

S.L. Scott

Naturally,
Charlie

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
Publishing House

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Chapter 1: Charlie Barrow

♀

“Damn it!”

My day starts with an irritation that some might see as an omen of things to come. Others might see it as a minor speed bump. I see it as another hassle in a gigantic series of hassles, but a hassle all the same. My life seems to be filled with agitations these days.

The toothbrush drops, and I watch as it bounces off the sink and straight into the toilet. With a frustrated sigh, I lean forward and spit the toothpaste out, realizing now that I only got to my bottom left molars before my grip slipped and the toothbrush went down.

I look at the blue stick floating in the middle of the toilet, mocking me as it drifts around. Pinching it between my fingers, I rescue the toothbrush from the cold porcelain bowl. My life isn't that bad to argue whether I should keep it or not. I toss the brush without a second thought and finish getting dressed for work.

I spill my coffee—er, I mean when a guy running into the Coffee Hut hits me with his shoulder, thus causing the coffee to bubble through the little spout on the lid and land on my shirt, I chalk it up to another annoying mishap in this stage of my life. After the coffee incident and ToothGate this morning, I need to pay closer attention to the world around me. These tedious little occurrences are still new to me, but they all add up to a large amount of unnecessary aggravation. I've always believed that it's the little things that make up your life. The bigger events just connect them. This is a philosophy I live by now.

I arrive at Smith & Allen, an auction house representing property from private estates and corporate collections. It's regarded as “preeminent in the marketplace of quality masterpieces, antiques, and antiquities.” That's what's written in the brochure. I've been known to believe in such greatness before, but today won't be one of those days.

I make my way through the maze of cubicles to my own little sectioned-off grey area and find a large manila envelope crowding my tiny, tidy desk. I set my coffee down and toss my purse in the bottom right drawer, kicking the cabinet closed.

“Red or green?” Rachel Russo asks. She’s my friend, coworker, and all around party girl.

“Green.” I keep my voice flat, trying to maintain a straight face while I tease since I’m clueless to why she’s asking me about colors.

I slide my jacket down my arms. Catching it in my hand, I hang it on the hook attached to the half wall that divides our two cubicles. When I sit, my chair does a slow bounce, adjusting to the weight it’s now holding, and I slide my body forward.

“You don’t even know why I’m asking.”

I don’t have to look at her to know she’s pouting. I can hear it in her tone. I give in and play along. “What’s it for?”

“Tonight. We’re going out. So, my va-va-va-voom red dress, or my green-means-go-home-with-me dress?”

I can’t hold back the laughter no matter how hard I try. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And on the market. So, which one?”

“On the market? What happened to Paolo?” I stand, leaning forward so no one overhears our personal conversation.

“He went back to Rome.”

“Since when? Weren’t you supposed to see him last night?”

“Yes, and I did, right before he left for the airport. I gave him his going away gift.”

“Do I even entertain the question?”

“Yes.” Her response is laced with giddiness.

“What was his gift?”

“Me, him, naked on his balcony with a bottle of red wine.”

My mouth drops open. Okay, I didn't expect that. “Rachel! He has a second floor walk-up that overlooks the street.”

She shrugs as if public nudity is common. Well, maybe it is in New York, but still. “It was a fantasy of his, and I enjoyed it. I look good in the nude. Remember when I modeled for a sculpting class? I got asked out by three of the students.”

“That doesn't count.” I roll my eyes. “One was the teacher—the very female teacher—one wore bifocals and was older than your grandfather—”

“And the other was Paolo.”

I plop back down in my seat. “Point taken. Are you going to miss him?”

“I gave him the best night of his life so he misses me. See how that works? I predict no more than a month before he's knocking on my New York City door again.”

“And by door, I'm guessing you mean your va-j? You know, you'd do well as a call girl.”

“Jealous much?” She jokes with me as she sits back on her side of the divider.

“All the time.” I always enjoy a good morning-time exchange.

With the envelope in hand, I scan the address label that's typed on the front:

Ms. Charlotte Barrow
Smith & Allen
584 Madison Avenue
New York, New York
10022

I blow a harsh breath as if I've been punched in the gut. My heart aches as I read the return address:

Mrs. James Bennett Sr.
12 Sutton Place
Penthouse
New York, New York
10021

I drop the package to the floor, the smooth paper like acid on my skin. At least that's what it feels like to me. Mrs. James Bennett Sr., also known as Jim's mother, has a knack for the low blow covered in a superficial camouflage of tact. And she doesn't disappoint today.

Tears fill my eyes as I search for anything to distract me, to make me not think about Jim. I look at my calendar and focus on the inspirational phrase below the picture, needing support, any support, I can get. I read, digesting the quote word by word. When you have confidence, you can have a lot of fun, and when you have fun you can do amazing things – Joe Namath.

Okay, a sports personality giving me life advice might seem strange, but I can deal with that. I mean, he is an icon—even if I don't know what for. I have confidence. I can do this. I take a deep breath then slowly exhale. I am a strong, confident woman! I am a strong, confident woman!

