happening, leaned back in her seat and watched in surprise.

Charlotte spoke directly to the camera. “When people ask me why I care so much, I tell them it’s because I’ve been there. I know what it’s like to have to build your life from scratch because I’ve done it.”

“By yourself...” Bella whispered.

“By myself. I had no one to rely on but me. I didn’t get any handouts...”

“No, you didn’t,” Bella said.

“But I sure heard no a lot.”

“All the time.”

“But I took those nos and turned them into yeses.”

“Because that’s what you do,” Bella said.

“Because that’s what I do,” Charlotte repeated. “And that’s what I want you to do too, my Greenhouse Fam, because I care about you. I’m a highly empathetic person, which means that sometimes I care about you so much that it hurts. But it’s worth it, because *you’re* worth it,” she exclaimed, blinking back real tears as she preached to the camera. “That’s right. Every single one of you is worth it. And if I can do this, you can too. I got your back, *girl*, just like you have mine, and together we’re going to *crush it. See you in Nashville!*”

She smiled and took a deep breath, nodding her head knowingly for a moment. Then she signaled *Cut* and Bella pressed stop.

“That was amazing!” Bella shouted, high-fiving Charlotte.

Charlotte looked at Harper, who was quickly trying to rearrange the look of shock and horror on her face into something more closely resembling appreciation and awe. “Wow,” she said slowly, “that was... amazing. I mean, I don’t even know what to say.”

Saying “that was absolutely insane” certainly wasn’t going to help her chances of landing this job.

“It’s just what I do. We get a lot of my best stuff on the fly, you know, real from-the-heart stuff, because that’s what my fans identify with. I’m real like them, although not exactly like them, obviously.” She gestured to the car, her enamel Chanel watch and large diamond wedding ring shining brightly as she did. “But you know what I mean.”

“Sure, you’re inspirational and aspirational all rolled into one,” Harper said, treading carefully.

“I told you,” Charlotte said to Bella, “even if she’s never heard of me, she’ll pick it up quickly.”

“I’ve heard of you,” Harper said, hoping she wouldn’t have to be more specific. Telling Charlotte that she heard she was a hit with middle-aged Texan women who liked to get their drink on wasn’t exactly going to cut it.

Charlotte turned to Harper, her eyes narrowed and her face serious. “No, you haven’t, not really. And I know that because I wasn’t in any of your hashtags on Instagram and Twitter, neither of my books were in your Goodreads queue, and you once tweeted that the only influencer you knew was the kind that put you in bed with a fever of one hundred and two degrees for three days.”

“I was joking,” Harper said, turning red. “It was a joke about the flu. *Influencer*? Get it?” From the outer edges of her brain, she pulled Corrine James’s name into focus and, in an effort to impress Charlotte, trotted it out. “And actually, I’ve met an influencer. Corrine James. She was an author my boss worked with. She came in to talk about women in the workplace and—”

Harper was just about to say that Corrine’s talk had taught her a lot when she caught Bella’s panicked expression. She shook her head and ran her finger back and forth across her throat, signaling for Harper to cut it.

“If you really knew anything about me, you’d know that C.J. and I can’t stand each other. She’s a privileged snob who cares more about Wall Street than Main Street, and she treats her business like a corporation instead of a community. Maybe that’s because she never had to pay her own way, unlike those of us who had student loans and had to work two jobs to put ourselves through college, am I right?” Charlotte said, flicking her hair over her shoulder and leveling a stare at Harper.

“Totally, that’s why I knew I wanted to work for you, you get it,” Harper lied, hoping to turn things around.

Charlotte smiled, her sunny disposition returning. “Anyways, what I’m saying is, it doesn’t matter. If I wanted a sycophant, I could be offering this job to the other fourteen hundred and ninety-nine people who applied for it. But I want a fresh perspective, a new set of eyes, and a more cosmopolitan take on things.”

“Okay...”

“And we really believe in diversity at The Greenhouse, so I think you’ll feel really at home there,” Charlotte said, nodding sincerely. “Just ask Bella.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Harper said.

“Well, because Bella’s half Asian, and you’re half Filipino. You are half Filipino, right? That’s what Bella said. Isn’t that what you said, Bella?”

“Well, I just thought because your last name is Cruz... and I did some looking, not that it matters,” Bella said quickly.

“Uh yeah, my mom’s Filipino, and my dad’s family is all from Pennsylvania. Cruz is my mom’s maiden name and my middle name, but I use it professionally...” Harper said, not sure where this was going.

“Love that. Feminism,” Charlotte said. “And just so you know, I have so much respect for immigrants like your mom, and Bella’s family. They have the best work ethic—am I right?”

