



A Novel

THE ROM-COMMERS

New York Times Bestselling Author

KATHERINE CENTER

The Rom-Commers

KATHERINE CENTER



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For my dad, Bill Pannill, who loves words as much as I do. Maybe more.

One

LOGAN SCOTT CALLED just as I was making dinner, and I almost didn't answer because my dad and I were singing along to ABBA's greatest hits. There were not too many people I'd interrupt ABBA for—but yes, fine, Logan Scott was one of them.

Logan was my former high school boyfriend, who still felt guilty about the way we broke up, and he dealt with that guilt by sending me job opportunities.

Not the worst way to handle it.

It was the penance he paid for his unscathed life.

Though nobody's life is truly unscathed, I guess.

His *less*-scathed life, maybe.

He was a manager. In Hollywood. For screenwriters. A very glamorous job.

Technically, he was *my* manager—although I'd never made him any money. I was kind of like his pro bono case.

It was fine, he always insisted. I'd pay off eventually.

I'd placed in two different screenwriting contests because Logan insisted I submit. He got me in the door freelancing for *Variety*. And all those movie reviews I got paid minimum wage to do? Courtesy of him.

He just kept sending me work.

I told him to stop feeling guilty. I was fine. But I didn't exactly mean it.

Not if that guilt of his was going to keep paying my bills.

Some of them, anyway.

All to say, on this particular night, Logan had a doozy of an offer for me.

“Emma,” he said. “I’m going to need you to sit down.”

“I’m flipping pancakes-for-dinner right now,” I said. My sister, Sylvie, was coming home from college, so I was making her favorite meal.

“You will definitely drop them all when you hear this,” Logan said, like he’d pictured me *juggling* pancakes instead.

I covered the in-progress stack with foil, turned off the music, and gave my dad a “one minute” finger from across the room.

My dad nodded and gave a hearty thumbs-up, like *Do whatever you need to do*.

“I’m ready,” I said to Logan.

“Are you literally sitting down?”

“No.”

“I’m not kidding. You need to do that.”

I walked to our dining-slash-breakfast table and sat down at my already-set place. “Okay,” I said. “I’m literally sitting.”

“I have a job for you...” Logan said then, pausing for effect.

“I’ll take it,” I said.

“Writing a feature film script...” he went on, stretching out the moment.

“Sold,” I said, like *Moving on*.

And then he got to his grand finale: “With Charlie Yates.”

Logan had told me to sit—but at the sound of that name, I stood up.

Then I froze. Then frowned. Then waited. Was this a trick?

“Hello?” Logan finally said. “Are you still—”

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I thought I heard you say Charlie Yates.”

“I did say Charlie Yates.”

I sat back down. “Charlie Yates?” I said, like there was room for confusion.

I could sense Logan nodding. “Yes.”

But I needed more confirmation. “Charlie Yates who wrote *The Destroyers*? Charlie Yates who wrote *The Last Gunslinger*, and *Smokescreen*, and *Forty Miles to Hell*? The screenwriters’ screenwriter, living legend, reason half the country says the catchphrase ‘Merry Christmas, cowboy’—

that Charlie Yates?”

“Uh-huh,” Logan said, enjoying the moment. “That one.”

I took a sip of the ice water in my glass—

“He’s written a rom-com,” Logan said.

—and I coughed it back out.

Logan waited while I recovered.

“*Charlie Yates* wrote a rom-com?” Now I was suspicious. A Western? Sure. A horror flick? Absolutely. A dystopic space adventure where the robots eat all the humans? In a heartbeat. But a *rom-com*?

No way.

“He didn’t,” I said, answering my own query.

“He did.”

“Is it ... good?” I asked, and then immediately shook my head to cancel the question.

Of course it was good.

I’d seen every movie Charlie Yates had ever written, and I’d read every one of his screenplays—produced or unproduced—that I could get my hands on, printing them off the internet and lovingly binding them with brass brads before alphabetizing them on their own dedicated shelf on my bookcase. And I didn’t just *read* them. I highlighted them. Annotated them. Covered them with Post-its and exclamation points. *No question* it was good. Charlie Yates couldn’t write a bad screenplay if you threatened to take all his awards away.

“It’s terrible,” Logan said then.

“What?” It couldn’t be.

“It’s so terrible, even calling it terrible is an insult to the word *terrible*.”

I took that in. “You’ve read it?” I asked.

“My eyes will never be the same, but yes—I read an entire draft.”

“You read a draft?” I asked. “How?”

How was my ex-boyfriend from high school just casually reading the private first drafts of the world’s most beloved superstar screenwriter?

