The Plus One

She needed a fake boyfriend for one Christmas weekend in Connecticut, he needed someone to sell his firehouse's charity calendar, and the mistletoe didn't care about their rules.

The voicemail came in at 10:42 on a Tuesday morning, in the middle of a client call about a vegan cheese brand that wanted to be disruptive, and Emily Carver knew what it was before she listened to it, because her mother only called during business hours when she had a plan.

She listened to it in the stairwell between the eleventh and twelfth floors, which was the only place at Halbrook Communications where nobody could hear you.

"Hi, honey, it's Mom. Don't call me back, I know you're busy. I just wanted to let you know that Diane's son Kevin is going to be home for Christmas, the orthodontist, the one with the boat, and he's single again, which is a long story, and I told Diane you'd be here the whole weekend, so I'm going to put him next to you at the party. He's very tall. Okay. Love you. Bring a nice sweater."

Emily played it twice. Then she sat down on the step and put her forehead on her knees.

It was December 8th. She had two weeks.

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"Just tell her you're seeing someone," Megan said.

They were eating salads at their desks, because at Halbrook eating anywhere else meant admitting you had time. Megan Russo sat across the low divider and handled consumer tech, which meant convincing reporters that a slightly thinner phone case was news.

"I told her that last year," Emily said. "I made up a guy named Paul. A lawyer. She asked for his last name and I panicked and said Paulson."

"Paul Paulson."

"She found out in February. She still brings up Paul Paulson at Easter."

Megan laughed so hard she had to put her fork down. "Okay. So you need a real one."

"I need a real one by the twenty-second. I don't have a real one. I have a fern and a Peloton I use as a coat rack."

Megan picked her fork back up and pointed it at her. "What about my brother?"

Emily looked at her over the divider.

"Jake," Megan said. "He's single. He's a firefighter. He's very polite to mothers. My mother thinks he hung the moon."

"Your brother doesn't know me."

"He's met you. My birthday, two years ago. The bar on Ditmars with the bad karaoke. You told him his Bon Jovi was technically flat."

Emily remembered a tall guy in a Mets hat with forearms like bridge cables, singing Livin' on a Prayer with his whole chest and no regard for pitch. He'd laughed when she told him, and bought her a beer anyway.

"Why would he spend Christmas with a stranger's family in Connecticut?"

"Because his firehouse is doing a charity calendar for the burn center at Cornell," Megan said. "Twelve months of shirtless guys holding hoses and puppies, and they have no idea how to sell it. Jake's in charge and he's losing his mind."

Emily put down her salad.

She did PR for a living. She had gotten a mattress company onto the Today show. She had once gotten a man who made artisanal ice cubes into the Times. Twelve months of shirtless firefighters for charity at Christmas would practically pitch itself.

"Text him," she said.

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They met on Thursday at a diner on Queens Boulevard, because Jake was coming off a twenty-four and said he'd fall asleep anywhere that didn't serve eggs.

He was already in a booth when she walked in. He stood up when he saw her, which nobody did anymore, and he was taller than she remembered, maybe six two, with dark hair cut short and a face that looked like it smiled more than it didn't. Gray FDNY hoodie, sleeves pushed up. Same forearms.

"Emily," he said. "The pitch police."

"You were flat."

"I was passionate. There's a difference." He sat back down. "Megan says you need a boyfriend."

"I need a temporary boyfriend. For three days. It's very specific."

"Megan also says you'll make my calendar famous."

"I'll make your calendar sell. Famous is extra."

The waitress came by. Jake ordered three eggs over easy, rye toast, a side of bacon, home fries, and a chocolate milk, and Emily ordered coffee, and he looked at her like she'd said something sad.

"You're not eating?"

"I ate."

"What'd you eat?"

"A yogurt."

"That's not eating. That's a snack for a cat." He turned to the waitress. "Can she get a short stack? I'll eat it if she doesn't."

Emily opened her mouth to say no. The waitress was already gone.

"Okay," Jake said, folding his hands on the table. "Tell me about these people."

So she told him. Her mother, Linda, a retired guidance counselor who treated her children's love lives like college applications with deadlines. Her father, Tom, who sold commercial insurance and talked to his snowblower. Her sister, Rachel, two years younger, married to a nice man named Chris, with two boys, Tyler and Ben, which their mother brought up roughly once per meal. The house in New Canaan with the red door. The Christmas Eve party her parents had thrown every year since 1994, with her father's eggnog, which was mostly bourbon.

"And Kevin," Jake said.

"Kevin the orthodontist. With the boat."

"What kind of boat?"

"I don't know. A boat. Does it matter?"

"It matters if I'm competing with it."

The pancakes came. She ate one without thinking about it, and then another one, and he didn't say anything, but she saw him notice.