I pick the envelope back up and run my finger along the return address, touching the package and being careful not to be burned again—metaphorically. Turning it sideways, I open it as if it's anything else that comes across my desk needing my attention. Some papers and a three-inch-square box spill out before me. Proper etiquette dictates opening the card before the present, so I reach for that first.

The card isn't a card, though—it's an invitation to his funeral. I can't believe his mother is turning her own son's funeral into a social event. One of the main reasons Jim and I were never meant to be—our upbringings were just too different.

I knew the funeral was coming, although I didn't know if I'd be invited. My original plan was to crash . . . for Jim, in remembrance of the good times. As I turn the card over in my hand, I can't stop the roll of my stomach seeing it

in print. He's gone, deceased, dead. Tears fill my eyes when I realize I'll never see him again.

Can I do this right now? I drop my face into my hands, my elbows supporting its weight, and I stare at the box. Memories flood from the last time I saw him—saw him alive. Maybe if I'd taken him back, he'd still be alive now. Maybe if I had pushed the hurt, the pain away that day he came to my apartment, he'd still be here. I'm tired of wondering if I'd taken him back whether I could have saved him.

I'm just tired.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I replay my mother's words, letting them in, and hope they give me the strength I need. "You didn't cause his accident, just like you didn't cause him to make the decisions he made. He alone chose those."

He alone.

Alone.

Alone, like I am now.

Jim's gone forever and I'm alone.

I wipe away the tears before they fall. I'm at work, and though some of my coworkers are aware of his death, I try very hard to keep my personal life out of the workplace. I think I'm strong enough to be here today, to deal with this, but not if it comes with the added pressure of smiling to reassure sympathetic coworkers. I can't do that.

But I can do this, I reason with myself. Not that I have much choice. I set the card down and pick up the box, hesitating as I lift the brown lid to peek inside. There in the fluffy white filler lies a simple white-gold ring with little diamonds sparkling like tiny stars randomly embedded in the band. I hold it between my index finger and thumb, remembering the life to which this ring once belonged.

I shake off those memories, not wanting to travel down that lane again, especially not at work.

The three days prior, I called in sick to mourn his loss, my loss, everyone's loss. It wasn't enough time to come to grips with his death. The sadness sits

like a rock in the center of my chest. It was more like a small hole before I found out he died. My heart was healing, enough time had passed, and I was moving on. When his sister called me, the hole gaped open once again. Today, it's more like a hard mass. Maybe that's my heart. I can't tell these days, so I try not to think about it.

I put the ring, with care, back into the box and close the lid. I rummage through the papers included and find two letters and a poem that Jim wrote for me. I close my eyes, rubbing my temples, as my annoyance flairs. It's a photocopy of the poem, a private moment we once shared. I should have the original, but in my hurry to leave, it was left behind. Now that Jim's gone, I assume the original remains in the tight grip of his mother.

I'm quite surprised she sent my engagement ring, but I'm sure the reminder of the rift it caused is insignificant compared to the disappointment she felt toward me for loving it so much. I'm sure she wanted to rid herself of it—rid herself of me—once and for all. The other ring wasn't returned to me. I bet she kept it—or sold it. Either of those scenarios wouldn't surprise me, because that ring was really hers all along.

I pile the papers back into the envelope and slide the invitation and box on top of them before placing it inside the large drawer where I keep my purse. Once more, I kick the drawer shut.

“I'm in for tonight.”

“Great! I discovered this cool place downtown—not too trendy—but it's got a great, hip vibe.”

“Fantastic!” I feign enthusiasm, because although I'm not excited about going out, I need to go and try to start living again.

It's Friday, and standard for our business, I get a large amount of tedious paperwork piled in my inbox regarding this weekend's auctions. The day seems to flow by without any major interruptions, apart from the unexpected visit from Mr. Smith. He's our auction house's founding leaders' grandson and is a descendent of the original, blue-blooded families in this city.

Frederick J. Smith III provides an endless source of enjoyment among the staff. He's older than the States and less animated than a sponge. He's a

character unlike anyone else I know—other than Jim's mother. They're very similar, more similar than I recognized before today.

"Ms. Barrow, I'm still not able to place your ancestry. You can fill me in when I have more time. It has bothered me so."

"It's Scottish, sir."

"No, no, Charlotte. I said when I have time." He walks off with strong intentions for the coffee room, accompanied by his assistant. "Oh, how I do love those foamy lattes you make, Teresa." She follows him down the corridor to make him that special treat.

I swivel back to my desk and notice it's almost five. Rachel pops her head up over my cubicle wall, all smiles and excitement.

"You ready?"

I pause to shut down my computer. "Yeah, I'm ready." Grabbing my jacket off the hook, I swing it on while pulling my purse out of the drawer. That's when I see the package again. I had managed to forget about it most of the day, getting lost in my work. But I can't avoid it now. I remove the papers and box, and toss the envelope in the trash.

Stuffing it all into my oversized purse, I make my way toward the elevators. Rachel keeps pace as the doors open like they know how desperate we are to leave. We glance over the crowd then squeeze in. As soon as the door opens, we race each other to the exit. That brings a smile to my face—a welcome reprieve from the heavy of today. After a quick good-bye at the corner, we separate, having already settled our plans to meet up later.

