

I'LL BE WAITING

—1
—0

-1—
0—

ONE

Snow drives into the windshield, turning an evening ride home into a theme-park spaceship ride, launching us into orbit, light streaking past, making me feel as if we're hurtling forward instead of inching along the highway.

"I'm thinking . . . Iceland," Anton says from the driver's seat.

I shake my head. "It's a freak fall storm. By tomorrow, it'll be gone. Wait until February. *Then* you can start complaining about the snow."

"I mean I'm thinking about going to Iceland. The two of us. On a cruise into the midnight sun."

I glance over at him. Headlights from the opposite lane catch his face, green eyes under dark hair falling over his forehead. He's overdue for a haircut, but I'll never be the one to remind him. I long to reach up and push the hair back, uncover the hidden strands of gray, run my fingers over the scar at his temple, maybe lean in to kiss his stubbled cheek. Yes, we've been married for two years, but I'm still ridiculously in love with my husband.

"Did you hear me, Nic?" he says.

"Mmm, no. I'm busy staring at you."

His color rises, which is adorable. I resist the urge to reach out and

—1

—0

touch his thigh, tickle my fingers over it. None of that while driving in a snowstorm.

“Fine,” I say, “you were saying something about a cruise to . . . Iceland?”

His gaze doesn’t leave the road. “I know cruises aren’t your thing, but this is an intimate one, with an emphasis on adventure and education. I’m quoting the pamphlet. Can you tell?”

I smile. “I can. I like the sound of ‘intimate,’ though.”

“And your brain stopped there. *Small* cruise, I mean. Fifty people. Lectures and sea kayaks. Glaciers and the northern lights. That sort of thing.”

“I would love that. Seriously. It sounds amazing, but I’m not sure . . . Well, we’d need to see whether it’s doable. For me.”

He takes his eyes from the road just long enough to fix me with a look.

“Which you have already done,” I murmur. “You wouldn’t mention it unless you were already sure they could accommodate someone with CF. Because you are amazing and perfect.”

“Can I get that in writing? For the next time I burn breakfast? Yes, I found a travel blog from someone with CF who took the cruise, and I checked with Dr. Mendes. She thinks it would be fine, with all the usual precautions.”

Which means taking along my shitload of medical supplies—bottle of enzymes and my vest and my nebulizer—and a backup power supply. But it can be done, and that’s the important thing.

“I would love to see Iceland,” I murmur.

“Excellent, and if you want to test out cruising first, I found another small one that sails through the Great Lakes. Would you like that?”

“Yes, please.”

I smile and lean back against the headrest. Iceland. My parents would be proud of me, as if I were doing it at eighteen instead of thirty-eight. But I know, despite their boundless support, that they’d always worried I wouldn’t live to thirty-eight. When I’d been

diagnosed as a baby, my life expectancy ended a decade ago. But a lifetime of advances mean I'm still here, even when my parents aren't around to see it.

Thirty-eight years old, married, heading off on cruises with my husband. I spent my life being told that none of that was possible. Not by my parents, of course, or my brother or my doctors. But it felt like everyone else who heard I had cystic fibrosis put limits on me.

You won't live past twenty, thirty if you're lucky. You can't play sports. You won't marry. You won't go to university.

I can still hear the guidance counselor telling me I could skip career-planning day because, well, that wasn't for me, was it? No point in a career I won't live long enough to need.

I ended up with a master's in software engineering. At university I was part of the running club and ran three half-marathons. A decade ago, I started my own company. And then, just when I was certain marriage was no longer in the cards, Anton came back into my life.

I won't say I'm running marathons these days. I know what's in my future. I can feel it in my lungs. But for now, I am healthy enough to go on cruises and more, and we're doing it all while I still can.

It helps that I'm on a new medication. A groundbreaking one that has me more hopeful than I've ever been. The fact that—as of last month—it's covered by Canada's health plan means we have the money to do those cruises.

"I want the best cabin they've got," I say.

Anton smiles. "Do you now?"

"Yep. We are splurging. First-class airfare, best cabin on the ship."

"Champagne every night?"

"Damn straight."

He laughs and—

And then—

And then—

The rest comes in lightbulb flashes that illuminate a single scene before darkness falls.

—1

—0

Flash.

Headlights, closer than they should ever be, shining through Anton's window. We rocket sideways, and there's a crash, the sound coming on a delay, just as my brain screams *What the hell is happening?*

Flash.

The car has stopped. People are shouting. I'm . . . upside down? Sideways? I can only tell that I'm suspended somehow, the airbag in my face, seat belt cutting into my chest. I yank at it, panic making me struggle to breathe until I'm sure I can.

"Nic?"

Anton's voice is a groan. I turn my head, but all I see is my airbag. And blood. I see blood.

Flash.

Hands pulling me out of the car. A man's voice, pitched high.

"My truck hit ice. I lost control."

