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CHRISTINA
LAUREN

NEW YORK TIMES
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The

PARADISE
PROBLEM

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CHRISTINA
LAUREN

The
PARADISE
PROBLEM



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*Dedicated to the things that keep us sane: group chats, Bangtan, Harry, and
Taylor*

Prologue

ANNA

The day my husband moves out of our apartment is also the day *Resident Evil Village* releases for PlayStation, and you might be surprised which of these things lands with a greater emotional impact.

But given that I am not a monster, and that we have indeed enjoyed this apartment together for two years, I do what any woman who's been given the couch and TV in a divorce would do: I watch with a supportive smile as West and his two well-muscled and newly minted PhD bros carry box after box, dining chair after dining chair, suitcase after suitcase, and the remaining ninety percent of the furniture and decor out to the moving van parked at the curb. I now have hardly any earthly goods to my name, and I guess that's a little sad—I've made great use of West's stuff over the past two years—but this moment was inevitable.

At least I take comfort in knowing that packing my own belongings in two weeks will be significantly easier than this.

Out at the curb, West emerges from the back of the truck and hops gracefully down to the street, gazing up at what I'm sure is a highly organized packing job. You should have seen our pantry: truly a work of cataloging genius. My meticulous ex is twenty-eight, infrequently verbal, and one of those incredibly capable men who make complicated things like doing taxes and fixing holes in drywall look easy. I admit, beyond the sexy capability vibe, West is also a fox. He's that perfect combination of height and muscle, though I have no idea how tall he is. Is it weird that I've never asked? I realize that most tall women are obsessed with how tall other people are, but I've never had that itch. I've known lots of men—men who are taller, men who are shorter, men who are exactly my

height. All I know is that West is chin-at-eye-level tall. At our wedding he had to bend to kiss me.

I haven't thought about that day in ages, but I guess it makes sense that I'm thinking about it now. That kiss feels like it happened a lifetime ago. Two years into this adventure, and I'm better acquainted with the couch he's leaving behind than I am with him.

Now, standing on the sidewalk, he turns and looks at me, our eyes meeting and giving me a weird, wavy feeling in my stomach, a touch of lightheadedness. It's not low blood sugar; I ate half a bag of jalapeño chips while I watched him pack. And it's not the heat; May in LA is the very definition of temperate. I think, strangely, it's *him*.

West's eyes are the color of sunlight passing through a glass of whiskey. His hair is that exact same color, but with more sunlight streaking through, and so thick I suspect it alone has ruined me for other men. I tried to paint it once, mixing Transparent Oxide-Red Lake with Old Holland Yellow-Brown but it wasn't quite right, and as soon as I realized how much it annoyed me that I couldn't get the correct color of his hair down on canvas, I immediately wondered why I'd become so invested in the first place.

With that intense eye contact still happening, West walks over and stops barely a foot away. For a weird, fevered beat I wonder if he's actually going to kiss me goodbye.

"I think I'm all set here," he says, and lol of course he isn't going to kiss me. "But if I forgot anything, you can have Jake come pick it up."

Jake: younger brother to West (and only slightly less good-looking) and that type of college friend who knows everything about my life at UCLA but has never met my father, who lives only an hour away. Jake introduced me to West; now Jake will be my sole remaining connection to West. The thought makes me a little sad, but then I remember I have the couch and T-virus zombies waiting for me inside.

"Sounds good," I say.

"You've got copies of the papers?" he asks. "My attorney looked over everything, and it should be sorted, but his phone number is there in case there's any issue." He pauses, eyes searching mine in a way I honestly don't think they have before, like he's trying to see me for the first time. "My number will be the same, of course. Read through everything and call me if you have any questions."

"Of course. Thanks for handling that."

He smiles, and his face absolutely opens up when it happens. I wonder why he doesn't do it more. Maybe he does, actually. I barely ever see him. He's up before sunrise to go for a run and spends every waking hour at class or the library before hitting the gym around midnight. By contrast, I live at the art studio, or on his—now my—couch.