I walk to the closest subway and straight onto a train. My mind wanders, as it always does when I'm on the train, the tunnel whizzing by. It's how I decompress from the day.

As the subway approaches the next stop, I notice a man—an attractive man—standing on the platform. Dressed casually, he's wearing worn jeans, a light-blue, button-down shirt, and sneakers. A large group pushes in behind him when he steps on. His face is handsome and his eyes are kind. He's really good-looking, and for the first time in forever, I kind of want to flirt. Maybe I

should talk to him? I probably shouldn't. He'll think I'm a weirdo. This is New York City. People don't like strangers talking to them on the subway. I watch as he lets everyone around him take the available seats, while he remains standing. His politeness is refreshing.

I'm staring too long, realizing a few seconds too late that this is my stop. I jump up from my seat and right into him. Since this is New York, no pardons are needed, but I still say, "Excuse me." I like to be polite, too.

"No, I'm sorry," he replies, maneuvering out of my way. Our eyes meet for a solid second before I turn back toward the exit doors.

I get stuck between a pole and a woman a foot shorter than me who refuses to budge. I look down at her and repeat, "Excuse me, please." I push forward without trampling anyone, but the doors close before I can reach them.

Deflated, I stand there, once again reminded that this is my life now—a series of hassles and a distinct difference from the one I once led. Life used to be sunshine. Life used to be easy before . . .

When I turn around to grab a pole, I notice the handsome man already entering the next train car. I continue watching until the door slides closed behind him.

The next stop comes, and I work my way through the crowd and up to street level, choosing to walk the five blocks back to my apartment. This is the second time this week I've had to backtrack like this. Sometimes I think I should give up the subway altogether and try the bus. It seems more natural for a person with my lack of aggression. I left my feistier side with Jim six months earlier. I still haven't mastered this new me yet.

A long bath eases some of the tension in my shoulders, but my mind is still left to flounder. The black dress I slip on is always flattering, but gives me the ability to blend into the background. Rachel can garner all the attention. It makes it easier since I'm not in a dating mode at this point in my life.

I stock my clutch and notice the invitation lying on the counter where I dumped my bag out when I got home. I pick it up, contemplating once again if I'm ready to read it. It will upset me, so I choose to walk away, leaving all the memories that come with it behind for the night.

Waving at me with enthusiasm when I walk in, Rachel looks like her confidence is soaring as she gets some much-desired attention at the swanky bar she's chosen to prowl tonight. She introduces me to the two guys she just met, Bob and John, who seem to be enamored by her charms. Their names make me question if they're using aliases tonight. Just like the guys themselves, they are generic.

I'm welcomed, and John even rushes to the bar to get me a drink. When he returns, he hands me a gimlet, and I graciously accept, though it's not a cocktail I normally drink.

I need this night more than I let on to Rachel. I can't be depressed anymore. It's too . . . depressing. I will enjoy tonight.

After a few minutes of talking about himself and his law firm, John winks at me then leans over. "You want to get out of here?"

Is he for real? Shocked by his arrogance, the answer is easy. "No. I just met you!"

He starts backtracking. "Just one drink back at my place. You know, and see where it goes from there." He touches my hair, looking at it between his fingers. "I've always heard redheads were fun."

Is that a perverted challenge of some sort? I don't smile. His rudeness doesn't deserve my niceties. I smack his hand away before backing up. "Well, you won't be finding out with me tonight."

I turn to walk away, giving Rachel a get-rid-of-them look before I head to the bathroom.

"You all right, Charlie?" Rachel asks.

"Just gonna powder my nose." I let my tone indicate how I'm feeling.

I've learned there are a lot of misconceptions about me and my fellow crimson comrades. Most men are predictable and make unwarranted assumptions. I fall into a stereotype of fiery-tempered sexpots. I'm passionate about my work and the ones I care about, but hot-tempered, no.

The other common belief is that we reds sleep around. I'm not easy, despite what people assume based on my follicles. My natural hair color is rare, so it

draws men in like a moth to a flame. But I often see the disappointment in their eyes when they discover I'm more what is considered the girl-next-door type than a vixen. At least it's a good way to weed out the jerks like the one tonight.

Escaping, I make my way through the barflies flocking to this club's light.

One thing I've learned living in Manhattan is that a man who takes you home to do the deed earlier in the night has no intention of staying home. He'll be right back on the prowl before midnight. I don't mind a one-night stand if needed. I had one once, although it turned into a relationship, so I guess it doesn't count. I do mind, however, being one of several for a guy who gets greedy and abuses his good looks. At twenty-five, I've already learned it's hard to find a meaningful relationship in this city. Most are too self-centered to make the effort, and the others . . . well, are like me, just not that into the hunt.

I check my lipstick in the bathroom mirror before squeezing past a gaggle of girls celebrating a pending marriage. I don't think about what could have been my life. I try to convince myself I should feel lucky I found out the bad stuff when I did—before the marriage.