Logan paused for a second and then he said, “So, I’ve been waiting for the right moment to share this with you, but ... I am actually his manager.”

“*What!*” I stood up. Again.

“I’ve been waiting to tell you because I knew you’d freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I said, but in truth I was now clucking around the dining table in a meaningless circle, headless-chicken style. I knew Logan

represented some high-profile people. But not *that* high.

“Just from the way you’re breathing,” Logan said, “I can tell that you are.”

“How am I breathing?” I demanded.

“Like a Charlie Yates superfan who is losing her shit right now.”

Fine. He wasn’t wrong.

I took a soothing breath, and then walked to our apartment door, stepped outside, and strolled deliberately down our fourth floor’s exterior walkway. Calmly. Like a non-freaked-out person.

I tried again. “You’re telling me in seriousness that you’re Charlie Yates’s manager?”

“Yes.”

“Charlie *Yates*?” I asked, like he might mean another Charlie. Then, “*Charlie* Yates?” like he might mean another Yates.

“Yes to both.”

I was baffled. “How long has this been going on?”

“About three years.”

“Three years?!” I shrieked. Then, lower, “Did you just say ‘three years’? You’ve been working with my favorite screenwriter *for three years* and you never thought to mention it?”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t think to,” Logan said, trying to steer us to a calmer place with his voice. “I decided to wait until the right moment.”

I thought about all the joy of being one degree of separation from Charlie Frigging Yates—joy I’d been missing out on for three years. Then I said accusingly, “You ‘decided to wait’?”

“Yes. Because, as you already know, timing is everything.”

Well. He wasn’t wrong there.

I’d made it to the end of our walkway. I leaned over the railing and looked down at the evening lights over the parking lot, and the car lights on the freeway beyond that, and the downtown lights sparkling off in the distance. I knew somebody who knew Charlie Yates. Everything had a bright new shimmer.

“Fair enough,” I finally said.

“I’m telling you now,” Logan said, “because, like I said before, I have a job for you.”

It all came rushing back. “That’s right. You have a job for me—”

“To write a screenplay—” Logan said.

“With Charlie Yates,” I finished, my voice glowing with awe.

“But *rewrite*,” Logan said. “Ghostwrite. I need you to *fix* this thing—hard.”

“It’s a page-one rewrite?”

“Page *zero*,” Logan said. “He’s got a handshake deal with an exec from United Pictures that if he writes this rom-com, they’ll produce that gangster thing he wrote that’s been kicking around.”

Was it weird that a screenwriter of Charlie Yates’s renown had an unproduced screenplay lying around? Not at all. Most scripts by most screenwriters never saw the light of day, in fact. You can make a great living in Hollywood getting paid good money to write scripts that never become movies. But that’s what made Charlie Yates such a legend. Getting anything produced was a feat. But Charlie sold script after script—that became movies, that won awards, that became classics, and that then had people quoting them verbatim year after year.

“I love that gangster thing,” I said. I’d found a bootleg copy on the internet and used up a whole pad of Post-its admiring it.

And I didn’t even like gangster movies.

I didn’t like drug kingpin movies, either. Or prison massacre movies. Or killer clown movies. Or sea rescue movies where everyone gets eaten by sharks.

Unless Charlie Yates wrote them.

He was that good. I loved everything he did, even though the only genre that I myself truly personally liked was ... romantic comedies.

Which was the only genre he didn’t write.

Until now, apparently.

That’s how good he was. He forced me to love him—against my entire personality.

“He loves the Mafia thing, too,” Logan said. “He spent months and months in Chicago for research and he wore a pocket watch the whole time. And he’s hell-bent on getting it made, especially now that he’s back from his”—Logan hesitated before finishing with—“hiatus. But that can’t happen until he does this rom-com. And as I mentioned—”

“It’s terrible.”

“We’re going to need a better word for terrible.”

I gave it all a second to sink in.

“That’s where you come in,” Logan said, ready to move on to details. “It’s going to need the mother of all rewrites. Uncredited, of course—”

“Of course.”

“But for good money.”

“How much money?”

“More than you’re technically entitled to, Writers Guild-wise.”

There it was. There were levels to how much you could earn, depending on how much success you’d had. And since I’d had—and I say this with great compassion for myself—almost no success, my level wasn’t high.

Didn’t matter. Who cared?

This was Charlie Holy Shit Yates.

“Send it to me,” I said. There was nothing more to discuss. Would I uncreditedly rewrite Charlie Yates’s incomprehensibly terrible screenplay? *Of course I would.* I’d do it for no money. Hell, I’d pay *him*. I’d already mentally opened a new file in Final Draft and saved it as CHARLIE F@\$%ING YATES.