“I guess,” Harper said, feeling uncomfortable.

“My point is, I believe in embracing everyone at The Greenhouse. I don’t care if you’re gay, straight, Black, white, Asian, or all of the above. My creative director, Oliver, is gay and Indian, and he’s also one of my best friends. And let me tell you, we raised a lot of eyebrows when we were growing up in Georgia, but we said fuck you if you had a problem with it. Sorry, I cuss sometimes. Do you cuss?”

Harper’s head was spinning, unsure whether she should find Charlotte’s speech on diversity alarming or reassuring.

“Sometimes, I guess...”

“You’re shocked; I shocked you. I’m just trying to keep it real. So forgive me if I went about that differently from what you might be used to here in New York. I’m sure there’s some politically correct HR-approved method to have that conversation, but I’m a Georgia Peach, and in Georgia, we believe you can be sweet *and* a straight shooter, like sweet tea spiked with whiskey. Is that okay with you?” Charlotte leaned forward.

“As long as we’re only shooting metaphorically,” Harper said, laughing nervously.

“Thatta girl,” Charlotte replied, smiling. “You’re funny too. I got that from your writing. I liked the piece you did that went viral. The one about interns with a side hustle that explained how they were *really* able to live on those small salaries? So many dog walkers and babysitters. I could totally relate. I had three jobs when I started out. Hustle was how I got where I am. It’s also why I believe in paying people properly.” She leaned back against her seat and smiled.

“You are *so* generous,” Bella agreed.

“I am, and I believe in rewarding talent. You’re a good writer, Harper. Maybe you could even write for me one day.”

“But I thought *I* was in charge of your social,” Bella said, looking at Charlotte, her eyes wide.

“You are, but I’m talking *real* writing, Bella. Harper’s been to college...”

“I’ve been to college,” Bella said.

“I know that, but you didn’t go to *NYU*, not that I’m judging. I mean, look at me—I went to little ol’ Georgia University, and I’m a huge freaking success. Tri Delta sister, top of my class... but I don’t like to brag about it, of course. It makes people feel intimidated, and that’s not me.”

“Of course not,” Bella agreed.

Harper, struggling to keep up, just nodded and smiled.

“Anyway, we’ve got lots to do before then. I just want us all to be open to doing whatever is best for The Greenhouse, okay?”

“Absolutely,” Bella said, looking down.

“Oh my God, wipe that sad look off your face, Bells. You know you’re like my doppelganger-sister-from-another-mother work wife, right?” She reached forward and squeezed Bella’s arm, a huge smile on her face.

“I know, I’m being stupid,” Bella said, twisting her fingers through her long dark hair.

“So stupid,” Charlotte said, laughing.

“You’re right,” Bella replied, shaking her head. “I’m sorry; that’s my baggage about my worth, not yours. Of course, whatever is best for Team Green is best for all of us.”

“Good,” Charlotte said. She looked at Harper. “Do you have any questions?”

Harper had nothing but questions, but she didn’t know where to begin, so she shook her head instead and tried to push down that little voice inside her that said, *Run*.

They pulled up to the airport curb, and Bella handed Harper a large mint-green folder that read WELCOME TO THE GREENHOUSE! “Everything you need to know about getting started is in there: company mission statement and vision, job responsibilities, a one-year contract—”

“You haven’t signed a contract yet?” Charlotte asked Harper, as if it was her fault.

“What? No, I just did the interview.”

“Oh sure, but that was only a formality, or you wouldn’t be here. I don’t have time to waste on interviews. But you gotta sign that first before we give you anything else. I mean, this is all insider team stuff. We can’t have it out there on social—not like you’re even *on* social—but you know.”

“Right, okay...”

“You can sign it now.” She checked her watch. “But hurry, because I can’t miss this flight.” She signaled for the driver to get her bags from the trunk.

Harper pulled out the contract and scanned it as quickly as she could. The salary was right, her job title of Visionary Support Strategist was listed correctly, but it was a lot to read so quickly, and she could feel her heart beating faster as both Bella and Charlotte stared at her and the driver stood waiting with the luggage on the curb. Her mind was swimming as she turned the page quickly. Someone honked at the car. “Just a minute!” the driver called. Charlotte sighed loudly, and Harper put down the pen.

“Look, this is a great opportunity, I know, but it’s just all happening so fast. I think I need time, and...”