Rachel waves at me. A different man is standing with her at the bar. I'm not surprised she's receiving so much attention; she's gorgeous with her long, dark, wavy hair, brown eyes, and Italian heritage.

Not that I'm bad-looking or anything like that. I receive my fair share of attention. It's just more an acceptance that I'm not the typical sexy type, not like Rachel. I'm average height for a woman, but heels put me right at five-six. My body isn't athletic, but I exercise, so I'm fit . . . enough.

I look to her right just as her next conquest turns. Our eyes meet, but not for the first time. My mind flashes to the subway when Rachel introduces him. "Charlie, this is Charlie. How funny is that?"

"Very," I say, distracted by the sweetness of his smile and his handsome face. His brown hair is tousled, kind of wind-blown, but definitely not styled like most of the men in this city. I like that. His hair looks touchable, but I resist the temptation. A small laugh escapes me, and my real smile reveals itself before slipping away.

“You made it off the subway?” he asks.

“What?” The music is louder now, and the bar area is noisy.

“The subway?” He leans closer, and his warm breath hits my cheek. I detect a hint of whiskey. “I see you made it off the subway earlier today?”

“Oh, yes. Barely.” I smile, wanting to blush and giggle like a schoolgirl, but I’m too intrigued that he remembers me. I look into his kind eyes, recalling the color from the train. They’re light bluish-gray. His pupils are dilated in the darkness of the bar, but I can see the sincerity in them. “I got blocked, and had to jump off at the next stop and walk home.”

“Sorry that happened. People can be rude sometimes.” “No worries. I’m getting used to it.”

“The rude people or walking home?”

“Both.” I laugh.

He laughs, too. “That’s a pity. You’re not from New Yo—”

“I’m ready for that drink you mentioned. Are you, Charlie?” Rachel interrupts, redirecting his attention back to her.

“Yes,” we reply in unison then look at each other and burst out laughing.

“Jinx! You owe me a martini.” I state this as if everyone knows this game.

He smirks, waving over the bartender. “I thought on jinx it was always a Coke?”

“I don’t drink Coke.”

He chuckles just as the bartender signals he’ll be over in a minute. Without missing a beat, he says, “Martini it is, then. So, your name really is Charlie?”

“It’s Charlotte, but I prefer Charlie. It’s what I’m used to. Is your full name Charles?” Did I just ask that stupid question? I blush this time, the alcohol not helping. This doesn’t faze Rachel, but doesn’t go unnoticed by Charlie.

He smiles again, tilting his head as if trying to figure me out. “Yes, but I don’t feel old enough to be called that.”

Rachel laughs too hard to sound natural, and she leans toward him, putting her hand on his thigh. “Charlie here tells me he’s interested in dogs.” She makes it sound as if a dog is some rare animal found in Siberia.

He nods, giving her his attention again before turning back to me. I also nod to show a courteous interest in the topic, though I have none. Looking at her, I finally clue into what all of her odd expressions and bulging eyes mean.

I’m enjoying myself for the first time in what seems like forever, but I’m reminded that she met him first. I’m the one who interrupted, so I should go. I should go before I get invested in a guy who has already been marked by my friend, because I don’t screw over my friends. “As much as I’d love to stay and chat more about dogs, I’m really tired after the day I’ve had. I think I’m outty.”

“Audi, like the car?” he asks.

Rachel is rolling her eyes behind his back, so he can’t see. She hates my lingo. It’s a bad habit left over from my more frivolous college days. I look at Charlie and smile again. “No, outty. It’s just a stupid way of saying ‘out of here.’ My college roommates and I used to say it.”

“I’ve never heard the word before.”

Rachel steps forward and laughs nervously. I’ve embarrassed her. She rests her hand on his shoulder, staking claim. “She always says the silliest things.”

“I think it’s cute,” he says with a gentle smile on his face.

I look away quickly, thinking there is more to his words than the basic meaning.

“Silliest, as in adorable,” Rachel says, her tone overly dramatic. “I meant she always says the most adorable things. I don’t know how she comes up with them.” She tilts her head toward the door, signaling me to leave.

“Well, I really should get going—”

Rachel’s hugging me before I finish my sentence. “Yes. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Yeah, Monday,” I mumble. The sudden and rapid good-bye is disorienting.

Charlie takes my hand and says, “It was really nice to meet you, Charlie.”

“You too, Charlie.” I emphasize his name for fun. What am I doing? I start to back up, now embarrassed by my own ridiculousness. He doesn't release my hand right away. Just when our arms are stretched as far as they can go, he tugs me forward again, both of us enjoying the moment. After another dirty look from Rachel, I drop my hand to my side and walk away. One more glimpse back, and I see him shift his hand to his lap.

Is this what a real connection feels like? It's been so long, I'm not certain anymore. As much as I want to stay and get to know him better, Rachel looks pleased with my imminent departure. Just as I'm about exit, I glance back, my eyes meeting his one final time.

I catch a cab, abiding by one of my golden rules: No subways after nine o'clock. Settling into the back seat, I reminisce about tonight. It was a good time, which was a nice change.