"My mother is very smart," she said. "She'll ask questions. You have to be good."

"I'm good with moms."

"Everybody says that."

"I've carried three moms down ladders. I'm very good with moms."

She laughed before she could stop it. He looked pleased with himself.

"Here's my side," he said, and pulled a folded piece of paper out of his hoodie pocket. It was a spreadsheet with coffee on one corner. "Engine 334, Grand Avenue in Maspeth. Twelve guys, plus Captain Murphy's dog, who's February. We printed two thousand. We've sold ninety-one. Mostly to my mom."

Emily read the sheet. Then she read it again.

"Who's on the cover?"

"Danny Ortiz. He's got abs like a waffle iron. Women go crazy."

"And which month are you?"

He picked up his chocolate milk. "I'm not in it."

"Why not?"

"Somebody had to hold the camera."

She looked at him over the paper. He looked back. It didn't sound like the whole answer, but the waitress came back with coffee and the moment passed.

"Okay," she said. "Deal. Connecticut, the twenty-third to the twenty-sixth. You're charming and believable and you do not oversell it. In return, I get this calendar in the Post and on NY1, and you sell out by New Year's."

"Two thousand calendars?"

"You printed too few, honestly."

He held out his hand across the table. It was warm and dry and very big and swallowed hers up to the wrist.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Emily Carver."

"Don't call me by my full name in front of my mother. She'll think you're a cop."

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They met under the clock at Grand Central at 1:15 on the twenty-third.

The main concourse was a madhouse, roller bags and wreaths from the holiday market in Vanderbilt Hall, kids pointing up at the green ceiling and its gold constellations. Somebody's terrier was wearing antlers. The departure boards clicked and flipped.

Emily saw him before he saw her. He was standing next to the information booth in a navy peacoat she wouldn't have expected, with a duffel bag over his shoulder and a big paper shopping bag in one hand, looking up at the ceiling like a tourist.

"You know it's backward," she said, coming up next to him.

"What is?"

"The sky. The constellations are painted in reverse. Somebody messed up the reference in 1913 and they said it was the view from God's side."

He looked down at her. "That's the best excuse I've ever heard for messing something up."

"I'm a publicist. That's basically the whole job."

He held up the shopping bag. Inside were a Nerf blaster, a remote control dump truck, a tin of butter cookies from a bakery on Grand Avenue with the price tag still on it, and a bottle of rye with a red bow.

"Jake," she said. "You didn't have to do this."

"I'm a professional," he said. "Track twenty-eight. Let's go, we're gonna miss it."

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The 1:22 to Stamford was packed, but they found two seats facing backward, and Jake folded himself into the window seat with his knees against the seat in front.

The train came up out of the Park Avenue tunnel into the gray light at 125th Street, and Harlem went by in brick and fire escapes and Christmas lights.

Emily took out her phone and opened the notes app.

"Okay," she said. "Ground rules."

"There are rules?"

"There are always rules. I'm a planner." She typed. "Rule one. We met through Megan, which is true. We've been dating since September, which is three months, which is serious but not suspicious."

"September," he said. "What'd we do on our first date?"

"We went to that Italian place on Thirtieth Avenue."

"Which one? There's like nine."

"You pick."

"Piccola Venezia. I took you there and you ordered the veal and I ate half your gnocchi." He looked out the window. "And it rained, and you didn't have an umbrella, so I gave you my jacket."

She stopped typing. "That's very specific."

"You said she'd ask questions."

"Okay." She typed it in. "Rule two. Public displays of affection are fine, within reason. Hand holding. An arm around the shoulders. A kiss on the cheek if necessary."

"What counts as necessary?"

"If my mother is watching and looks suspicious."

"How will I know if she looks suspicious?"

"She'll squint. Like she's reading a menu without her glasses."

"Got it." He did a squint. It was pretty good, for a man who'd never met her mother.

"Rule three," Emily said. "No kissing on the mouth."

"What if it's necessary?"

"It won't be."

"What if your mom does the squint?"

"Then you kiss my forehead. Like a soldier coming home."

He laughed. A woman across the aisle with a poinsettia on her lap looked over at them and smiled. Emily lowered her voice.

"Rule four. Nobody falls in love."

She said it as a joke. It came out sounding less like one than she meant. He didn't laugh this time. He just looked at her for a second, and then out the window at the Bronx going by.

"That's a good rule," he said. "Put that one in bold."

He leaned his head back against the seat. "My turn."

"You get rules?"

"I get one rule."

"What's your rule?"

"You eat breakfast." He shut his eyes. "Every day. A real one. With protein. If I'm gonna be your fake boyfriend, I'm not gonna watch

you live on yogurt and coffee for three days. I'll have to report you."