I'm not sure what else there is to say, so I try to wrap this up: "Congratulations on finishing, West. You must be so happy."

"Absolutely," he says, digging his hands into the pockets of his jeans. I've mostly seen him in basketball shorts and free marathon T-shirts, so the worn Levi's and cozy gray T-shirt combo is a surprise this late in the game. I feel a little cheated to only be seeing it now. A tiny strip of his boxers waistband is visible and I work very hard to keep my eyes on his face. "Congratulations to you, too," he adds. "On to new, big things."

"Right," I say, laughing. "The world breathlessly awaits my next move."

He laughs, too, and the sound sends electricity scratching down my spine.

An awkward silence blankets us, but he's staring directly at me, and I feel like I can't look away. This is, like, *eye contact* eye contact. Like staring-contest eye contact, like studying a series of numbers to be memorized in a spy movie eye contact, and I force myself not to fold first.

"Well," he says finally, "I guess that's it, then."

"I hope you have a good life." It sounds trite, but I do mean it.

"You, too." West smiles that eye-crinkling smile again, and damn, I really wish I'd seen it more. "Bye, Anna."

"Bye, West."

We shake hands. He turns, walking to the curb to meet his friends, who squeeze beside him into the truck's cab. One of them rolls down the window, waving at me. I happily wave back, even though I have no idea what his name is.

I feel a body come up beside mine and turn my head to see our neighbor Candi in her bathrobe. She's always in her bathrobe so I've long wondered what she does all day. But she makes a killer key lime pie and has loud sex with her husband, Rob, around midnight every day like clockwork, so clearly she's crushing it.

"Are you moving?" she asks, looking behind me toward the mostly empty apartment.

"Oh, I'm moving in two weeks," I tell her. "West just left."

I feel her attention move from the empty apartment to the side of my face, and when I smile over at her, her blue eyes are round with worry. “Holy shit, Anna, I had no idea. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I tell her, looking down the street as the moving truck makes a turn and disappears from view entirely.

“Okay,” she says with a frown in her voice. “I’m glad.” She sets a hand on my arm. “But if you need to talk, you know I’m here, okay?”

I realize with a gust of happiness that the cover story doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve finished my bachelor’s and have a life of unknown adventure ahead; West has finished his doctorate and is on his way to his brilliant future as something impressive and serious. We both got what we wanted.

“Oh no, I’m fine!” I assure her. “I barely know him.”

Candi stares at me. “What?”

I point at the apartment behind me. “Family housing. He was just a random dude I married so I could live here. Thank you, though.”

With one last smile, I squeeze her hand where it rests on my arm and turn to go inside. I have zombies to kill.

One

ANNA

Three years later

If you'd told me back in college that my primary source of income at twenty-five would be working as the night cashier at the corner convenience store, I... well, I might have believed you. Having done a one-eighty junior year when I acknowledged that my brain does not "science" and pivoted from premed to art, I remained realistic about what life as an artist might entail. Every fine arts major at UCLA has dreams of becoming the next big set designer, costume mastermind, or art scene It kid, but those of us whose ambitions are simply "afford rent and health insurance" are aware we will most likely be waitresses by day and hobby painters by night. So the fact that it's 12:44 a.m. and I am womaning the register at the Pico Pick-It-Up and not at some fancy party rubbing elbows with the creative elite shouldn't surprise anyone, least of all myself.

But with my dad's medical bills slowly climbing, my ambitions might have to climb, too.

I carefully turn the page of the *US Weekly* I borrowed from the magazine rack. There are lots of lucrative jobs on display here. Do I have what it takes to be the next big art influencer, someday featured in the Celebrities... They're Just Like Us! page? I'm young and know how to wear a T-shirt without a bra. That's at least half of what's required, right?

I imagine it:

Instagram sensation Anna Green caught with a perfectly messy topknot outside of Sprouts!