Thinking of Charlie, I'm glad Rachel found someone interesting this time. To most men, she's the epitome of a single city girl—if she sleeps with a guy too soon, she won't be considered wife material, and if she doesn't have sex with him soon enough, he won't want her as a girlfriend. I know under her optimistic enthusiasm she gets lonely. Hell! We all do. Right now, I'm just trying to enjoy the fact that I had a great time with a fascinating man . . . oh yeah, and Rachel, too.

I push down the pang of jealousy surging through me because she met him first. I take a deep breath and chant, “I will not fall for Charlie. I will not fall for Charlie.” After I repeat the phrase several times, I rationalize that walking away was the right thing to do. Rachel has staked her claim, so I can't dwell on him, although I want to.

I crawl into bed later that night feeling hopeful, which is a nice reprieve from my usual sadness. I smile thinking that maybe, just maybe, I can find someone as charming as Charlie one day, too.

Chapter 2: Charlie Adams



“I don’t think I need it—”

“Dude, take it, just in case. If it brings you lady love, mm-hmm,” Conner clears his throat, “then I’ve done my job.”

I roll my eyes, but also laugh at the gesture. “I haven’t seen a rabbit’s foot in years. I think since I was eight.” The orange foot is really creepy, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings. I loop the chain onto my key ring anyway. “I’ll give it back to you next week.”

“No hurry. Just take care of it.”

I’m caught between being creeped out and amused that he thinks this thing can do anything other than scare women away, but I humor him. “Yeah, okay. I’ll keep it safe.” I walk to the door and yell, “Rip it up in Aspen.”

He shouts from the back bedroom, “Yeah, no doubt, dude!”

Leaving his apartment, I gallop down the stairs. I can barely remember the last time I snowboarded. It’s been a few years. The last time was three years ago when I spent Christmas with Conner and his family in Park City. My family was still holding their grudge against me for dropping out of university and thought it best if I didn’t come home for the holiday. They thought I’d come begging my way back into their good graces, return to college, and step in line to run the family business, but I didn’t. I just hopped on the private jet with Conner and took off. My parents didn’t call me on Christmas or New Year’s like they had every other year of my life when we were apart. That hurt, especially since I called them on both days, and was sent to voice mail both times.

Most people, including all of my childhood friends, would have caved at that point, but my parents’ wealth and status was not my concern at the time—just like it’s not now. I had goals and my own dreams to pursue, and their cutting off my allowance and living expenses wasn’t going to deter me.

The rift between us has continued to this day, but it's softened. I see my parents occasionally now. My mom reads my articles that make the paper, but that's all. I'm the prodigal son who let them down. I get their disappointment, but I don't understand the treatment. I'm their only son, their only child. Aren't they supposed to love and support me, no matter what? I work hard and don't need their money. Shouldn't they be proud I'm making my own way? I am. I hope one day, they will be, too.

As I approach The Bagelry, the smell of fresh dough and coffee permeates the air—my version of heaven in the morning. I turn and go inside. Tony leans forward on the counter and in his thick Bronx accent asks, “Your usual, Charlie?”

“The usual.” I set my money down, taking my coffee and bag from him. As I back out the door onto the street, I call out, “Keep the change.” Walking down the remaining two blocks to my apartment, I appreciate the new, warmer air that covers the city.

As I press the code to get in my building, Mrs. Lackey walks by, greeting me warmly. “Good morning, Charlie.”

“Morning, Mrs. L.” I return the kindness. She smiles to herself almost as if she's blushing from the interaction. She's eighty-three and always makes me smile, too.

I take my first sip of coffee as I unlock the door, always using the walk home to let it cool. Their basic house coffee is my standard. The rich but simple taste reminds me why I don't like the frou-frou fancy coffee drinks. Just a good ole cup of Joe for this guy will do just fine. It's that good.

After hanging my keys on the hook, I remove my bagel from its brown bag. My breakfast gets dropped on my desk, which I pushed to face the sliding glass door a few days ago, needing a new perspective. I open the door to the balcony and lean against it to people watch. We don't get many people in this area sightseeing, so the attractive girls I spy down below must be lost.

There are several clues that tell me they're not from around here. First off, they're too tan for a New Yorker emerging from a cold winter. They also wear bright colors—too bright for my taste. And finally, there is the most

obvious giveaway—the map that they can't seem to figure out how to read. I laugh at my easy deductions when they ask a guy for assistance.

Our spring season kicks into high gear when New Yorkers leave and the tourists start arriving in droves. Inspired to write, I sit down in my desk chair. The antics playing out on the street below, coupled with Conner escaping the city in hopes of catching that last elusive snow storm of the season, give me plenty of material to work with, so I start typing.

When I finish the piece, I read through it again and do a quick edit. It's in keeping with my collection of articles on life in New York, and I know my agent will like it.

It's ironic that when I was growing up in Manhattan, I used to wish to be anywhere else in the world. And yet here I am at twenty-seven, still in Manhattan and now being paid to write about it. Crazy ridiculous! But being paid to write about the city I now appreciate is nothing to sniff at, and I don't. I love what I do for a living. I've worked hard and sacrificed a lot to get where I am.