"To who?"

"The calendar committee. They're very strict."

She typed it in. Rule five. Emily eats breakfast. Then she watched Westchester go by and listened to him breathe, slow and even, a man who could fall asleep anywhere, and she thought, this is going to be fine.

At Stamford they changed for the New Canaan branch, a little train that rattled north through the woods like it was doing everybody a favor. Old snow, gray at the edges. Glenbrook. Springdale. Talmadge Hill. Jake pressed his face to the window like a kid.

"It's like a Hallmark movie," he said.

"Please don't say that in front of my sister."

"Why?"

"Because she's going to say it first and then she's never going to stop."

. . .

Her father picked them up at the station in the twenty-year-old Volvo he refused to sell because it had a good heater. He shook Jake's hand for a long time, then looked at his duffel. "That all you brought?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. Emily brings three bags to go to the grocery store."

"Dad."

Elm Street was all lit up, white lights in every bare tree, wreaths on the bookstore and the cheese shop, and the white Congregational church sat on the hill above the green like a cake on a stand. Her father talked about the Giants.

"You a Giants fan, Jake?"

"Jets, sir."

There was a long silence in the car.

"Well," her father said finally. "Nobody's perfect."

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The front door of the house on Silvermine Road opened before they were out of the car, and her mother came down the steps in a red cardigan and slippers, in the snow, with her arms already out.

"You must be Jake," Linda Carver said, and hugged him, and then stepped back and held him by both arms and looked him over the way she used to look at a transcript. "Oh. Emily, he's tall. You said average height."

"I said above average."

"Mrs. Carver," Jake said, "thank you so much for having me. I brought you something. It's not much." And he handed her the tin of butter cookies, with the price tag still on it, and Emily watched her mother fall in love with him in real time, right there on the front walk, in her slippers.

Inside it was the house it always was at Christmas. The tree too big for the front window, with the clothespin reindeer Emily made in

second grade. Pine and cinnamon. Bing Crosby on the kitchen speaker. Her nephews came tearing down the stairs, Tyler first, then Ben in a Spider-Man costume, two months after Halloween.

"Are you a real fireman?" Tyler said.

"Firefighter. Yeah."

"Have you ever saved a cat?"

"A cat, a parrot, and one time a really mad goose."

Ben's mouth fell open inside his mask. "A goose?"

"Stuck in a storm drain in Flushing Meadows. Bit me right here. Want to see the scar?"

They wanted to see. Jake crouched in the front hall in his peacoat and showed them a faint white line near his wrist, and they looked at it like it was the Holy Grail.

Rachel came out of the kitchen with her eyebrows all the way up. She looked at Jake, then at Emily.

"Hi," she said. "So this is real."

"Hi. Yes. This is Jake."

Rachel shook his hand. Then she leaned in close to Emily and whispered, "He looks like a Hallmark movie."

"I hate you," Emily said.

. . .

Dinner was meatloaf, because it was always meatloaf on the twenty-third, and her mother asked Jake twenty-two questions

between the salad and the pie. Emily counted.

Where did he grow up? Middle Village, Queens, same house his whole life. His mom was a school nurse. His dad had been a firefighter too, retired now, mostly into fishing and complaining about the Jets. How did he and Emily meet?

"Megan's birthday," Jake said, and cut his meatloaf. "She told me my singing was flat."

Her father laughed out loud. Her mother looked at Emily like she'd been raised by wolves.

"Emily."

"He was flat, Mom."

"I was a little flat," Jake said. "But she was right, and nobody'd ever told me before. Everybody just clapped. I figured anybody who'd say that to a stranger at a bar would never lie to me about anything."

Emily looked down at her plate. It was a very good line. Maybe too good. Her mother put her hand on her chest.

"And where do you see this going?" Linda said.

"Mom."

"What? It's a normal question."

"It's question twenty-three."

"I'm not counting."

"I am."

Jake put down his fork. He looked at her mother, and then at Emily, and then back.

"I see it going wherever she wants it to go," he said. "She's the planner."

And her mother didn't squint. Not once all night.

. . .

The guest room was over the garage, with a slanted ceiling and one window facing the woods. It had been her grandmother's sewing room, and it still had the old Singer in the corner and a needlepoint over the dresser that said BLESS THIS MESS.

It had one bed. A queen, with a white iron headboard and about forty decorative pillows.

Emily stood in the doorway and looked at it. Jake came up the stairs behind her with both their bags and stopped.

"Huh," he said.

"I forgot," she said. "I always sleep on the pullout in the den. But my mother thinks we're together, so."

"So."

"So she gave us the guest room."

"Because we're together."

"Because we're very together. For three months."