Charlotte motioned for Bella to leave the car, and as soon as they were alone, she turned to Harper, her eyes sincere and her voice kind. “You’re freaking out. I get it. Change is scary. Taking a leap is scary. Trusting your gut is fucking *scary*, but it’s what every great woman has ever done—charged into the unknown boldly, said yes now, and then figured out how to do it later. It’s what I’ve always done, and it’s gotten me to where I am at The Greenhouse, but you have to feel good about joining us because although it’s a shit ton of fun, it’s also a shit ton of work. If you think for even one second that your life is working better for you now than it could be working for me, then I want you to know that I understand, no hard feelings, and I sincerely wish you the very best.” She reached over and gave Harper a big hug. She got out of the car, walking ahead as Bella lingered on the curb. Then she paused and turned around. “I won’t land for another few hours. Think about it while I’m in the air, and then let me know by touchdown. The decision is yours. But I hope I’ll see you tomorrow in Nashville.”

Harper stared after Charlotte, her mind reeling. Charlotte was right—she was freaking out. She took a deep breath to center herself. It wasn’t what Charlotte had said that had thrown her off guard, but the way she’d said it. No one in publishing would ever give an interview like this, but then again, no one in publishing had ever given her the opportunity to run before she could walk. All this time Harper had been hoping to catch a break, hoping that someone would take a chance

on her, and here was Charlotte doing just that. The question was whether Harper was brave enough to take it.

4

Greener Pastures

Harper went straight from her interview with Charlotte to Penn Station to catch the train to Poughkeepsie to see her parents as promised, even though the timing couldn't have been worse. It had been almost two months since she had seen them, which was why, when her mother texted to say that she was baking her favorite cookies for her already-twice postponed visit, she knew she couldn't cancel again. But all she really wanted to do was go back to her apartment and discuss everything with Poppy. She only had a few hours to make a decision and she was desperate to talk it out.

The last time Harper had been up to Poughkeepsie to see her parents had been for a Fourth of July celebration they were hosting at the inn they'd owned and operated ever since Harper was born. In an effort to boost the family business that had been on a steady decline as hip boutique hotels and Airbnbs popped up, they'd hosted a big backyard cookout with a fireworks display as part of their "stay two nights, get one free" promotion. Looking back, Harper wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but watching her parents run around catering to guests wasn't it. In previous years there had been staff on hand, but staff for the long weekend had been hard to come by, her parents said, so they decided to just do the work themselves. Still, it was an impossible undertaking for only two people, so Harper had rolled up her sleeves and jumped in. It was only at the end of the weekend that her exhausted parents finally admitted that the staff shortage was because of a shortage of funds and, as much as they wanted to, they couldn't keep helping Harper financially. Shame and embarrassment had caused Harper to keep making excuses about why she couldn't come back home for a visit since then, but now she had an actual job offer on the table.

"Harper!" her mom, Eva, said the moment she opened the door to the little wood and stone house Harper had grown up in. Although Eva was small in stature, she had a larger-than-life personality. She wiped her hands on her apron before wrapping Harper in a hug and pulling her in tight. She had bits of flour in her hair and on her face and smelled like sweet powdered milk. Harper knew she must have been making polvoron, the Filipino version of shortbread that all her non-Filipino friends called milk candies. They were a specialty of her mother's, and she often made them with whatever was in season—pumpkin spice at Thanksgiving, finely crushed candy canes at Christmas. They were a favorite of Harper's and everyone who tried them.

"You're just in time. Tell me what you think of this new flavor," Eva said, leading her daughter into the kitchen. "I used freeze-dried strawberries. Apparently, Christian's fiancée, Janice, loves all things strawberry, so I'm sending these to San Francisco for their engagement party."

Christian was Harper's lone male cousin, the baby of the family, and, with the exception of Harper, the last to get married.

“Wow, they’re really doing it.” Harper said. Part of her couldn’t believe he was finally settling down, while the other part was annoyed that the spotlight about a love life—or lack thereof—was now going to be entirely on her.

“They better be. I’ve been working around the clock on these,” her mom said, removing a row of cookies from a cooling rack onto two small plates.

“You’re not needed at the Inn?” Harper asked, trying to suss out if business had gotten any better.

“Oh, it’s not that busy right now. You know, end of summer.” Eva fixed them two cups of coffee.

“Isn’t that when you’re usually busy—last getaway of the summer and all that?”

“It’s different now; everybody wants all the bells and whistles. Did you know that the Hilltop Inn is putting in a swimming pool? I mean, we’ve got the Hudson River right over there,” her mom said, pointing out the window. “And Landing Point started a brewery on-site and does tastings. What happened to going for a beautiful hike, having a great meal, and ending the night with a good book?”