I didn't luck into my life. I created the life I wanted to live. When I left college at the end of my junior year, my parents used every threat they could think of, but nothing could change my mind. I hated the life I was living. It was how they chose to live, not how I would. So I took off on my own and worked hard, earning and deserving everything I have despite what my parents predicted. I also know that I'm very fortunate, and I don't take it for granted, not like the life I led before. That all feels like a lifetime ago, like my memories are of a different person entirely now. I guess, in a way, they are.

I take an afternoon nap, knowing I'll need some energy for hitting the bars with Justin tonight. He's an animal, and even though I'm still in my twenties, that doesn't guarantee the stamina to play in his league of partying. I met him through Conner about three years ago. Justin's cool and loves the thrill of the hunt. It's always interesting to go out on the town with him.

After waking, I take a break from my apartment and go downstairs to check my mail. As I stand in front of the wall of mailboxes, I flip through the uninteresting bills, pausing at a large heavy cardstock envelope. I tab through my mind, hoping I haven't forgotten about a friend's upcoming nuptial or a

younger cousin's graduation, but I come up empty on both fronts. I head back upstairs and rip it open after the other mail gets tossed onto a small table to my left.

A sigh escapes when I realize it's a funeral announcement for my great-aunt Grace. She died on Tuesday, but I wasn't called until Thursday, which still bothers me. I read the information relevant to her funeral taking place next Wednesday at three o'clock. The thought of a family reunion, especially one of bad tidings, is unsettling.

Dropping down onto the couch, I turn on the local news as a distraction until my stomach reminds me I forgot to eat lunch. I grab my jacket and walk to the closest subway station. Craving Chinese food, I head to the best in town which is two train stops away and worth the hassle of getting there.

While waiting on the platform, the crowd bunches around me just as the train arrives. The doors open, and I walk on with the herd. As I make my way to the center of the car, letting everyone else claim the seats, I hear a quiet voice.

"Excuse me."

I follow the voice and find a pretty, blue-eyed redhead attempting to work her way off the car without much luck. I stare into the innocence of her eyes for a second longer than what's considered polite before I scoot out of her way and apologize for blocking her. "No, I'm sorry."

I hope removing myself from her path assists in creating an opening for her to exit, although all of my instincts direct me to do the opposite, to keep her here. After hesitating for a second, I continue on my mission to find a seat and let her go. There's nowhere to sit back here, so I decide to move to another train car. I head toward the front, hoping to find a seat up there.

I make it home with food intact and eat while flicking through the television stations. Nothing's on, though, and I'm supposed to meet Justin in thirty. I turn the television off and get ready. A fresh shave and a change of clothes later, I grab my keys and am out the door right on time.

Walking in just past eight, I head straight to the back where Justin always reserves a table. I'm greeted with the usual round of handshakes and hollers from the regulars.

"Grab a glass, my friend. The pitcher's over there." Justin points to the corner shelf as I search through the rows of sticks on the wall, looking for Lynda. "Who's the lucky lady tonight?" Justin asks.

I find my favorite pool stick and chalk the tip. "Gentlemen, behold Lynda." I laugh, holding up the cue, knowing how they eat up the dramatics. I jokingly name the sticks after ladies I've spent time with.

"Now which one was Lynda again?" Bruce asks.

"I've got this one." Justin steps in to explain. "Lynda was the one in those little hot pants who strolled in one evening asking if we'd seen her friend." He makes a sad face. "Her friend stood her up, but Chuck here lent a shoulder to cry on all night—figuratively speaking." He looks at me and asks, "Did I do her justice?"

I don't like to brag about my dates, but he was a witness and loves to boast, even if it's for me. "We went out a few times until—"

"She went nuts over the boy," Bruce spews out. "I remember now. Dark hair, hot body, and big boobs."

"Well, to be clear, she didn't go nuts over me. She was already deemed clinically insane before we met." I correct his take on the situation, ignoring the rest.

I walk back over to the wall and grab any old stick, not quite feeling the same desire to use Lucky Lynda anymore. Was I seriously that much of a pig back then? Some of my old habits tagged along into my new life, but have since been kicked to the curb.

"You can break," Bruce announces. Justin grabs a stool to watch our game.

After a few pitchers, Bruce takes off and Justin stands, ready to leave. "Let's go. There's a bar around the corner that gets some good-looking girls in there." I follow without question. I'm tired of playing pool anyway.

We walk in, and I search to figure out the vibe in here. It's part professionals still partying after happy hour and part locals. I dig the relaxed atmosphere. I buy the first round and pay more for those two whiskeys than three pitchers of beer cost at the pool hall.

Justin is already working his charms on two women. Not interested in playing the get-to-know-you-game yet, I hand him his drink and return to the bar to chill. He seems to be doing well for this early in the evening. Usually it takes a few drinks and several hours mixed with a hint of desperation for a girl to give my most obnoxious buddy this much attention.

Bored with watching Justin, I've been staring into my drink now for a while. I look out and survey the crowd that's changed in the last hour. The clubbers, the nighttime partiers have arrived.