He set the bags down. He looked at the bed and then he looked at the floor, which was hardwood with a rag rug about the size of a bath

mat.

"I'll take the floor," he said.

"You're six foot two. And my mother comes in without knocking. She'll find you down there and think we had a fight and make us see the pastor."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay. So what do we do?"

Emily started lining decorative pillows down the center of the mattress. A blue one with tassels. A round one shaped like a peppermint. A long one embroidered with a cardinal. When she was done there was a wall running from headboard to foot, soft and ridiculous.

"Rule six," she said. "That side is yours. This side is mine. The wall is the border."

"The Berlin Wall of throw pillows."

"It held for twenty-eight years."

"And then it came down."

She threw the peppermint at him. He caught it one-handed, without even looking, and set it back on top of the wall like he was fixing it.

They took turns in the bathroom. She came back in flannel pants and an old Fordham T-shirt, and he was already on his side of the wall, reading his phone. The room was very small. She hadn't noticed before how small.

She got in. The old mattress dipped toward the middle, and she had to grab the edge to keep from rolling into the pillows.

"This mattress is from the Carter administration," she said.

"I'll keep to my side. I promise."

She turned off the lamp. Down the hall her father was snoring through two closed doors, the same as when she was a kid.

"Emily," Jake said, after a while.

"Yeah?"

"Your family's really nice."

"They're a lot."

"They're nice. Your mom loves you so much she's trying to marry you off to a guy with a boat."

She laughed into the pillow. "That's one way to see it."

"That's the only way to see it." He was quiet for a second. "Night."

"Night."

She lay awake a long time listening to him breathe on the other side of the wall. He fell asleep in about four minutes. She didn't.

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She woke up at seven to the smell of bacon. The wall of pillows was still standing, and someone had put a glass of water on her nightstand.

Downstairs, Jake was at the stove in her mother's KISS THE COOK apron, making eggs. Her mother sat at the island with her coffee, watching him like he was a cooking show. Her father was eating bacon off a paper towel.

"He's making eggs," her mother said.

"I can see that, Mom."

"He got up at six. He shoveled the walk. Your father didn't even ask him."

"I asked him," her father said, without looking up from the paper.

"You did not ask him, Tom."

"I asked him with my eyes."

Jake slid a plate in front of Emily. Two eggs, toast, bacon, sliced oranges. He leaned in close to her ear.

"Rule five," he said.

She ate the whole thing. Her mother watched her do it like she'd seen a miracle.

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It had snowed again overnight, a few inches of the good kind, soft and dry, and by ten o'clock the boys had dragged everyone into the backyard.

It started as a snowman. Jake helped the boys roll a bottom ball the size of a washing machine, and Emily stood on the deck with her coffee in her mother's pom-pom hat, watching, and that was where she made her mistake.

"You're doing it wrong," she called.

Jake straightened up. "Excuse me?"

"You're packing it too loose. It's going to fall apart when you put the middle on."

"Did you just tell a member of the New York City Fire Department how to pack snow?"

"Are you trained in snow?"

"We're trained in everything."

"Then you should know you're packing it too loose."

He bent down slowly and packed a snowball between his palms, looking right at her the whole time. The boys watched with their mouths open.

"Don't," Emily said.

"Is this too loose?" Jake said. "This one? Tell me. You're the expert."

"Jake. I have coffee."

He threw it. It hit her square in the shoulder and exploded all over the pom-pom hat and the back of her neck, and the boys screamed like it was the best thing that had ever happened in the history of Connecticut.

Emily set her coffee down on the railing, very carefully, and walked down the deck steps into the yard.

"Oh no," Jake said.

It went on for half an hour. The boys and Emily against Jake, then Chris joining Jake, then Rachel joining Emily and throwing like she was trying out for the Yankees, while her father yelled tactical advice from the deck in his bathrobe. Ben got hit in the face, cried for nine

seconds, and threw one at his own mother. Emily hadn't laughed like that in ten years.

At the end she got him from behind the woodpile, two in a row, chest and face, and he went down backward into a drift with his arms out like he'd been shot.

"Man down," Tyler yelled. "Man down!"

Emily walked over and stood above him. He was lying in the snow with flakes melting in his eyelashes, grinning up at her.

"Too loose?" she said.

"Perfect," he said. "That was perfect. I take it all back."

He held up his hand. She took it to help him up, and he pulled, and she went down too, right on top of him, into the drift, and suddenly they were face to face with their noses almost touching. His breath was a little cloud between them. His hand was still holding hers. She could feel his chest moving under her, under all the layers.

For a second, nobody said anything.

Then Ben landed on both of them like a cannonball, and the moment broke into a hundred pieces of snow.

When she stood up, her mother was at the kitchen window with a mug, smiling, no squint at all. Emily had to look away first.