A woman's voice, snapping. "You were driving too fast. I told you to slow down."

"They're okay, right? They're going to be okay?"

"Does he *look* okay?"

Anton . . .

Flash.

So many voices. Everyone talking. Shouting for a doctor. Asking whether anyone's called 911.

"We've all called."

"Where the hell's the ambulance?"

"On its way. The storm . . ."

Flash.

I'm kneeling on grass. Slush soaks through my jeans. Blood drips down my face. Anton lies on a blanket someone has dragged from their trunk.

Anton, his breath wheezing, his chest caved in, blood streaming from his head, one eye fixed on me, the other off to the side, unable to focus.

“The airbag,” someone whispers. “Why didn’t his airbag go off?”
Someone else shushes him. Strangers all around, pacing and whispering and keeping their distance, as if they’re witnesses at a vigil.

“The ambulance is coming,” I say, as I squeeze Anton’s hand.

“I love you,” he says.

“Shh. The ambulance—”

“Stay with me.”

“I’m right here, baby.”

“No, stay . . .” He struggles for breath, that awful wheezing sucking sound bubbling up. “It’s okay. Just stay with me. Focus on me.”

A noise comes out of my throat, an almost hysterical yip. “That’s supposed to be my line.”

“Nic?”

I squeeze his hand tighter. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. Can you see me?”

His lips quirk. “I always saw you.”

I squeeze his hand.

“Even when we were kids,” he says. “You might not have seen me, but I saw you.”

“I saw you, too.”

Another quirk. “But not in a good way. I was a jerk.”

“Your friends were jerks. You were just a guy with really bad taste in friends.”

A soft laugh. “Maybe, but I had very good taste in girls. I always saw you, Nic. I always . . .” His voice catches. “I need to tell you something. A secret.”

Something in me flails, a wild and unreasonable urge to stop him. Whatever he’s about to say, don’t say it. Just—

“Remember how I said I accidentally found your company when I went looking for a coder?” He’s wheezing, struggling to get the words out. I try to stop him, tell him to rest, but he plows on. “It wasn’t an accident. I recognized you in an article, and I had to reach

—1

—0

out, take a chance.” His fingers flutter in a weak squeeze on mine.

“Best damn chance I ever took.”

I lean over, pressing my lips to his. “I’m glad you did.”

His mouth twists in a wry smile. “I don’t think I’m going to Iceland, Nic.”

“Don’t say—”

“Wherever I do go, though?” His fingers tighten on mine, startling me with their sudden strength. “I’ll be waiting for you. But . . .” His lips form the next word, but nothing comes out, and his eyes roll back, and his fingers release mine and, with a soft exhale . . .

Anton is gone.

TWO

Seven Months Later

This way,” says the woman. She flaps her arms in what I presume is a welcoming gesture, but with her voluminous black robe she looks like a vulture about to take flight, red talons flashing.

As soon as Shania and I step into the hall, the reek of incense hits and my insides twist.

Fake. You know this is fake, so what the hell are you doing here?

Even as my brain screams that, a little voice whispers that I know it’s *not* always fake. It is possible to reach beyond this world into the next.

Of all people, I know that.

I also know what can happen if you do.

An image flashes. Blood sprayed across a bush—

I shove that aside. That was two decades ago. This séance is about Anton, and I am not the least bit concerned about summoning my husband’s spirit.

I follow the medium down the dim hall. Beside me, Shania fairly vibrates with excitement. Tiny and dark-haired, Shania has kohl-liner

—1

—0

cat eyes that make her look much younger than her twenty-five years. So does the hope shining in her face.

I met Shania two months ago, at grief counseling, where I'd been assigned as a mentor to help her mourn the loss of her sister.

I can say I'm here for her. She desperately wants proof of an after-life. But that's a lie, and I won't give in to it.

I'm here for me. Because I'm a damn coward who can't accept that her husband is gone.

As the medium—*call me Leilani*—herds us toward the room, Shania whispers, "This time we'll reach him. I know we will." She squeezes my hand, her skin hot against my clammy fingers.

We enter a tiny, windowless room. It looks like the den in my grandparents' house, complete with wood paneling and a stucco ceiling. Mystical abstract art on the walls seems to all be painted by the same amateur, maybe Leilani herself.

Two women and a man sit at an old table draped in a black cloth. All three are middle-aged, white and nondescript enough that they could be related. Three pairs of eyes stare at me. Leilani introduces them as spirit helpers, but I know why they're really here. To gape at me. Nicola Laughton. The woman from the news. The woman from a viral story that rises from the grave every few weeks, which I know by the sudden surge of messages with titles like "Have you seen him yet?" and "I can help you contact him."

My life changed in one night. A winter storm, not even that bad, just earlier than usual. An asshole who wasn't letting a little snow slow him down. Faulty airbags in a nearly new car. Between the three, I went from giddy newlywed to grieving widow in twenty minutes flat. A private tragedy that should have damn well remained private.