A red dress catches my eye, and I notice, along with half the men in the bar, the pretty owner wearing it—dark hair, dark eyes, and a bright smile. She's quite stunning. I've encountered her type too many times to recall. I've dubbed them the "Unapproachable Approachable." She's wearing red to get the attention, but she's looking, too. If a man she's not interested in comes up to her, it's a quick rejection. But if a man she's eyeing comes over to talk, she welcomes him. She's looking for a husband, but it will end up more a match made in one-night-stand heaven.

Yeah, she's stunning all right, but not my type.

The girl with her, the one in black, not only catches my attention, but holds it. She's pretty and cute at the same time—familiar. A memory flashes as I watch her talking with her friend. It can't be. Can it? Sitting up a little straighter, I'm shocked. This is quite the coincidence. I think she's the hot little redhead from the subway this afternoon. She's very attractive, even more so than I thought on the train. I wonder if she lives in the area, if this is her hangout. She exited the subway not too far from here, so it could be.

Justin comes over for a bit; the girl he'd been chatting up is now gone. "You learning from the master by watching me all night, or you gonna get out there and mingle?" He slaps his hand down on the bar and signals for two more drinks.

“The master? Yeah, you’re the master all right,” I reply, my sarcasm taking over. “I’m good. Just enjoying the scenery from the bar.” I glance back over my shoulder and see my redhead has left.

I spin back on the barstool and down the last two gulps of my drink just as a fresh one arrives.

I must be boring Justin, because he’s now talking to a girl a few stools down. I overhear her say that she loves classic rock like Smash Mouth and Madonna. Some of my brain cells die an instant and agonizing death from her comments. “Classic rock,” I scoff purposely loud.

I’m still laughing at my sardonic thought when Justin says, “So, Tiff and I are gonna take off. You cool hanging here by yourself?”

“Yeah, sure.” I lean back, scanning the bar one more time. I see the girl in the black dress again with her friend and two guys. I smile, because she didn’t leave. From her expression, I can tell how disinterested she is in the man hovering too close to her. Her body language says everything she’s not, but he keeps talking, missing her obvious disinterest.

Looking back at my friend, I say, “No problem. Go on. I’m cool.”

Justin and his new potential leave, and I’m left to watch these players hit on my redhead. Would it make a difference if those jerks weren’t just trying to get laid? Stop analyzing weird crap! Looking back at my drink, I watch the ice melt, wondering why I’m even here. It’s not my scene at all. Though, these days, I’m not sure what my scene is. I think I’m ready for someone more permanent in my life, not this ongoing dating business. I’ve outgrown this scene enough to not make an effort, and I’ll stay just to finish my drink.

I’m not an aggressive guy and know full well I won’t intrude on another man’s game. My redhead will be interested in that schmuck or she won’t. I’ll watch and see how it plays out.

A few minutes later, without a drink in my hand, I’m debating whether I should stay or go. I decide to go, but I’ll check on the girl before I do. I negotiate with myself. If the guy is still there, I’ll leave. If he’s not, I’ll go talk to her.

Just as I turn around, I'm chest to chest with brown eyes, long brown hair, and a sinful red dress.

Smiling, her hand lands on my chest. "Hi there, handsome. I hope you're not leaving."

I sit back down, because when a woman like her wants you to stay, you do. The only problem is I'm more interested in her friend. Looking over her shoulder, I scan the bar to see if she left, but that's what I assumed before, so this time I want to verify.

"I'm Charlie." She giggles for some reason when I introduce myself. I don't get the joke, so I move on and ask, "Are you here alone tonight?"
Straightforward, but I need to know to clear my thoughts of the pretty girl.

She glances over her shoulder then looks me in the eyes. "Yes, it appears that way. I'm Rachel." She's flirting. "Are you here by yourself tonight?"

I'm a believer in destiny, so I don't like things forced—if I am meant to meet her, I will. Guess it's not in the stars tonight. "I am now. The friend I came with took off."

We talk, and I discover she's funny. She speaks fast, almost too fast. I hope it's nerves and not that late-night desperation.

She asks, "Do you live in the area?"

"Sort of, about six blocks away. How about you?"

"Down the street. I love the access to the park."

I offer her my barstool, but the one next to me becomes available and she settles there.

"There's a dog park around the corner from my apartment. I don't have a dog, but I find it fascinating to sit and watch the animals interact. Dogs are interesting, that's for sure." I don't even know what I'm talking about. I blame the alcohol for the gibberish.

An odd thought strikes me as she talks about some couple out in the Hamptons selling their estate. What if the redhead was brought into my life so I can meet her friend? “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Yes, I’d love a . . .” She stops speaking for a moment, and I follow her gaze, my eyes meeting bright blue ones and a black dress—my redhead. “Oh! Here’s my friend. Charlie, this is Charlie. How funny is that?”

I can’t stop the smile. It’s there, natural, just for her.

She smiles at me before responding, “Very.” She’s speaking to Rachel, but looking at me.

“You made it off the subway?” I ask, wondering if she remembers me.