TikTok star Anna Green and her sexy actor boyfriend caught canoodling in front of Soho House!

I wonder how much an influencer makes these days and whether it's worth the humiliation of monologuing into a selfie stick in front of Picasso's *Woman with a Book* at the Norton Simon, or the patience it would take to get a ring light positioned just right to draw tiny tigers on my eyelids using only vegan skin care products.

This thought exercise has clarified something for me: I'm too lazy for an influencer life.

But it's fine. Between five nights a week here, three lunch shifts at Amir's Café, the occasional dog-walking hustle, and plasma donation when things get really tight, I'm paying my rent. I'm covering most of Dad's health insurance and medical expenses. That's what matters. Deep breath. I flip the page, moving onto the Red Flag Exes! section.

"Anna."

I lean across the checkout counter and look both ways. My boss, Ricky, stands in the doorway to his small, cramped office, his wispy blond hair falling over his boyish eyes, tight fists planted on his narrow hips. He's wearing a *Naruto* T-shirt and sweatpants bearing the logo of his recent alma mater, Hamilton High School.

"Yeah?"

"Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure." I hook a thumb over my shoulder toward the store's entrance. "Want me to close up for a few?"

He shakes his head. "It's one in the morning. We average half a customer from one to two."

"Fair." I hop off my stool and gently place the magazine back on the rack before dancing my way down the aisle. Ricky graduated last June but had no interest in college, prompting his parents to offer him the challenge of managing their Pick-It-Up location at Pico and Manning sandwiched quite literally between a Subway and a Jimmy John's. Barb and Paul are two of my favorite people in the world, but Ricky has been using this Stern Boss voice with me ever since he asked me to dinner on his eighteenth birthday and I said no. Be serious.

I lean against the doorway and brush my too-long, barely-pink-anymore bangs from my face. I'm in desperate need of a cut and color, but such things fall very far down on the priority list these days. "What's up?"

He straightens a string-bean arm and tries to look authoritative as he motions to the chair across from him. It looks like one of those old elementary school chairs, with the contoured plastic seat and tubular steel frame, but the closest school is over half a mile away. It showed up in the alley one day and it's been in the office ever since. "Could you come sit down, please?"

I take a seat but glance over my shoulder at the front of the store. Even if Ricky has called me back here, it's still my till in the register. The last thing I need is someone bolting in and doing a quick grab of all the cash in there. The Verizon store three doors down was robbed just last week. "Are you sure we can't chat out there? It makes me uneasy leaving the store unattended."

"Well, that's ironic."

I turn back to look at him. From my little chair I see that he has a distinct height advantage, which I realize now is probably intentional. "Pardon?"

He flips a pencil between his fingers. His nails are all chewed up, there's a faded blue stamp on the back of his right hand from Randy's Arcade, and he's wearing his high school class ring. Ricky straightens his spine and tries to look taller. He's five seven standing on a box. It's not my most mature coping strategy, but sometimes when Ricky is particularly condescending, I'll draw little caricatures of him dwarfed in his dad's broad-shouldered suit, his feet swimming in his dad's giant shoes. "It's ironic when you pretend to be concerned about the store being robbed."

"Ironic?" I ask. "How so?"

"I saw footage of you taking a pack of gum yesterday. You never paid for it."

I squint, thinking back. I did take a pack of gum. Probably thirty minutes into my eight-hour shift. "How do you know I didn't pay for it?"

He points to the security camera in the corner of the office, reminding me, I suppose, that there are cameras everywhere. But if he knows I never paid for it, then...

"You watched eight hours of footage of me?" I ask.

Ricky shifts in his chair and the faux-leather squeaks under him like a fart. He tries to do it again and fails. With his face red, he clarifies, "On fast-forward."

I know how old those security cameras are. Fast-forward is, at best, double speed. “So, you’re saying you only watched four hours of footage of me at work?”