“There’s a catch, though,” Logan said next.

“What’s that?”

“You have to come to LA.”

Now I started pacing the walkway again. “Come to LA?” I echoed, like that was something no one ever did.

“Not *forever*,” Logan said. “Just for the working period of the rewrite.”

How long did a rewrite even take? I’d never done a rewrite for someone else.

Logan read my mind. “Six weeks,” he declared next. “Possibly longer. This has to be an in-person thing.”

“But—” I started, so many objections in my mind, it was hard to choose. “What about Zoom? What about FaceTime? What about Slack? Google Meet? Hell—even Skype! There are a million virtual ways to do it.”

“He’s old-school,” Logan said.

“That’s no excuse.”

“And he’s got a massive ego.”

“He deserves that ego,” I said, shifting sides. “He’s earned it.”

“The point is, he’s Charlie Yates. He gets it the way he wants it. And he’s never going to just accept virtual corrections from some unproduced writer

on the internet.”

“When you put it that way, I don’t sound very impressive.”

“I know.”

“So I have to come out there and—what?”

“Woo him.”

“Woo him?”

“Obviously not in the traditional sense of *woo*.”

“I can’t go to LA, Logan,” I said. “I can’t go *anywhere*. Remember my dad?”

But Logan wasn’t deterred. “What about Sylvie?” he asked.

Dammit. He had me. “What about her?”

“Didn’t she just graduate?”

“She did, but—”

“Wasn’t that the plan all along? To get Sylvie through college and then let her take a turn?”

“That *was* the plan,” I said, bracing myself against how right Logan was. “But she got a very prestigious summer internship with International Medical Aid—”

“Bullshit!” Logan shouted.

“Did you just shout ‘bullshit’ at me?”

“It’s her turn,” Logan said, mad at me now. “You’ve done everything for ten years—”

“*Just under* ten years,” I corrected.

“—and the plan, all along, was for her to come back to Texas after college and take over.”

“Yes, but that was before—”

“Call her,” Logan demanded. “Call her right now and tell her she’s coming home. You will never get another chance like this. This is the opportunity of your lifetime.”

“I don’t have to call her. She’s on her way in from the airport right now. Remember the pancakes?”

“Perfect timing,” Logan said then. “Tell her at dinner.”

But I just leaned down and rested my forehead against the metal handrail as a garbage truck rumbled by down below. “I don’t want to.”

“Be fair to yourself, Emma,” Logan cajoled.

Why were we even talking about this? I had things to do and no time for

nonsense. “I’m not crushing Sylvie’s dreams, Logan. That’s not on my to-do list today.”

“But what about you?” Logan asked. “What about *your* dreams?”

At that, I stood up. “My dreams,” I said, like *We’re done here*, “got crushed a long time ago.”

Two

I DID NOT tell Sylvie at dinner.

It wasn't just the first dinner we'd had together in the months since she'd gone back to college last January—it was her graduation party. A graduation that, of course, my dad and I had missed, since he couldn't travel—and if he couldn't travel, neither could I.

This wasn't just dinner. This was a celebration. My glorious, brilliant baby sister had graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from the highly picturesque Carleton College—which, if you didn't know, is the Harvard of the Midwest—and she was now, among many other things, living proof that our family had overcome all of its tragedies and was thriving, at last. Officially.

We were celebrating, dammit.

I'd made a cake in the shape of a graduation cap and stuck sparkler candles in it. I'd festooned our kitchenette with gold streamers and sprinkled confetti on the table. I'd typed out little menus and rolled them up like diplomas.

I wasn't ruining all that by *moving to LA*.

You had to maximize joy when it fluttered into your life. You had to honor it. And savor it. And not stomp it to death by reminding everyone of everything you'd lost.

Sylvie showed up in a cropped tee with her fairy-tale straight blond hair

billowing, looking like the personification of youth and beauty and hope—and lugging five hundred duffel bags of dirty laundry. And I hugged her around the neck with genuine joy and jumped and squealed and kissed her cheeks. And my dad met us at the door with his walker and we sang “Happy Graduation to You” to the birthday song tune, my dad adding some one-handed percussion with a maraca. And then we ate stacks of pancakes and sausages and squirted canned whipped cream all over everything.

We sat at our little dinette and chattered away and teased each other and enjoyed every second of being back together so much that I almost felt resentful in some tiny compartment in my brain that Logan Scott had called out of nowhere with that crazy Charlie Yates news and complicated things.