Except it didn't.

One of those strangers milling around that night had recognized a story unfolding before them. Was it one of the Good Samaritans who helped get us out of the car, wrapped us in blankets, called 911? Or one of the ghouls who only stopped to gape?

-1—
0—

It doesn't matter. Someone overheard me telling the paramedics that I had cystic fibrosis, just warning them as you would with any chronic condition, and suddenly, a back-page "One Dead in Highway Accident" became a front-page "Terminally Ill Newlywed Widowed in Horrific Winter Crash."

I'm not sure what enraged me more: the idea that having CF made me "terminally ill" or that the headline centered around me, when Anton was the one who'd lost his life.

"Man Dies in Crash" isn't a story. Not until someone hears that he married a woman in the late stages of a chronic illness and—plot twist!—*she's* the one now planning *his* funeral. I'm not even in the late stages of CF, but given my age, someone apparently decided I was.

That story would have made the front page, but it wouldn't have gone viral. It's the other one that counted. That night, when I'd said goodbye to Anton, people had overheard us talking. They'd heard his last words to me.

I'll be waiting.

One witness swore that after he said that, his spirit flowed from his body and bent to kiss the top of my head. They even took a damn photo—because that's what you do when you unintentionally eavesdrop on a stranger's dying words. You get out your phone for a picture.

In the photo, a white blur hangs over me. It's some kind of optical illusion—from the snow and the night and the headlights—but people see what they want to see. And what they want to see is the ghost of a dead man, standing over his "terminally ill" wife, reassuring her that he'll be waiting on the other side. For, you know, when she dies. Which will be soon. Aww. How sweet.

That's the story that went viral. That's also the story that brought every medium to my virtual—and sometimes actual—doorstep. I'm the perfect client, grief-stricken and financially comfortable enough to fork over cash for a séance, pathetically hopeful after that photo,

—1
—0

and also minor-league social-media famous, guaranteeing publicity if they can contact my husband.

Do I sound angry? I *am* angry. I'm pissed off at that driver, at the car manufacturer, at whoever shared those stories, at whoever took that picture, at the phony mediums preying on my grief. But the person I'm angry at the most?

Me.

Because I keep falling for the con artists. Because I am smarter than this, stronger than this, wiser than this. Or I should be. Yet here I am in another medium's house, paying to be tricked and gaped at by strangers.

Worse, I'm here after swearing to everyone that I won't do this again. I'm like a junkie sneaking away for her fix, and I am ashamed.

I am so damned ashamed of myself.

I've never been what you'd call meek. Dad always said I plow through life, and there may have been some mention of a bull and a china shop, implying that my "plowing" comes with the strong possibility of destruction. But when I enter Leilani's lair, I am as meek as can be. Gaze downcast, greetings murmured, praying my face isn't bright red with shame and embarrassment. I'm sure it is—the perils of being the pale and freckled kind of redhead.

I take my seat, and Shania slides in beside me. I offer her a smile that I try—really try—to make genuine. She deserves better. She deserves a mentor who can help her move past her sister's death. But how am I supposed to help her do something I can't do myself?

I know all the platitudes. Cherish the memories. Be thankful for the time you had with them. They would want you to be happy. All true. Anton would be horrified to see me in this room. But this is where I am.

Leilani lights candles and lowers the lights. She doesn't turn them off. The candles aren't strong enough for that. But the illusion of a séance by candlelight is all that matters. The illusion of the whole thing is all that matters. A proper séance must look as if we wandered

-1—
0—

into a nineties movie-set séance, complete with candles, incense, a black-clad medium, and a Ouija board. Don't forget the Ouija board.

What do you mean Ouija boards aren't traditional spiritualism? You're saying they were created by a novelty company for parlor games? Fie on you and your easily confirmable data.

Once the candles are lit, we hold hands and Leilani sends out an invitation for Anton to join us. It's a very pretty invitation, all curlicues of words, verbal calligraphy that would have Anton scratching his head: Does she mean me? What does she want me to do? I don't get it, Nic.

Just say something, damn it. Tell a joke and get the punch line wrong, like usual. Whistle Green Day and My Chemical Romance songs so off-key that only I recognize them.

Just say hi.

That's all, Anton.

Say hello.

Tell me you are out there, somewhere.

Tell me your last words weren't blind and empty reassurances.

Tell me you are waiting.

As Leilani continues, I let the sarcasm and cynicism roll off me. There's no point in asking for help contacting Anton if I refuse to listen.

Find my breath. Clear my mind. Focus on the sound of Leilani's voice. Forget what she's saying and focus on her voice, low and rhythmic.

It only takes a few moments, and then I am where I need to be. Calm and just slightly outside of myself. Aware of the heat of Shania's hand, of the smell of candle wax cutting through the incense, the tick-tick-tick of . . .