. . .

The four o'clock service on Christmas Eve was the family one, which meant every pew was full by a quarter to and the church smelled like wet wool, candle wax, and the perfume of three hundred women

from Fairfield County.

The Carvers had sat in the same pew for thirty years, fifth from the front on the left. Emily ended up between Jake and her mother, because her mother had arranged it that way.

Jake had on a dark green sweater over a collared shirt, and he'd shaved, and he smelled like her father's soap.

"I'm Catholic," he whispered. "Is that gonna be a problem?"

"Just stand up when everybody stands up. Don't kneel. My mother will think you're having a stroke."

The organ started. Jake stood up a half second late. He didn't know the second verse of O Come All Ye Faithful and he sang it anyway, slightly flat, with total conviction.

Then her mother leaned forward and looked down the pew at them. She looked at their hands, which were at their sides. Then she looked at Emily's face.

She squinted.

Emily reached over without looking and took Jake's hand.

He didn't miss a beat. He didn't even turn his head. He just laced his fingers through hers like he'd been doing it for years and kept on singing about the angels, and his hand was warm and rough and fit hers exactly.

Her mother sat back. The squint was gone.

Then the hymn ended, and everybody sat down, and the pastor started talking about the shepherds, the least important people in

Bethlehem and the first ones told, and Jake didn't let go.

And Emily didn't either.

She held his hand through the children's pageant, where a six-year-old Mary dropped the baby Jesus and said a word she should not have known. She held it until Silent Night, when the lights went down and the candles were lit one wick to another until the whole church glowed gold. He had to let go to hold his candle. She felt the cold of it right away.

Then, when the candles were out and the lights came back up, his hand found hers again on the pew between them, under the program, where nobody could see.

Her mother was talking to the woman behind them about a casserole. Nobody was watching. There was no reason for it at all.

. . .

By eight o'clock the house was packed.

The Carver Christmas Eve party had not changed since the first Bush administration. Eggnog in her grandmother's cut glass bowl, a ham, a tray of shrimp, three kinds of cheese ball, Sinatra, a fire, and about sixty people over fifty talking about real estate and their knees.

Jake was a hit, in a way that made Emily nervous.

He let Mrs. Patel feel his biceps, which she asked to do, out loud, in front of her husband. He sat with Aunt Carol on the couch while she showed him photos of her late husband in his Wilton volunteer fire company, and Carol, who had not laughed at a party since 2016, laughed twice. Kevin the orthodontist showed up in a quarter-zip and

talked about his boat, and Jake asked him a question about the motor so specific that Kevin admitted he didn't know and wandered off to the shrimp.

"He's very good," Rachel said, handing Emily an eggnog by the fireplace. "Suspiciously good."

"He's a nice guy."

"Mm-hm." Rachel sipped. "I watched you two in church."

"Okay."

"You held hands for, like, forty minutes."

"We're dating."

"You held hands during the offering. You don't even hold your own purse during the offering. You were raised Congregationalist."

Emily drank half her eggnog in one swallow. Her eyes watered.

"I'm just saying," Rachel said. "You look happy. You haven't looked happy at this party since Brandon."

And as if saying his name had made a door open somewhere, the front door opened, and a cold draft came through the whole downstairs, and Brandon Hale walked into her parents' house.

. . .

She had dated Brandon for four years. He'd grown up four houses down, and their mothers were in the same book club, and everybody had assumed, Emily included, right up until he told her, two Christmases ago, on the back deck at this exact party, that he'd taken

a job in Charlotte and had been seeing someone there for a while, and he thought she'd understand, because she was always so busy anyway.

He looked the same. Good coat, good haircut, a blonde woman in a white coat on his arm. He was scanning the room the way he always did, looking for who mattered.

He found Emily.

"Oh no," Rachel said. "Oh, no, no. Mom did not tell me. I swear to God, Em, I didn't know."

"It's fine."

Brandon was coming over. Of course he was.

"Em," he said. "Wow. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Brandon."

"This is Lauren. Lauren, this is Emily. We grew up together."

We grew up together. Four years. A drawer at his apartment. A Le Creuset she'd left in Charlotte that she still thought about when she made soup.

"Hi," Lauren said. She had a great handshake.

"So what are you up to?" Brandon said. "Still doing the PR thing?"

"Still doing the PR thing."

"That's great. That's really great. I always said you'd be great at it if you, you know. Gave it everything." He smiled. "You were always such a workaholic. I used to say, Em's married to her job."

Rachel made a small noise like a teakettle.

And then there was a hand on the small of Emily's back. Big and warm, through the silk of her blouse. She knew whose it was before she turned.

"Hey," Jake said. "There you are. Your dad wants to show me the snowblower again. I think it's a test."