Flushing, he waves this off. “The time I spent isn’t the point.”

I swallow down the response I know won’t get me anywhere: *Four hours of your wasted time seems like a bigger theft of resources than a single two-dollar pack of gum in three years’ employment, as does you being here working the graveyard shift with me when we average zero-point-five customers every hour.*

Instead, I say, “I just forgot. I didn’t have any cash and I didn’t want to pay a five-dollar debit fee for a transaction under ten dollars.”

“You should have put an IOU in the cash drawer yesterday.”

“An IOU? Like... on paper?”

He nods. “Feed out the receipt paper and use that.”

“How would Kelly have accounted for that when she came in at seven?”

“She could have told me you took a pack of gum and would pay for it later.”

“But you *knew* I took a pack of gum. You watched the entire video.”

His nostrils flare. “The point is we can’t trust you.”

“Ricky, I’ll pay for the gum now. God, I’ve worked here for three years, and this is the first time you’ve ever had an issue with me.”

The face he makes tells me that I don’t have this quite right.

I sit back in my little chair. “Oh. I see. This is about the date.”

Ricky leans forward on his forearms, clasping his hands the way his dad does when he’s in Mentor Paul mode. But Paul could give me a two-hour sermon about how to be successful in business and I’d eat it all up because he’s charismatic and caring and worked his ass off to get a chain of four stores in downtown Los Angeles. Ricky got an Audi for his sixteenth birthday, a store for his eighteenth, and apparently spends his managerial time watching security footage of me on the days I wear skirts to work. So, I don’t believe a word he’s saying when he says, “It isn’t about the date.”

“Really?”

“It *isn’t about that*,” he insists.

“This is so dumb, Ricky!”

“It’s Derrick.”

“This is so dumb, *Derrick*.”

He flushes. “This is a business owner handling an employee issue. I’m sorry, Anna. We have to let you go.”

My ears ring. A panicky flush blankets my skin. “You’re firing me today over a pack of gum?”

“Yes.”

“Do Barb and Paul know?”

“My parents are aware, yes.” This lands like a punch to the gut. Barb and Paul know that Ricky is firing me over a pack of watermelon Trident? And they’re okay with that? Ouch.

Ricky leans in to catch my attention. “Anna? Did you hear what I said? You can turn in your set of keys, and I’ll mail out your final paycheck.”

I blink back into focus, pushing to stand. “Make sure to deduct the cost of the gum.”

“I already have.”



THE MOMENT I STEP out onto Manning and don’t see my beat-up Jetta where I usually park it, I realize that I am at the beginning of a domino train of terrible shit. My memory reels back to six hours ago when Manning was temporarily closed off to clean up a fender-bender. I’d had to park on Pico, where I’d made a mental note to move to Manning when it opened or feed the meter by eight... and I hadn’t done either.

That stupid two-dollar pack of gum has turned into a forty-five-dollar parking ticket.

But not only is there the expected white envelope under my windshield wiper, there’s also a giant black scrape down the driver’s-side door where someone apparently sideswiped me and kept going on their merry way. The dent has bent the frame, and now when I climb in, the door won’t shut all the way.

Fuck.

It never rains in April in LA, but it begins the second I get on the freeway. Big fat raindrops falling in a bratty, torrential downpour that leaves the streets slick with oil and the left side of my body soaking wet. When I pull into my apartment complex, my roommate’s boyfriend is parked in my spot, and I can’t even be mad, since they didn’t

expect me home for another three hours. I block him in, turning off the ignition and resting my head against the steering wheel for a few deep breaths.

One thing at a time, Dad's voice says in my head, deep and low. *Get the car sorted, then talk to Vivi tomorrow about picking up more shifts at the café.*

"It's going to be okay," I say to a sky that has miraculously cleared of any evidence of rain. I repeat these words to myself as I climb out of the car, as I stare at the door that won't close and then lean back in, digging out anything that's of any value inside, as I realize that the AirPods Dad gave me for Christmas and which I'd left in the center console have already been taken. As has the emergency ten dollars I leave there for late-night fast-food emergencies.