Is that a metronome? I peek. Yes, there's an antique metronome by Leilani's elbow. That makes me smile and relax a little more. Anton had a metronome on his desk. It was his form of meditation, for times when his work as a mathematician got too stressful.

—1

—0

I loved to sit in his office and start up the metronome while I waited for him to solve whatever problem gripped his mind.

Tick-tick-tick.

I can see him hunched over his pages, scribbling furiously, reading glasses on.

Reading glasses before forty? I say. That's what you get for straining to read teeny-tiny numbers without good lighting.

That's a myth, Nic.

Mmm, not so sure.

He's writing and frowning and writing more. There's a laptop and a desktop computer nearby, but he likes to work by hand.

Luddite.

Tick-tick-tick.

Hair falls over his broad forehead. I catch a few silver hairs and smile smugly. About time. I've had them since I was twenty-five. Never dyed them out. I'm too damn proud of having lived to see gray hair.

Anton rests the tip of his pencil in his mouth.

Going to get lead poisoning, I say.

The amount of lead absorbed—

Don't math on me, Novak.

I smile and keep reaching for that image of him, constructing it until I see the whole of his office, right down to—

“Janica.”

The name whispers up from my left, and I stiffen. That's not my name. It used to be, once upon a time, but it's not now, and no one in this room knows me as anything but Nicola.

I look at Leilani, but she's still invoking Anton.

I imagined it. Imagined hearing my old name. Imagined hearing it in Anton's voice, because he knew it, though he never called me that. Only my mom called me Janica, while sighing that everyone ignored the lovely name she'd picked for me, in favor of the boyish diminutive, Nic.

But might Anton use that name if he reached out? So I know it's really him?

I shake it off, making Shania glance over, worry clouding her brown eyes. I smile reassuringly and focus on the metronome again.

Tick-tick-tick.

Anton in his office, working out a problem. Finally, with a start, he realizes I'm there.

What time is it? he says.

Finish up.

Sorry. I lost track of—

Finish. We have time.

All the time in the world.

"Janica," the voice whispers. "Careful . . ."

The hair on my neck rises. I seem to hear Anton. Isn't that what I'm here for? So why am I stiffening, my heart picking up speed, panic rising?

Because it can't be him. Because I'm imagining—

Something moves, a shape caught just in the corner of my eye. I startle, and Leilani's soothing voice stops.

"Nicola?" she says.

There's nothing there, and I'm not even sure what I thought I saw. A sensation of movement. I sensed . . .

I blink hard.

"Continue," I say, my voice croaking.

"I don't think I need to," Leilani says. "He's here. I sense him."

A soft whisper has Shania jumping and one of the observers gasping softly.

"Nic . . ." The name swirls around me. The voice says something else, but it's garbled, indistinct.

"Anton?" Leilani says. "Am I addressing Anton Novak, husband of Nicola Laughton, who is here with me today?"

"Yes . . ." The word comes as a hiss. Then more, still garbled like two radio stations coming in at once.

—1

—0

“Anton? We’re having trouble—”

Cold air snakes over my bare calves.

Shania jumps and squeaks. “Did anyone else . . . ?” She claps a hand to her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Did you experience something, dear?” Leilani asks.

“Cold air. I felt—”

“I did, too,” the male observer says.

“There!” one of the women says. “Did you see that?”

“The candle flames wavered.” Shania’s hand tightens painfully hard on mine. “Nic, he’s here. Anton’s really here.”

I look at Shania’s shining face, and I want to smile at her and say that yes, Anton’s here. If he’s here, that’s proof of an afterlife, proof that her sister is somewhere and Shania can move on with her own life, confident in the knowledge that she will see her sister again.

Part of me wants to be the person who can do that.

The person who can lie to make others feel better.

The person who doesn’t have to face the truth. Always.

I extricate my hand from Shania’s. Then I stand and walk to where the candle flames had flickered. They’re on a small cabinet, nestled between two statuettes of Egyptian deities. I lift one statuette.

“What are you doing?” Leilani says, stumbling to her feet.

The statuette only moves a couple of inches. Enough to reveal the tube running into it. An air tube that runs out the side, right at the level to make the candles flicker. Then I bend, hiking my skirt past my knees to get low enough. Another tube runs along the bottom shelf of the cabinet. That’s where the blast of cold air came from.

I don’t say anything. I just look at Leilani, and she flinches before setting her jaw.

“I don’t know what you think you’ve found,” she says.

“Shall I say it out loud?”

I walk back to the table. Then I pause, remembering which direction the voice had come from. The one that called me Nic.

There’s another yard-sale-quality cabinet right behind the chair

-1—

0—

where I'd been sitting. Where I'd been *told* to sit. I find the speaker hidden in a picture frame. I turn the frame around so everyone can see the small speaker. I don't say anything, and no one else does either.