He stood very close, close enough that she could feel how solid he was, and held out his other hand to Brandon.

"Jake Russo."

"Brandon Hale." Brandon's eyes went up a few inches to Jake's face. "You're with Em?"

"I'm with Emily," Jake said, pleasantly. "Yeah."

"What do you do, Jake?"

"Firefighter. FDNY. Engine 334 out of Maspeth."

"Oh. Wow. That's great. That's really admirable." Brandon nodded the nod of a man who had never once had to lift anything heavy. "Must be tough, with Em's hours. She's always working."

Jake looked at Brandon for a long, calm second. It was the look, she imagined, that he gave doors before he went through them.

"I work twenty-four-hour shifts," Jake said. "Sometimes forty-eights. Christmas, the Fourth, whatever. You know what she does when I come off a bad one?"

Brandon didn't know.

Neither did Emily.

"She shows up at the firehouse," Jake said, "with coffee for twelve guys at seven in the morning, before her own job, and lets Danny Ortiz tell her the same story about his cousin's wedding for the fourth time, and then she gets on the R train and goes and gets a mattress on the Today show." He smiled. "Married to her job. She's good at everything, is what she is. Some people find that intimidating. I think it's the best thing about her."

"Anyway," Jake said. "Good to meet you. Merry Christmas, Lauren." And he steered her gently by the small of her back across the living room toward the front hall.

Her face was hot the whole way.

"You made that up," she said. "The coffee. Danny Ortiz."

"Some of it."

"Which part?"

He looked down at her. In the front hall the light was gold and dim, and the party was all on the other side of the wall.

"The part where it happened," he said. "The rest of it I'm pretty sure is true."

Somebody behind them said, "Oh, look."

It was Mrs. Patel, holding a plate of meatballs. She was pointing up.

Emily looked up.

Hanging from the light fixture on a red ribbon, where her mother hung it every year, was a ball of mistletoe.

"Oh, you have to," Mrs. Patel said. "Linda! Linda, come look, they're under the mistletoe."

And then there were people. Her mother with her hands clasped. Her father with the eggnog ladle. The boys chanting. Rachel with her phone up. Brandon by the fireplace, looking like he'd bitten into a lemon.

"Rule three," Emily whispered. "Forehead."

"Your mom's squinting," Jake whispered back.

She was not. Her mother was beaming like she'd just been told about a full scholarship.

Then he put one hand on the side of her face, his thumb right along her jaw, and leaned down, slow, giving her all the time in the world to turn away, and she didn't, and he kissed her.

It was a soft kiss, a kiss for an audience, a kiss you could show your grandmother. Three seconds. Maybe four.

It was the least fake thing that had happened to her in two years.

She knew it the way you know you've missed a step in the dark. Everything in her went still and bright. The party cheered, faraway, like it was happening in another house. When he pulled back, he didn't go far. His thumb was still on her jaw. His eyes were dark and right there and a little surprised, like he'd walked into a room he thought he knew and found the furniture moved.

"Okay," he said quietly. Just to her.

"Okay," she said.

Her mother was crying. Tyler was yelling gross at a volume that suggested he did not think it was gross at all.

Rachel caught her eye over everybody's heads and mouthed, very clearly, Hallmark.

. . .

The party ended after midnight, the way it always did, with her father asleep in his armchair and her mother wrapping ham for people who didn't want ham. Jake took out the trash without being asked, and her mother hugged him by the back door and said something into his shoulder Emily couldn't hear.

They went up the back stairs without a word. In the guest room the lamp was on and the wall of pillows was still standing.

Jake shut the door behind them. Then he just stood there with his back against it.

"So," he said.

"So."

"I broke rule three."

"You did."

"I'm sorry. Your mom was right there, and Mrs. Patel, and I thought..."

"Jake."

He stopped.

Emily was standing by the bed. Her hands were shaking a little, which they never did, not before live TV, not ever. She looked at the wall of pillows. Then she picked up the peppermint one off the top and dropped it on the floor.

He watched it land.

"What's that?" he said. His voice was lower than she'd heard it.

"That's the wall coming down."

For a second he didn't move. Then he crossed the little room in two steps and stopped right in front of her, close enough to touch, without touching her.

"I need you to tell me this isn't for anybody," he said. "There's nobody watching. Your mom's asleep. Your sister's asleep. Nobody's squinting."

"Nobody's squinting," she said.

"Then tell me."

"It's for me." She reached up and put her hand flat on his chest, over the green sweater, and felt his heart going under her palm, as fast as hers. "It's just for me."

He kissed her.