Today of all days.

The longer the evening went on, and the more we sat around chatting afterward, catching up and drinking root beer floats for dessert, the more the memory of that phone call faded for me. I felt a growing and peaceful sensation that the crisis had passed—that I no longer had to make any hard decisions, and life would continue on as predictable and normal and vaguely unsatisfying as ever.

I just wanted to be happy—simply, uncomplicatedly happy—for like *one evening*. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently so.

Timing really was everything, I guess.

★ ★ ★

YOU MIGHT BE wondering why my fifty-five-year-old dad had to use a walker to come greet my sister at the door. Or why we couldn’t go to her graduation. Or why his percussion instrument of choice was *one* maraca.

I will give you the same vaguely cheery, deeply oversimplified answer that we always gave everyone: Just under ten years ago, my father had “a camping accident.”

Pressed for details, I’ll add this: He was hit in the head during a sudden rockfall while climbing in Yosemite and got a traumatic brain injury—which left him partially paralyzed on one side, a condition called hemiplegia, and also suffering from an inner-ear issue that profoundly messed up his balance called Ménière’s disease.

That's the long story short.

I'm leaving out a lot here. I'm leaving out the worst part, in fact.

But that's enough for now.

That's why my dad couldn't be left alone. That's why he moved through the world like he was ninety. That's why I worried about him 24-7. And that's why writing a screenplay with Charlie Yates in Los Angeles was totally, utterly, entirely out of the question.

I wouldn't shirk my responsibilities.

I wouldn't abandon my dad.

And I would not, not, *not* eclipse my baby sister's potential by sticking her on medical duty in this six-hundred-square-foot apartment.

I wouldn't. And I couldn't ...

Until I read the screenplay.

★ ★ ★

THE EMAIL FROM Logan with the subject "Apologies in Advance" hit my inbox just as Sylvie was settling in on the top bunk with Netflix and her headphones. Our PJs were on, the lights were off, and I stared at that attachment for a good long minute before finally giving in and clicking it open.

An hour later, I made it official:

Terrible.

We really would need a more terrible word for terrible.

First of all, it was—at least in theory—an updated retelling of the beloved rom-com classic *It Happened One Night*. Written by a person who had clearly never seen the movie.

If you haven't seen it yourself, please do yourself a favor: stop whatever you're doing and go watch it. This movie is ninety years old, and it still sparkles with life and vitality and charm. A down-on-his-luck newspaper reporter tries to help a runaway socialite travel by bus to New York in hopes of getting her exclusive story—and falls madly in love with her instead. Clark Gable is fan-yourself sexy, Claudette Colbert is sassy and gorgeous, and the romantic tension? You could *eat* it with a *spoon*. This is the road trip rom-com that launched a thousand road trip rom-coms—and it swept the Oscars, winning all of the big five categories, including Best Screenplay. It's a titan

of the genre. It's practically sacred.

And Charlie Yates, my beloved Charlie Yates, my gold standard, my writer by which all other writers are judged, my absolute all-time screenwriting hero ...

He mutilated it.

He besmirched it.

He *desecrated* it.

This thing he did—I don't even want to say "wrote" ... It had no spark, no build, no banter, no joy—and no scenes that even resembled the original movie. The title was the same, and the character names were the same. But that was it. Was he *asleep* when he wrote this? Was he *in the middle of dental surgery*? How could someone so good and so masterful at writing—someone who could make you root for serial killers, and believe in ghosts, and genuinely *like* cannibal robots—take something that was already working, and had been working for ninety years, and chuck its charming soul into a wood chipper?

I mean, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert had to be weeping up in heaven.

He had their characters going to a line-dancing competition.

A *line-dancing* competition!

Something was going on here. Did Charlie Yates have a stroke? Had a chat bot secretly rewritten the real script as a gag? Was Charlie Yates being held hostage somewhere and forced at gunpoint to write a career-endingly bad story?

But *career-endingly bad* didn't even capture it.

This thing was apocalyptic.

And there it was. Somehow *that* was the tipping point for me.

Real life was allowed to be disappointing. Heck, real life was *guaranteed* to be disappointing. Living alone in a tiny apartment with my sick father? Teaching community college freshman English so we could have health insurance? Denying my own dreams so my overindulged but lovable baby sister could live all of hers struggle-free? All fine. I didn't get to make the rules for reality.

But stories had a better option.

I was not letting Charlie Yates ruin this movie, his career, the romantic comedy genre as a whole, and *all our lives* with this nuclear-waste-fueled

dumpster fire of a screenplay.

That was where I drew the line.