The other voice, the one that called me Janica, came from my left, right at my ear. I look around that area, but I don't see where a speaker would hide and, honestly, I don't expect to. No one in this room knows me by that name. That voice, then, I must have imagined.

I tap the picture-frame speaker as my gaze meets Leilani's. I still don't say anything. I could sneer that I know my husband's voice. I could roll my eyes at her for using tricks I've seen a half-dozen times. I could even rage at her for preying on my grief.

Instead, I just look at her and say, "I expect a refund."

When I glance at Shania, I falter. The disappointment on her face stings, but the resignation is worse. She's accompanied me to three séances, and she already knows this is what she can expect. The decent mediums admit they can't make contact. The charlatans pull this shit. And most of them are charlatans.

I can feel bad for not letting Shania believe in this one, but that would be patronizing. She isn't a child. She'd seen through the last one before I did. She might have been fooled here temporarily, but that would have passed, and she'd have been rightfully pissed off with me for playing along.

When I look over, she's already on her feet, her glare fixed on Leilani.

"I trusted you," Shania says to Leilani. "I let you convince me to bring Nicola. If you haven't transferred back her money before we reach the door, you'll have one-star reviews on every site by sundown."

That's my Shania. I smile at her, and she mouths an apology. I wave it off and put my hand against her back, guiding her from the room. No one tries to follow us. We walk through the tiny house . . . and make a wrong turn at the kitchen.

—1
—0

“Kinda ruins the whole storming-out thing when we can’t find the exit,” I whisper.

Shania gives a strained laugh. Then she whispers back, “I am *so* sorry, Nic. I know you were trying to quit, and I talked you into it.”

“I’m a grown-up, Shania, and part of being a grown-up is, sadly, that no one else gets the blame for my shitty choices. Oh, there’s the front door. Whew. What do you say to a midafternoon sugar splurge? I saw one of those fancy artisanal ice cream places on the drive in.”

I pull open the door. “My treat, but only if you promise not to apologize . . .”

I trail off. There’s a pickup parked in front of the small house. Parked illegally, which is why I didn’t take the spot. A blond woman in jeans and a pullover perches on the truck’s front bumper, while a dark-haired guy in a sport jacket leans against the front panel, arms crossed over his chest.

“Shit,” Shania whispers.

“Yep.”

Shania surges forward, boot heels clicking down the concrete steps. “Libby. Jin. I am so sorry. This is my fault. I talked her into it.”

“No one talks Nic into anything,” Libby says, straightening. “Trust me. We’ve all tried. If she agrees, it’s because she already wanted to do it. Like visiting another spiritualist after promising she’d quit.”

“How’d you find me?” I ask as I walk over.

Jin lifts his cell phone with the Find My Friends app displayed. “Forgot to turn it off this time, Nic. You’re slipping.”

“Or she wants to get caught,” Libby says, using her psychologist-in-session voice.

I roll my eyes at her. No, I do *not* want to be caught. I might seem calm, but inside, I’m cringing like I’m eight again and Mom found chocolate-bar wrappers in my pocket after I’d forgotten—again—to take my enzyme pills with me. And after I swore I *never* had snacks if I forgot the pills.

I look from Jin to Libby. From my one best friend to the other.

-1—

0—

From my brother's husband to his ex-wife. And, yep, that's as complicated as it sounds, but Keith has good taste in partners. It's probably his one redeeming quality.

Okay, fine, Keith has lots of redeeming qualities. I just happen to prefer hanging out with his spouses. And I definitely prefer having *them* show up, because they know the shame is punishment enough. If Keith were here . . . Well, my older brother has a knack for making me feel like I really am eight again, sneaking those chocolate bars.

"I *am* sorry," Shania says.

I wag my index finger at her. "No more of that. I messed up, and I'll take my licks, which apparently won't come with ice cream." I look at them. "I suppose it's Nicola-intervention time?"

"It is," Libby says. "If you want to meet us after your ice cream, that's fine. I'd just need to ask Keith to pick up the kids at school and look after them for an hour. Which is not a bad idea. Hayden is in a mood. Twelve years old and already sulking like a teen." She takes out her phone. "Yep, I'm definitely calling Keith, whatever you decide. Then we can hold the intervention over drinks."

"You go on," Shania says. "I'll catch a cab and see you at group tomorrow."

"No, I'm driving you home." I turn to Jin. "Meet me at my place. You can drive Libby and me to the bar, so I can have a couple of drinks. I have a feeling I'm going to need them."

THREE

I take Shania home, then I go to my place, where Libby and Jin will be waiting. Anton and I have a condo in downtown Toronto. It was stage one of “the plan” when we got married. We’d both owned condos in less central—and more affordable—neighborhoods. We sold them for a down payment on this because I dreamed of living right in the heart of the city, where I could walk everywhere, including along the shores of Lake Ontario. We planned to live here for a few years and then flip the condo and buy a house in the country, because I’d dreamed of that, too—rural living within easy driving distance to a CF center.