Slow at first, almost careful, his hand coming up into her hair, and then not careful at all. She pulled him down by the front of his sweater. He made a low sound against her mouth. Her back met the wall under the slanted ceiling, the old wallpaper cool through her blouse, and he was warm everywhere else. His hands moved down her sides, slow, learning her. She'd wanted this, she realized, since the

diner. Since he'd ordered her pancakes and watched her eat them without saying a word.

"Emily," he said into her neck, and the way he said it, her name, just her name, made her knees go.

She found the hem of his sweater and pulled it up. He helped her. Then the collared shirt, button by button, her fingers clumsy, his laugh soft and breathless against her temple while she fought with the third one. Under it he was warm and solid and real, and she put both her hands flat against him and just held them there for a moment, feeling him breathe.

"You're shaking," he said.

"So are you."

"Yeah." He tipped her chin up with one knuckle so she had to look at him. In the lamplight his eyes were very dark. "I've been shaking since church."

He found the little pearl buttons down the back of her blouse, one by one, taking his time with each, like he wanted to remember it. The silk slid off her shoulders. His mouth followed it.

The decorative pillows went over the side of the bed, all of them, a soft avalanche onto the rag rug. The old mattress dipped toward the middle, the way it had the first night, and this time she let it roll her toward him, and this time he was there.

She reached over and turned out the lamp.

Outside, it had started snowing again. It came down slow past the window, over the woods and the garage roof and the whole sleeping

town, and for a long time, in the little room under the slanted ceiling, nobody said anything that needed to be written down.

. . .

She woke up on Christmas morning with her face on his shoulder and his arm heavy across her waist, and the first thing she felt was happy, and the second thing she felt was terrified.

Gray light at the window. The boys shrieking downstairs about the tree. Jake still asleep, his hair flat on one side.

She lay very still and did what she always did when something mattered. She made a plan.

It had been a weekend. A beautiful, snowed-in weekend, with eggnog and mistletoe and an ex at exactly the wrong moment. People did things on weekends like that. In thirty-six hours he'd go back to Queens and she'd go back to East Twenty-Ninth Street and the fern, and if she said it first, in a calm voice, she wouldn't have to watch his face when he said it.

Jake opened his eyes.

"Hey," he said, and smiled at her, slow and sleepy, and she almost threw the whole plan out the window.

"Hey." She sat up and pulled the quilt with her. "So. Last night."

"Last night," he said, still smiling.

"It was really nice."

The smile stayed, but something behind it went careful. "Nice."

"I just think we should be smart. We had a deal. There was bourbon, and my mom was crying under the mistletoe, and it's a lot." She was using her work voice, the one for telling clients their launch was delayed. She couldn't stop. "You don't owe me anything. When we get back, we go back to normal. I'll still do everything I promised."

He looked at her for a long time.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay?"

"You're the planner." He sat up and found his T-shirt on the floor, under the cardinal pillow, and pulled it on. He didn't look at her while he did it. "Rule four. Nobody falls in love. You put it in bold."

"You put it in bold."

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

Then Ben banged on the door yelling that Santa had brought a drum set, and Jake swung him up onto his shoulders and carried him downstairs, and they never finished the conversation.

He was perfect all day. He wore the scarf her mother gave him. He let Tyler shoot him with the Nerf blaster eleven times. He told the goose story again at dinner, with sound effects. He held her hand when her mother was looking and let go when she wasn't.

That night he slept on his side of the bed. He didn't put the pillows back up. He didn't need to.

. . .

The train back on the twenty-sixth was nearly empty.

They sat facing forward this time. Jake looked out the window. Emily looked at her phone and didn't see any of it.

At 125th Street, she said, "My mom texted."

"Yeah?"

She held it up.

> *Tell Jake we love him and he's welcome anytime. ANYTIME. Your father says bring him for the Super Bowl even though he's a Jets fan. Love you honey. I'm so happy for you.*

Jake read it. He smiled at it, a real smile, and then he handed the phone back.

"That's nice," he said. "Tell her thanks."

In the tunnel the windows went black, and in the glass she could see the two of them with six inches of empty seat between them, like strangers on the way to work.

Under the clock at Grand Central he hugged her. It was a good hug, short, the kind you'd give a cousin.

"Thanks for the weekend," he said. "Your family's great."

"Thanks for being so good at it."

"Yeah, well." He shouldered his duffel. "I'm a professional."

He walked off toward the 7 train and didn't look back. She stood under the clock for a long time after he was gone and thought about the backward sky, and how a good excuse for a mistake doesn't make it any less of one.

. . .

She did what she always did. She worked.

She pitched Danny Ortiz's abs to the Post as a public service, and they ran it on page nine under FDNY HOTTIES BURN UP FOR BURN UNIT. She got NY1 to send a crew to Maspeth. She got Captain Murphy's dog onto a bagel account with two million followers. By the thirtieth they'd sold all two thousand calendars and had a waiting list for a second printing.