Nobody was dishonoring *It Happened One Night*. Not on my watch.

I didn't even make a decision, really. Just finished reading, clamshelled my laptop, swung myself up to the top bunk, and stared at Sylvie until she took off her headphones and said, "What's up?"

"I've just read a romantic comedy script," I said, "that will destroy human civilization as we know it."

Half an hour later, she had the whole story: Logan's call, Charlie Yates's situation, my life-changing opportunity. And before I even knew what she was doing, she was typing out an email to withdraw from her summer internship, citing "a family emergency."

"You can't not go to your internship!" I said when I realized what she was doing.

"Sure I can," she said.

"It's a week away! You made a commitment."

"They'll pull someone off the wait list."

"But—" I shook my head. "But it's *very prestigious*."

Sylvie shrugged. "I'll go another year."

"What if they don't take you another year?"

"I'll go somewhere else."

But I was shaking my head—ferverently. I mean, I recognized that I'd gotten this started. I was the one who'd climbed the bunk ladder and told her everything. She was a good-hearted person, after all. I could've predicted she might try to solve this.

But now that it was happening, I couldn't stand it.

What was she even thinking, giving up her internship?

Had I protected her too much? Had she had it too easy? Didn't she know how awful the world was? "I'm not sure you understand what a big deal opportunities like this are," I said. "You can't take them for granted. The world is horrible. Chances to shine don't just fall from the sky."

"You hear yourself, right?" Sylvie said. "Ditto—right back at you. Do you know what a big deal Charlie Yates is? We studied him in my film theory class."

"But you're..." I couldn't think of a justification. "You're *young*."

"You're also young."

“You’re full of promise.”

“You’re also full of promise.”

“But you’re—just...” I shrugged. “You’re Sylvie. You’re my Sylvie.”

“And you’re my Emma.”

I shook my head like that argument held no weight. “I can’t take your chance away from you.”

“And I can’t take *your* chance away from *you*.”

“But you’ve already said yes to your chance.”

“But your chance is bigger than mine.”

The more we argued, the more I had to pick a side. And of course, that side was always Sylvie’s. She really was my Sylvie. I’d practically raised her. Between me and Sylvie, I chose Sylvie—every time. That was a given. I didn’t know how to be her sister-slash-surrogate-mom any other way.

But Sylvie wasn’t giving up. “Guess we’ll have to flip a coin.”

“I’m not flipping a coin, Sylvie.”

Ugh. I’d created a monster. I used to win all our arguments—but now she was big enough to beat me.

“You know what?” I said. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Too late,” Sylvie said then, looking mischievous and defiant. “I just hit SEND.”

“You *what*?”

She shrugged like she’d won. “I sent it.”

“We weren’t done talking!”

“I was done,” Sylvie said. “You’re going to LA.”

“Write them back!” I said, grabbing at her laptop. “Say it was a mistake!”

But Sylvie clutched it to her chest. “Never!”

We were just starting to wrestle for it when our dad’s voice came through the wall. “Girls!” he called. “Quit arguing!”

Sylvie and I froze and looked at each other like, *Now you woke up Dad*.

Then his voice sounded again, deeper this time—resonant and decisive, like the voice of God. “We’ll discuss this in the morning like rational people,” he said, in a tone that made it final. “And then we’ll take a vote. And then”—he paused to be extra clear—“we’ll send Emma to LA.”

Three

ONE WEEK LATER, I was on a plane.

I could easily have taken *a month* to pack up my stuff, and organize my dad's medications, and label the supply shelves, and color-code daily to-do lists, and cover every surface with sticky-note reminders.

Taking care of my dad wasn't an art—it was a science, and it sure as hell wasn't for amateurs. Sylvie was a smart girl, sure, but she'd never had any training for this, and I felt like an astronaut handing over the keys to the space shuttle to a chimpanzee.

"He has to drink a minimum of forty ounces of water every single day," I told Sylvie as I marked water bottles in the cabinet with Sharpies. "And he won't remember, so you have to follow him around and nag him."

"Do I really have to nag him?" Sylvie asked, like a person who had never done any caretaking.

"If you don't nag him, then he won't drink enough water, and then sodium levels in his body will spike, fluid will build up in his inner ear, and he'll lose his balance, hit his head, and wind up in the ER all night."

"Ah," Sylvie said. "*Nag him*. Got it."

"It helps to keep a color-coded chart," I said, opening up one of the kitchen cabinets to show her where the last three months were taped up. "The blue boxes are for water. Yellow is for multivitamins. Red, purple, orange, and green are all for medications. And the unicorn puffy stickers are for