Why the fuck didn't I use that ten-dollar bill to pay for the gum?

But—no! Why the fuck did *Derrick* fire me over something so meaningless? It's so petty!

One thing at a time, Mental Dad reminds me.

I jog up the steps to the apartment, sliding my key into the lock, and the "Oh shit!" on the other side translates only once I swing the door open to see my roommate, Lindy, and her boyfriend Jack in a deeply compromising position on my beloved divorce couch. He's stark naked, incredibly sweaty, and—oh God—still hard. I whip around the second what I'm seeing crystallizes. Her hands are tied to her ankles so she can't even make a quick getaway, and he frantically works to free her while the two of them shout mortified apologies. My own apology for coming home early disappears into their chaos, and I press my forehead to the wall, wishing I could melt into it and live in the building's foundation for the rest of my days. I would make such a good ghost.

At the sound of her bedroom door closing with a slam, I turn, leaning back against the wall, trying to decide whether the pricking behind my eyes is oncoming hysterical sobs or laughter.

When I open the fridge, I see that Bondage Lindy and Sweaty Jack have eaten the leftover lamb tagine I'd been saving for when I got home from my shift at the store. All I find inside is a half block of cheddar cheese, an old pint of half-and-half, and a couple of ancient, floppy carrots.

In my room, I fall back onto my bed and stare at the ceiling, too bummed out to even revenge-draw a cartoon Ricky. The walls around me are stacked three deep with my

paintings, nearly all of them giant canvases of flowers: nature's real masterpiece. No brush could perfectly replicate the intricacies of the shadows deep in a petal's core, the gentle variations of color along delicate filaments, or the complex patterns of light climbing up a naked stem, but I have to try, can't stop trying, in fact. I finished my new favorite piece yesterday morning—an enormous red poppy with a hidden galaxy of pollen in the deep black center. It's currently leaning against the wall, partially hiding the one behind it—a tight fist of tissue-thin ranunculus petals, heavy with raindrops.

Sadly, these paintings don't pay the bills. I have no idea what to do now, but I know I don't want to find another job like the one at the Pick-It-Up. I don't want to work at a 7-Eleven or a Starbucks. I don't want to be someone's overworked assistant, an influencer, an Uber driver, or a career waitress. I want to paint. But I am drowning in completed canvases and unable to sell a single one. The canned dream I keep kicking down the alley—supporting myself with my art—is nothing but a distant echo. I sold a few pieces after I graduated from college, even signed a manager after a buzzy art show in Venice Beach, but I haven't had a single painting at a show in eighteen months and my manager hasn't called in nearly a year. Whether or not I want to, I'll have to apply at every coffee shop and convenience store I can find tomorrow.

My phone pings on the bed beside me and I immediately reach for it, hoping it's an email from Barb and Paul at 2:14 a.m. apologizing for their dipshit son—but it isn't. It's a bill from the hospital for Dad's latest chemo co-pays.

I grab a fistful of my comforter and drag it with me as I roll over, burying my face in the pillow.

Two

LIAM

There is a Safeway two blocks from my house in Palo Alto, which is great because of the convenience factor, of course, but it's also terrible because every time I shop here, I fear I'm going to be caught on camera in the Weston Foods security room four hundred miles south in Irvine.

It doesn't matter how much distance—geographic or emotional—I've put between myself and my family's corporation, this is my one remaining childhood fear: that when the automatic doors part at any other supermarket, and I set foot inside, my perfectly groomed mother with her custom suit and not a hair out of place will receive an alert. Standing in front of a wall of screens in a security room, she'll lean in, touching the tip of her manicured index finger to a tiny figure in the corner.

"There. Right there," she'll say into a walkie-talkie that feeds into my father's earpiece. "I see Liam in the Safeway on Middlefield and San Carlos."