We’d been on the verge of selling last fall, as the housing-market bubble seemed prepared to burst. Sell at a profit, and then rent for a few months before taking advantage of the housing dip to buy. So smart, right? Yep, it was. And now the bubble has burst, and I’m still in this condo, barely able to face getting up in the morning much less moving.

I arrive at my door to find Jin and Libby in the hall.

“You have keys,” I say with a sigh. “*Both* of you.”

They don’t comment. While Libby and Jin are very different, my

-1—
0—

brother does have a type, and it's the sort of person who'll happily take my condo key for emergencies or house-sitting, but will politely wait at the door instead of letting themselves in.

They are also the type who don't comment on the boxes in the front hall, dropped off by Anton's colleagues two weeks after his death. They've each separately offered once to help me deal with that, and they won't mention it again, knowing I'll accept that offer if and when I'm ready to unpack those boxes . . . and empty his closet and move the coffee cup he left on the counter that morning before work, the one he'd always only rinse out because he'd want a coffee when he got home. It sits there, gathering dust, waiting for him to need it.

Jin pauses by the hall table and silently scans the growing tablecloth of unopened mail. He knows there will be nothing urgent—I'm responsible enough to deal with all that. I mentally recite the contents of that pile as I pass it. Two cruise ship brochures I don't need. Three subscription magazines I can't read. And eight letters addressed to Anton. It's the last that Jin's looking for.

He spreads them and takes a photo, saying, "We'll deal with these."

He means he and Keith will notify the senders that Anton has died. I want to say I'll handle it. I want to be able to handle it. I tried, but even cutting and pasting a prewritten blurb into an email felt like being at that roadside again.

I regret to inform you that Anton Novak has died.

I could have handled that. What I couldn't handle were the replies that demanded additional proof. Additional proof? My husband is dead. Dead. You really think I'd lie about that?

Oh, I know people do lie about it, but that was the part I couldn't handle—demands to prove Anton was dead, as if I wouldn't give my right arm to say "Ha! No, I was just trying to scam you. He's fine."

Jin is walking away when Libby says, "Nic?"

—1
—0

I turn around to see her at that table, holding a letter to me. I march back, take it, and head straight into my office, where I feed it, unopened, into the shredder.

“Good riddance,” Jin mutters from the doorway.

“He shouldn’t be contacting you,” Libby says.

I don’t answer. What can I say? That I agree, but I lack the energy—or the will—to take more concrete action?

The letter is from the guy who hit us. After I blocked his email, he resorted to old-fashioned letter writing, which I suppose is also better than laying on my buzzer at two in the morning.

I’ve read a couple of the letters. He alternates between begging forgiveness and blaming me for ruining his life. After all, he hadn’t been driving drunk or high. He’d just been going too fast, typical twenty-four-year-old guy confident in his skills, not about to be slowed down by a little snow.

Now his life is ruined because of a momentary lapse of judgment. And was it really his fault? Couldn’t your husband have veered out of the way? What about the airbags? That’s the real villain here—the airbags that didn’t go off. I’m suing the company, right? Suing for millions, that’s what he’s heard. So what right do I have to complain? I’ll be rich.

Anton didn’t have time to veer. That was never questioned. Yes, I am suing the automaker, at Keith’s urging, and it’s not for millions, and that money will go to charity because I have enough and what we really wanted was the recall, which has been issued. But the kid who hit us isn’t the only one who snarks about that.

Did you hear the widow is suing the car company, too—first that story about ghosts and now this. She’s such an attention whore. Probably doesn’t even have CF.

It doesn’t stop. None of it stops.

Prove that your husband is dead.

Forgive the guy who killed him.

Don't you want to contact your husband's ghost? He's right there, waiting for you, like he said.

I turn sharply and brush past Libby and Jin. "Let me comb my hair and we'll go."

Jin drives to our favorite pub on Queen West. It's a little dive bar, the interior so dark you'd never know it's only late afternoon. Also dark enough that you can barely see the decor, which is a blessing. At this time of day, it's practically empty. We order at the bar, get our drinks, and take our usual table in the back.

"So . . ." Jin says. "Another séance."

I sink into the booth, cracked vinyl squeaking under me. "I screwed up."

"That depends," Libby says, folding her hands on the scarred table. "Do you really want to quit? Then yes, you screwed up. But is it possible you don't want to quit, and you're only saying that to get Keith off your back?"

I sigh. "I wouldn't do that to you guys. If I say I want help quitting, I really do. I don't know why I keep sabotaging myself. It's humiliating. I know they're all con artists. I just can't help . . ."

"Hoping," Libby murmurs.

I slump into my seat. "God, I'm pathetic."