Jake texted her once.

> *We sold out. The guys want to know if you're a witch.*

She typed back, Tell them I'm a publicist, and deleted it, and typed it again, and sent it, and then she sat on her kitchen floor next to the fern for a while.

Megan came into the office on the thirtieth, put a coffee on Emily's desk, and sat on the edge of it.

"My brother's being weird," she said.

"Weird how?"

"He's been watching the Yule log channel. For hours. My mother thinks he has a concussion. What happened up there?"

Emily looked at the coffee. "Nothing. It went great. My family loved him."

"Did you love him?"

"Megan."

"I'm just asking."

"It was a deal," Emily said. "We had rules."

Megan stood up. She looked, for a second, exactly like her brother.

"You know he was supposed to be December," she said.

"What?"

"In the calendar. With a wreath. He backed out in October. My mom asked him why, and he said he didn't want to be a picture on somebody's wall. He'd rather be the actual guy in somebody's actual house." She picked up her bag. "He's an idiot. Happy New Year."

. . .

On the morning of the thirty-first, Emily was the only person on the twelfth floor. She was answering emails from the bagel woman and eating a yogurt at her desk when the front desk called.

"There's a firefighter down here," said Luis, the security guard. "Says he's got a press release."

She stood up so fast her chair rolled into the filing cabinet.

He was in the lobby in his peacoat and her mother's scarf, holding a manila folder and a deli bag, looking like he'd been up all night.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"I wrote something." He held out the folder. "I know it's your thing. I looked up how on the internet."

One sheet, Times New Roman. She read it standing in the lobby, with Luis pretending to look at his monitor.

> *FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE. Maspeth, Queens. Local firefighter Jake Russo, 32, announced today that he is not faking it. Russo, who agreed to a three-day fake relationship in exchange for publicity services, reports that the services were excellent and the relationship was not fake at any point after approximately 1:20 p.m. on December 23rd, when the subject explained that the ceiling at Grand Central is painted backward. Russo admits to breaking rule three on purpose. Russo also admits to breaking rule four, which he says was a bad rule, and which he says he broke at a diner on Queens Boulevard on December 10th, before the deal was even signed. Russo would like it on the record that the subject is not married to her job, that she is good at everything, and that she should not have to be the one with the plan every single time. Russo is available for comment. Russo is available for dinner. Russo is available for the Super Bowl, even though he is a Jets fan. Contact: the guy in the lobby.*

She read it twice. The second time the words went blurry.

"You used the passive voice twice," she said.

"I don't know what that is."

"And you can't say approximately 1:20. It's either 1:20 or it isn't."

"It was 1:19," he said. "I checked the board."

She laughed, and it came out wet, and she pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth. Luis was no longer pretending to look at his monitor.

"I was scared," she said. "On Christmas morning. I had a plan. If I said it first, I didn't have to see your face when you said it."

"I know," he said. "I was gonna say something on the train. I chickened out at 125th Street." He stepped closer. "I run into burning buildings for a living, Emily. And I couldn't tell you I liked you on a Metro-North train."

"It's a very intimidating train."

"It's the worst train." He held up the deli bag. "Egg and cheese on a roll. Rule five. I saw that yogurt from the street."

"You did not."

"I'm a trained observer."

She took the bag. Then she took a step forward, and put her hand flat on his chest, over his coat, exactly where she'd put it in the little room under the slanted ceiling, and felt his heart going, as fast as hers.

"Okay," she said. "New rules."

"Oh no."

"Rule one. We met through Megan, which is true. We've been dating since December twenty-third, which is eight days, which is crazy but not suspicious."

"I can live with that."

"Rule two. No more pillows."

"Agreed."

"Rule three." She looked up at him. "Kissing on the mouth is fine. Kissing on the mouth is encouraged. Whether or not my mother is squinting."

"What about rule four?"

"There's no rule four," Emily said. "I deleted it."

He kissed her, right there in the lobby of Halbrook Communications, under the fluorescent lights, next to the ficus that had been dying since 2019, with Luis applauding slowly behind the desk. Nobody had hung any mistletoe. Nobody needed to.

When they came up for air, her phone was buzzing in her pocket. She looked. It was her mother.

> *Did Jake find you?? He called the house last night asking for your office address. I may have given it to him. Don't be mad. Bring him for the Super Bowl. Wear a nice sweater.*

Emily held it up so he could see.

Jake read it and grinned. "Your mom's a really good publicist."

"She's the best one I know," Emily said, and took his hand, and laced her fingers through his, and walked him to the elevator so she could show him her desk, and the fern, and the yogurt she wasn't going to eat.

— Shay ••

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.