It's an absurd fear. Never mind that my mother never bothers herself with security footage, or that there are a million reasons I might venture into a non-Weston's supermarket, including something as loyal as scoping out the competition. But this is the kind of paranoia a man lives with when his family business is the US's sixth-largest grocery chain and has a decades-long beef with the fifth largest. It's also the kind of paranoia a man lives with when he shuts his powerful father out of his personal life for years. (Never mind, too, that if my father really wanted to know what I do every day, he could easily find out. Raymond Weston is simply too narcissistic to imagine that the distance between us might not be his idea.)

But my instincts don't care about logic. So when Mom calls while I'm at the register paying for a post-run coconut water, I abruptly tap my watch, declining the call, and look

around me for cameras in view.

Calm your shit, Weston. I take a deep breath and smile at the woman at the register, pulling my phone from my armband to pay. It lights up with another call.

I press Decline once more and hold the phone to the payment screen in front of me. It doesn't register, and I try again. The cashier is reaching over to see if she can get it from another angle when a text lights up my screen: William Albert Weston, answer my call or so help me I will fly to your house right now.

Well, shit, we can't have that.

"Yikes," the cashier says, reading the text with a sympathetic wince. "You'd better answer, William."

Just then, my phone rings again.

With a resigned laugh, I answer the call on my watch as I try desperately to pay for my water with my iPhone. We may be in Silicon Valley, where everyone has fifteen devices on their person at any given moment, but I can still feel everyone behind me in the express checkout line glaring. I am absolutely that tech asshole right now.

"Hello?"

Her voice carries through my single earbud. "Liam? Finally."

"Sorry, Mom," I whisper. "Where are you?"

She pauses, confused. "I'm... at home? Where are you?"

"Just grabbing water at the Weston's on Alma and University." The cashier looks at me in confusion and I smile, waving her off. The lie was needlessly specific and likely won't work anyway: the problem with AirPods is they pick up every noise in a room. I glare up at the high ceiling, wondering how much ambient noise is bleeding through the line. My parents began dating their freshman year in high school, waited until they'd graduated college before getting married, and then waited an additional five years before having my older brother, Alex. All this to say, Janet Weston has been in the family business since she was fourteen; the woman has spent so much time in supermarkets that she could differentiate the sound of a Safeway from a Weston's even while standing at the 101 and 80 freeway interchange at rush hour. I have to get out of here.

Finally, my payment goes through. I snatch the water, wave off the receipt, throw an apologetic smile to the annoyed line behind me, and jog out of the store, ducking into an

alley between buildings.

“What’s up?” I ask, like we both don’t know exactly why she’s calling.

I’m grateful for the time she gives me to brace myself; I hear the tidy click of her shoes and imagine her strolling out through the living room onto the terra-cotta tiles of the sunroom looking out over the Newport Coast. “I’m calling about Charlie’s wedding, sweetheart.”

I wince, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Of course. Can’t wait.”

“We all leave for the island next week, and your RSVP arrived yesterday. I’d really hoped you’d be RSVP’ing for two. We’ve reserved one of the five private bungalows for you.”

“You know how busy she is, Mom.”

“Which is exactly why she needs this vacation, darling.” She sighs. “Liam, honey, it looks bad if the entire family isn’t there. *Vogue* is coming to do a profile on Charlie and Kellan. *Forbes* is sending someone to interview your father. People will talk.” Mom pauses. “I hate to say it, sweetheart, but your father is getting strange about it, too.”

My stomach drops. “Strange how?”

“You know.” And I do, though I wish for once we could all just speak plainly with one another. This is as close as my mother will come to saying, *Your father is beginning to think maybe she shouldn’t be in this family if she’s never around.*

“Mom, come on.”

She sighs. “We barely know her,” she says. “Just bring her and everything will be fine.”

Everything will be fine.