"No. You're grieving, and they're taking advantage of that. I know you want to be stronger, Nic, but no one blames you. What happened was . . ." She sucks in breath. "The worst. Horrible and unfair. To both of you. You guys got married knowing you might not have much time left. Then you got on that new medicine, and suddenly, that timeline is shifting, giving you more of a future. But it's always been *your* timeline. That's the shittiest part of it. You and Anton were on *your* timeline. That's what counted."

How much more time I had left.

—1

—0

How much more time I had to be healthy.

How much more time I had to be alive.

I knock back my shot, and then make a face. “That’d be way more impressive if it wasn’t a shooter.”

“We know you’re hard-core, Nic,” Jin says. “Even if you drink like you’re still in college.”

“What’s that one called again?” Libby says.

Jin grins. “Redheaded Slut. It’s her favorite.”

“Damn straight.” I slam back a second test tube of Jägermeister, peach schnapps, and cranberry juice. Then I hold out the shot glass. “Hit me again, bartender.”

Jin sets it aside and shakes his head. Then he leans forward. “Look, I know what Keith thinks about this spiritualist stuff. It freaks him out.”

For good reason. But Jin doesn’t know that part. Neither does Libby. It’s my secret. My family’s secret.

Jin continues, “Keith is the one making you feel ashamed of what you’re doing. I love the guy, but he can be judgy, and he’s judging all over the place here, even if we know he’s only worried about you.”

“He’s being overprotective,” Libby says. “But yes, it feels like judgment, and it’s driving you to hide what you’re doing. Driving you to get help from Shania, who’s a sweet kid but . . .”

“She wants to make contact even more than I do.”

Both of us blinkered by our losses. Smart people doing things that our brains know are foolish, but when you’re lost in the darkness of grief, the light of emotion is the one that guides you.

“Okay,” I say. “So what’s the solution? Keep blowing money on mediums until I get the answer I’m looking for? I’m already that oft-quoted definition of insanity—doing the same damn thing over and over and expecting a different result.”

“Which is why we’re suggesting one last attempt,” Libby says. “You agree to try one more time and *only* one more time, and we do it right. We find a good spiritualist who might actually be legit. We take every step to do this exactly right.”

We're talking about a séance, not a dinner party. You can't plan something like that "exactly right" any more than you can plan a unicorn hunt exactly right.

Except this isn't like a unicorn hunt, because I don't believe in unicorns. I might not want to believe in ghosts either—and some days I don't, convinced I'd misinterpreted everything that happened twenty-two years ago. But deep down, I know there is something out there, and if it's contacted, things can go horribly, unspeakably wrong. Only this is Anton, who would never hurt me.

That voice from earlier whispers up from my memory.

Janica. Careful.

"Nic?" Jin says.

I shake myself. I imagined it. Imagined Anton warning me that I was being tricked because deep down, I already knew it.

I look from Jin to Libby. I don't think either of them believes in ghosts. Hell, they never thought I would either, and if asked, they'd say it's my grief opening me up to the possibility. I need ghosts to exist, so I believe they do.

Libby and Jin want to do this for me. Not because they really think I can contact Anton but because they know I need to try. That is friendship, and I am grateful for theirs, and even if a séance isn't the kind of thing you can do "exactly right," I need to let them try because I need to end this.

One last time. A time where I haven't half-assed it, allowing a medium to convince me to hire them rather than actually finding one I consider legitimate.

Get everything right. Then, when it fails, I can't seize on an oversight as an excuse to try again.

"And Keith?" I say.

Jin straightens, hands folded again. "We don't tell him. Libby and I will arrange everything. You can help if you like, but as far as Keith knows, we're arranging a much-needed getaway for the three of us. All he has to do is take the kids for a few days."

—1

—0

“So we lie to him? How’s that going to make me less ashamed of what I’m doing?”

They glance at each other.

“Nic’s right,” Libby murmurs. She looks at me. “What do you suggest?”

“I tell him I’m doing this. You guys don’t need to get involved. I say it’s like having one last blowout party before embracing sobriety. He might not like it, but it’s my life and my money.”

Jin shakes his head. “No, *we* tell him *we’re* doing this.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I will. He’ll understand, eventually, and he’d rather we were there with you.” He looks from me to Libby. “Settled then?”

We nod.

Jin takes out his phone. “So where do we start?”

When someone knocks on my condo door that evening, I don’t need to check through the peephole. There are a very limited number of people with my downstairs access code, and I know exactly which one this is.

I open the door. Keith stands there, looking like he rolled out of bed still dressed in his Bay Street banking exec suit. His top button is undone, his tie is askew, his hair is rumpled. Is it possible for a face to be rumpled, too? Then his is.

He looks like he’s been up for three nights straight, and I’d feel terrible about that, if my brother hasn’t looked like he missed a night of sleep since he was a teenager. That’s just Keith, always slightly tired, slightly disheveled, and when he sees me, he sighs and leans on the doorframe, as if I’m responsible for his exhaustion. Which, to be fair, is usually accurate.