“I guess people want to get as much for their money as they can?” Harper said, treading lightly. She took a seat at the kitchen table that faced the backyard and had a view of the Inn at the other end of the property. She felt sorry for her parents, who had spent their whole lives making the Inn as warm and welcoming as possible. But without the renovations and new offerings it needed—neither of which her parents could afford—it had become a bit worn and tired over the years.

“I know,” her mom said, taking a seat. “But big changes cost money, and I just don’t know if it’s worth it. Your dad and I aren’t getting any younger.” She picked up a cookie and took a bite.

“Speak for yourself,” Harper’s dad, Dan, called, coming in the back door. “I’ve never felt better.” He flexed his biceps, making them both laugh.

Harper jumped up and gave her dad a hug and caught the scent of freshly mowed grass.

“You’re mowing the lawn now too?”

“Yup. I decided if anyone is going to get paid twenty dollars an hour to cut grass, it’s going to be me,” he said, washing his hands at the sink before drying them on a tea towel and joining them at the table. “Which reminds me, you’re late with my paycheck,” he joked to Harper’s mom.

“Get in line,” Eva said, passing him the plate of cookies.

Harper often wondered how her parents had gotten together in the first place. Her mom was bubbly and talkative, while her dad was a man of a few well-chosen words with a dry sense of humor. They’d attended the same high school in Pennsylvania, but it had taken Dan until their senior year to ask her mom out. They’d been partnered up to work a spring fundraiser together, and, as her dad told it, her mom persuaded everyone who came up to their corn dog stand to buy two, as it was for a good cause. She didn’t stop talking the entire time they were together.

It wasn’t until her dad walked her mom to her car at the end of the day that she turned to him and said, “You know, you haven’t told me one thing about yourself.” To which he turned to her and said, “I’ve been trying all day, but you never gave me a chance.”

Harper used to blush at this next part, where her dad took a step closer to her mom and said that he had never met anyone who talked so much in his whole life who he could still listen to all day. Apparently, that shut Harper’s mom up, and then before she could say anything else, he asked her out. The rest was history.

“So now, what’s your big news? Your mom said you had something to tell us,” her dad said, picking up a cookie.

“Well, I’ve been offered a job,” Harper said.

“In publishing? That’s fantastic!” Her mom reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I knew you’d find something if you didn’t give up.”

“No, not in publishing exactly,” Harper said, making sure to keep her voice light and a smile on her face. Harper’s parents had sacrificed a lot to make sure she could go to school in New York and pursue her dream career, and she hadn’t realized until now how leaving to be an influencer’s assistant would sound.

“What’s the job, then?” her father asked, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“Well, it’s in social media, as a visionary support strategist for a well-known influencer named Charlotte Green.”

The look on her parents’ faces told Harper she could have been speaking gibberish for how little that meant to them, which, to be fair, was about as much as it meant to her until a day ago.

“Does her vision strategy include influential books?” Eva asked, trying to connect the dots.

“Yes. She’s a very successful self-help author, and I’d be working for her as kind of an executive assistant.”

“What does she influence people to do?” her dad asked.

“Live their best life, connect to the warrior women inside them—it’s really all about empowering women,” Harper said. “She has a huge following on Instagram, and her main headquarters is in Nashville.”

“Uh-huh,” her dad said, reaching for a second cookie. “Is it a good offer?”

This was Harper’s opening, and she dove in. “It’s a great offer—more than three times what I was making, a rent subsidy, and the chance for growth in the company. Charlotte personally picked me out of everyone that applied, and she loves that I have a fresh perspective, went to a great school, and worked in publishing. She does a lot of writing and has published three bestselling books, and if things go well—which they will—I could even write for her.”

“Oh well, that’s good. I like the idea of you getting back to your writing—you were always so good at it,” her dad said.

“You should’ve started with that, honey. What kind of writing? Does she have a magazine?”

“She didn’t say exactly... but she said she really liked my writing, so you know...” Harper trailed off, suddenly aware of how little she really knew about the role of visionary support strategist.

Harper watched her parents exchange looks in that way of theirs that told her they were biting their tongues. “It’s the best offer I’ve had,” Harper said quietly.

“Better than working at the *Poughkeepsie Press*?” her mother said, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms in front of her. “That job is actually in publishing, and even though they won’t pay as much, they’re very supportive of local writers if you wanted to try your hand at that again. And under your own name.”

Harper hated that her parents were tiptoeing around the fact that she had given up on her writing dreams after a series of false starts. Harper had spent the first year after graduation freelancing by day and working on a novel by night. But without bites on the book or any cushion to fall back on if she didn’t get enough writing gigs each month, she was forced to admit that what she really needed was a paycheck. If she couldn’t write, she could help other writers get their stories