I *need* everything to be fine. I’m so close to finishing this long game, I can feel the silvery promise of it on my fingertips. The last thing I want is my father turning his attention to my personal life. But he might. And the fiction of this life I’ve built for my family—the life upon which every plan I’ve made relies—is a precariously balanced house of cards.

I take a deep breath, squeezing my eyes shut. I have no idea how I’m going to make this work, but I’m backed into a corner, and I know it. So, I let the words burst free: “Okay, Mom. We’ll both be there.” The tremble in her relieved exhale is amplified through my AirPods, and the confirmation of how stressed she’s been sends a wash of renewed resolve through me. “We’ll figure it out.”

“That is *wonderful* news, sweetheart! Oh, I’m so thrilled! Why don’t you fly down to John Wayne the night before, stay at the house, and we’ll all take the plane over together? The flight to Singapore is a bear.”

“We’ll get ourselves there.” I say it more sharply than I’d intended, and my words are met with a nervous pause. I wince, and my eyes land on a discarded crate with a word stamped in red across the bottom. Desperate to alleviate her worry that this is about the continued friction between me and my father, I add a bewildering lie: “She’ll be coming from Cambodia.”

Oh God. God. Why did I say that? No one handed me this shovel, but I’m digging my own grave anyway.

“Cambodia! How *exotic!*”

“Right.” I squeeze my forehead. Panic is setting in. “So we’ll meet you there.”

She leaves another pause, and I realize I can’t escape it after all. “Liam, darling,” Mom says quietly. “Even if you travel separately, perhaps you could call your father beforehand? I’d like you two to iron out your wrinkles before we arrive on the island with everyone else. I don’t want any tension to be visible from the outside.”

I take a deep breath, trying to not react to her use of the word *wrinkles* to refer to my father’s enormous betrayal. “Mom,” I say, wincing when a delivery guy on a bike darts through the alley, almost clipping me with his handlebars. “I think these are more than wrinkles. I need an apology.”

“Well...” She sighs again. “I’m sure he regrets what he did.”

“Has he told you that?”

“We haven’t discussed it, but I apologize on his behalf. Does that work?”

I stare at the wall across from me. My parents haven’t discussed the absolute shit show that resulted in my father and me not speaking for nearly five years? What a perfect example of the Weston family dysfunction. “Not really.”

She ignores this. “We’ll both be on our best behavior,” she assures me. “I won’t say a word about her clothing. Or her hair.”

I tighten the grip on my forehead.

“You need to leave by Wednesday afternoon,” she continues. “May first. The private transport will meet you at the airport, so please send along your commercial flight information and I’ll arrange it.” She says “commercial flight” like she’s expecting a rotten

banana in her inbox. “We’ll arrive in Pulau Jingga the day before you and have activities and a wonderful ten days planned for everyone.”

Ten days. Ten days on a private island with my family. Ten days on a private island with a virtual stranger.

If I’m lucky.

For a fevered second, I consider telling my mom everything, untangling myself from this web of lies. But I know she’ll tell my father, who will only use the information as leverage. Renewed fury climbs its way up my throat like a predatory vine. I swallow the impulse to come clean.

“Liam? You heard me, honey? Arrive in Singapore by the third.”

I close my eyes and rub at my temple where one hell of a headache is starting. “Got it. We’ll be there.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can help with. I’ll email over the wedding itinerary. Love you, sweetie.”

“Love you, too.”

Mom hangs up and I stare down at the screen. Not to be melodramatic, but it feels like my life has just been sawed into two halves: before and after. Sure, *before* was a pile of lies, a complicated cover story that started with an innocent scam and slowly turned into full-on deception. *Before* was a boulder, precariously balanced on the edge of a cliff. But *before* had also reached a sort of uneasy stasis, a tentative calm.

After is the wake of chaos and destruction when the boulder gets a sudden, hard shove.

The way I see it, I have three options:

1. Fake my own death.
2. Finally admit to my parents that I’ve lied to them for five years.
3. Fly to Los Angeles and bargain with my wife.