It’s later in the night, the music has been turned up, making it harder to hear and hold a conversation. We do just fine, though. She blushes when we talk about the coincidence of our names. The act of blushing is completely endearing and quite adorable on her. Most of the women in this city lost the ability to blush years ago.

Being around her makes me sit up straighter, listen more intently. Remembering the strict etiquette courses I endured as a child, I adjust my shoulders back, fixing my posture as I stand, offering her my chair.

She declines and the brightness in her eyes and smile remain as we tease each other about jinxes and sodas. The playful banter is refreshing, considering we’re in a bar. Our conversation is easy and comfortable, extraordinary. That is until we’re both reminded that Rachel is here when she interjects some bizarre comment about me liking dogs that makes no sense. Charlie’s expression indicates she thinks it’s odd, too.

Not wanting to be rude, I focus on Rachel, including her in the conversation. I don’t want to make her feel awkward and can tell she’s feeling competitive with her friend. My eyes flicker to Charlie again when she uses a word she made up. I tell her she’s cute when Rachel teases her. I wonder if she doesn’t like the compliment, because she’s suddenly trying to dash out the door. She probably would’ve preferred if I told her she was pretty or clever—which she is also.

Silent exchanges flow between them, and Charlie says good-bye before I have a chance to change her mind. I grab her hand, pretending it's a casual handshake. It's not. I feel a little desperate myself now.

She backs up, trying to leave, and I hold on, not wanting to let her go, not ready for her to walk away. I pull her toward me, watching the light in her eyes sparkle as she giggles. But her hand slips free, and she turns to leave. I should respect their decision, but this feels wrong, all wrong. The wrong girl is leaving.

“Now, about that drink,” Rachel says, leaning forward, her arm draping across my shoulder.

We settle into light conversation. She has an enthusiasm when she talks that makes her appear animated. She's fun to chat with—or maybe I should say listen to. That might be more apropos.

Just after midnight, I find I'm starved and ask her if she'd like to grab a bite to eat together. She readily agrees, and we walk a block down to an all-night diner I used to frequent. Over our food, I discover she's from New Jersey and works at an auction house. Sounds depressing, selling dead people's stuff, but she says there's more to it than that.

She starts to ask questions about me, which kind of surprises me. I guess because she hadn't all night. “So, are you native to New York?”

I smile, and my mind shoots between all corners of my brain, searching for which answer I'm comfortable giving. “I'm from Kansas.”

It's not a lie. I've spent a lot of time, summers and holiday breaks, down there visiting my great-aunt. Her house was more like a home than Manhattan ever was with my parents. My parents were too caught up in being a part of high society to worry about me and my upbringing.

My dad did take the time to teach me the importance of two things, or at least the most important to him: making money and meeting girls. That was the life advice I was given.

In Manhattan, you're a pawn in the game of society, a willing participant to their rules. The women here tend to attach themselves as soon as they find

out I'm a local. That sounds the alarm which means I must come from money. Kansas throws them off, and it's only a partial lie, at worst, since I did spend a lot of time there.

"Kansas, wow! I wouldn't have guessed that. A small town boy, huh?" She smiles and takes another bite, hoping I'll lead into a story, but I just eat my food.

She asks a few more questions, expected ones, nothing of interest. Not saying she's shallow, but she's running through her list, checking off her requirements one by one. It's fine. I can admit we're in the age group that is seeking a life partner, so it doesn't bother me. These questions are a great way to get to know the girl, too, to find out what's important to her, what she values.

I answer her inquiries as honestly as I can and throw them back to learn more about her. After we finish our meal, we walk outside, and although I should walk her or cab it with her home, I decide to end the night. "Can I get a taxi for you?"

Her smile is friendly. "Oh, that's right. You live close by. I'll just grab a cab myself."

I step forward, spotting a taxi in the distance heading this way with its light on. I raise my arm, and it pulls up to the curb. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Rachel." And it was. There weren't fireworks, just a few minor sparks.

"I enjoyed this very much." She smiles. "I was wondering if you'd like to go out for dinner this week. Maybe Tuesday?"

Fate chose Rachel, I remind myself. "I'd like that, but I can't Tuesday." My agent texted and made me promise to focus on my goals. I don't like lying and told him I would start this week. Monday, I can let slide, but Tuesday will make me feel guilty. "I'm free on Monday."

"Oh. Um, well, I'll make Monday work. If I can't, I'll call you."

"All right." We exchange numbers.

She shakes my hand and leans in, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "I'll call you. Thank you for dinner. I had a great time." She gets in the cab, and it screeches as it takes off down the dark street, with no regard for the late hour.

I shove my hands in my jacket and walk home, thinking about my aunt's passing. My chest tightens at the loss, so I switch my thoughts to tonight, the guys at the pool hall and Rachel from the club. I don't dwell and hurry home. By the time I get to my apartment, it's almost 2:00 a.m. I climb into bed, and although I know I have to deal with my agent tomorrow, I let my mind settle on my redhead. Charlie. Her name makes me smile in the dark of my room. She makes me smile.