I used to envy Keith. Despite that perpetually tired look, he’s obnoxiously healthy. He doesn’t need to spend two hours a day in treatment for a chronic illness. He doesn’t need to take pills before

he eats. He didn't grow up needing to be hospitalized for infections once a year.

What I realize now is that it's not easy to be the healthy sibling of a chronically ill child. My parents were very careful to give Keith an equal share of their attention, but of course, there were the little things they didn't consider, the responsibilities they gave him from a young age.

Look out for your little sister. Make sure she's taking her enzyme pills at school. Keep her amused during her daily treatments. Make sure you don't ignore her when she's bedridden with an infection.

Even their will favored me. They wanted to be sure I had money for all possible care when my health failed. The bulk of their estate was to be held in trust, and whatever I don't need for my health will pass to Keith when I die.

Our father died of a stroke six years ago. Cancer claimed Mom almost exactly a year later. When the will was read, I wanted Keith to have half, no matter what our parents intended. Of course, Keith refused. So if he gives that long-suffering sigh at my doorstep, he's kinda earned the right to it.

My brother has spent his life playing a role thrust on him, however inadvertently. He learned to subsume his own needs and do what was expected. Which is why, even though I'd always suspected he was gay, he did what was expected. Found a woman he cared about, married her, and had two kids.

It was Libby who realized the truth and tugged him from the closet. That doesn't mean the breakup was easy on her. It can't be, under those circumstances. But they figured it out, and four years ago, she introduced him to Jin, a radiologist at the hospital where she's a psychologist.

Keith may not have been born onto the easiest path, but life has made up for it by giving him a loving husband, two amazing kids, and an ex-wife who still talks to him. So I won't feel too bad for the guy.

"Jin spoke to you, I presume," I say.

—1

—0

He sighs again.

“Oh, cut that out,” I mutter. “Come in and have a beer. Or should I make it a coffee? You look like shit.”

“I can always count on you to make me feel better.”

“No, you can count on me to be honest. You’re working too hard for corporate assholes who don’t appreciate you.”

“They pay me, though.”

“Not enough. Coffee? Knowing you’ll be leaving here and going home to work for another three hours?”

“Please and thank you.”

I start the machine. I know I’m deflecting by bitching about his job. Doesn’t stop me from doing it, though. Just like feeling guilty about dragging him into my madness doesn’t stop me from saying, “I’m doing this last séance. I know you don’t want me to, but I am.”

He sighs again, and I resist the urge to whip a dish towel at his head and settle for wrapping it around my hand.

“Preparing for battle?” he says.

I look down to see that the dish towel does indeed make me look like a boxer taping up for a bout. I unwind it.

“I don’t want to fight about this, Keith.”

“Neither do I.” He pulls out a table from the breakfast bar and sits. “Which is why I’m not going to try to talk you out of it. I’m just . . .” He rubs a hand over his mouth.

“Worried,” I say.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed, Nic. If I thought you could contact Anton, I’d have helped as soon as you started hiring these people.”

He lowers his voice, as if we aren’t alone in the condo. “I’m worried that you keep trying because of what happened the last time. You realize you girls didn’t actually contact a ghost, right? Patrice just . . . She had problems, and those problems led to . . .” He trails off, unwilling to fill in the rest.

“That’s not why I don’t expect it to work,” I say.

-1—

0—

Liar.

“I don’t even really know why I’m doing it.”

Liar.

“It just feels like something I need to get past. I know that probably doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it does. Losing Anton was . . .” He sucks in a breath. “Devastating. But all that viral-story nonsense?”

“It messed me up?”

A quirked smile. “Nah, you were always messed up.”

“You like sugar in your coffee, right?” I lift the bowl. “Lots and lots of sugar?”

He ignores the threat. “Yes, it messed you up. Interfered with the grieving process.”

“You’ve been talking to Libby, haven’t you?”

“The point is that I’m trying to accept that you need to do this. I trust Jin, and I trust Libby, and if they say this is the way to handle it, then maybe it is. I’m an economist. I don’t know anything about how the mind works.”

But you know how grieving works, Keith. You grieved for the end of your marriage to Libby, and we both grieved for our parents. We’re still grieving for them, in our way. It felt as if I’d just buried my parents, and then I was burying my husband, too.

Keith continues, “Jin says he and Libby are setting this up, and Jin is going to be with you.” They’d originally both wanted to be there, but Libby finally admitted that her skepticism would get in the way. “I’d like to be there, too.”

“I don’t think—”

“Please, Nic. I just . . . I want to watch out for you. I know Jin can do that, but he doesn’t know what happened with Patrice, and I don’t think you want to tell him, right?”

I tense instinctively. “No.”

“I agree. So can I be there? Please?”

“All right.”

—1

—0