



The *Best* Mistake

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Chapter 1

“SETTLE SOMETHING FOR US?”

That’s how it started.

Ava frowned. “Sorry?” A petite woman with a shoulder-length fizzle of brown curls was clutching a coffee cup and smiling expectantly at her from a few seats along the bar. Ava sent her a purposefully blank look and went back to her phone, as if to signal that she wasn’t really interested in the answer.

But the woman was undeterred. “We need you to help decide which of us has the weirdest wedding story.” She waved a hand between herself and the bartender. He immediately stepped up to top up Ava’s wine, as if prepaying for her cooperation.

“Ridiculous, we know,” he said, “but we’re anecdotally competitive. She really only comes to visit me in my place of work so she can out-storytell me.”

The woman gave him a withering look. “Yes, that’s the only reason I come to see you. Not our long years of friendship.” She turned and smiled hopefully at Ava. “Help me put Max in his place?”

For a second, Ava could only blink at the woman. She had just left a meeting that had plot-twisted itself into a job interview. Thrown, Ava had sought shelter in a glass of merlot in one of the laneway cafes this city was famous for, buying herself a minute to examine these tiny vines of possibility. Ava contemplated coolly telling the woman that she was busy, like she’d usually do when strangers tried to talk to her in bars, but this woman, with her luminous blue eyes and generous mouth, was smiling right at her.

So Ava surprised herself. “Fire away.”

“Great!” The woman jerked her thumb at the bartender. “Max, you’re up.”

“Right.” Max pushed Ava’s glass a little closer to her, as if to say *settle in*, and began. “So, you know how in comedy-movie weddings, someone always falls on the cake? Well, my Great-Aunt Emmie actually did it. Fell onto the cake at my cousin’s wedding. Face and all. Mass dessert destruction.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “How?”

“Accidental pharmaceutical cocktail. Turned out that she thought she was taking her cholesterol meds that morning, but she was actually taking her night-time meds. She threw down a few brandies over dinner and was having a little turn on the dance floor when she got a little woozy, then *timber!* She was down like a sack of bricks, collapsed the cake table and everything.”

“Was she okay?” Ava asked.

He grinned. “Not even a bruise.”

“I suppose a giant cake *would* soften your fall,” the woman said thoughtfully.

“The worst part was that she’s diabetic.” Max grinned. “She couldn’t even enjoy this unexpected face full of red velvet sponge and buttercream icing.”

“Wow.” At most weddings that Ava had attended, the height of excitement was an unfortunate best man’s speech or an overly drunk in-law.

“I hope there’s a video recording of this somewhere,” the woman said. “For family posterity.”

“Hell yes. She demands we play it every Christmas. Says it makes her feel like she’s on *Australia’s Funniest Home Videos*.” Max turned to his friend with a grin. “Try to beat that.” Just then, some guys in suits hustled into the bar, still hashing out a meeting in low, self-important tones. Max sighed and picked up a menu. “Go ahead, I’ve already heard all her stories at least three times.”

“He makes it sound like I sit here all day rambling,” the woman told Ava. “I promise that I’m gainfully employed.”

Ava couldn’t help giving her a teasing smile. “Whatever you say.”

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Ignoring her dig, the woman cleared her throat and did a little shimmy, as if preparing herself. “Okay, it was a Gold Coast wedding, so you never know which is going to be bigger, the hair or the dress, right?”

“Right.”

“In this case, both are equally huge. Bridesmaids too.” The woman flapped a hand. “Personality-wise, of course.”

Ava nodded. She couldn’t *not* play along. The woman was already deeply invested in her story, and it was disarmingly attractive. “Got it. Big hair, big dress, big bridesmaids.”

“Correct, gold star.”

They both flicked cagey, amused glances at each other, as if wondering if the other recognised the possibilities of the joke. Then the wry gleam in the woman’s eyes announced to Ava that they both definitely *did* get the joke, and Ava found herself totally attentive to the fullness of the woman’s mouth, and to the way the top few buttons of her deep blue shirt sat open to her smooth, tan collarbones. She was so vivid and—it was hard not notice—beautiful. She had this manner that could be flirting, or just be her way of being. Whatever it was, Ava now had no desire to return to her phone. Intrigue was now prowling around this encounter.

The woman doubled down on the joke with a sly smile. “Of course, *that’s* none of my business. *So*, bride and groom say their vows, do the whole kiss thing, then, bam! The Spice Girls are playing at full volume out of the church speakers.”

“The Spice Girls?” Ava was blinking again. “As in the British nineties girl group?”

“The very one. Next thing you know, bride and bridesmaid are pulling on wigs and dancing back down the aisle, each one dressed as a different Spice Girl.”

“And the groom?”

“Just follows them, bewildered. Like the rest of us.”

“Wow.” Ava gave in to a husky laugh. “Just wow.”

“See?” The woman grinned. “Somehow both epic and confusing.”

Max the bartender ambled back to their end of the bar, twirling a dish towel. “So, is it Aunt Emmie’s face plant for the win?”

Ava frowned. "Wait, this is an *actual* competition?"

"He told you, we're anecdotally competitive," the woman said.

"So, what's it to be?" Max drummed the bar lightly. "Is it Living the Wedding Movie Cliché or Random Attack of the Nineties Girl Group?"

"Wow, such pressure." Ava sipped her wine, weirdly enjoying this little dose of power. "Okay, well, both were chaotic enough to convince me that I've only been to very normal weddings, but I think, for the utter randomness, it's the Spice Girls for the win." Not because Ava was playing favourites. Not at all.

Max pouted and went to serve some customers, muttering, "rigged".

"What does he think I did, slipped you a twenty when he wasn't looking? Anyway, thank you, it was very important I won that argument." The woman held up her coffee cup and winked. Apparently, she was the kind of woman who could make a wink both non-creepy *and* non-cheesy. Impressive.

Ava couldn't help returning her smile. "Glad I could be of assistance."

"I'm Sofia, by the way."

"Ava." Ava shook the offered hand. It was small but strong, containing the same energy that seemed to ripple through Sofia.

"So, what are you doing with your Friday night, Ava?" Sofia nodded at the wineglass. "I see you've started it early."

"I'm down from Sydney for a meeting. I just got done."

"How long are you here for?"

"I fly back disgustingly early tomorrow morning."

"You arrive at the end of a week and don't even stay a weekend?" Sofia narrowed her eyes. "Are you one of those Melbourne-hating Sydney people?"

"Ha, no." Ava had considered taking a weekend's reprieve from her life, but her one friend in this city was away. Traipsing around by herself for two days was kind of a lonesome idea. "Do you think I was foolish?"

"You don't look foolish." Sofia's slow up-and-down appraisal set off these small flickers of awareness in Ava. "And going on the meeting

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outfit, I'm sure you've got a good thing going for yourself. I do question your life choices."

Ava chuckled. "Gee, thank you."

Sofia traded her coffee for a glass of pinot. She skittered lightly over topics, her chatter as alive as her eyes. At the same time, her gaze carried a warmth that was anchoring. She was so relaxed and easy, she made Ava want to be too. And when it was Ava's turn to talk, Sofia rested her hand on her cheek, attentive, and absently touched her tongue to her full, upper lip in a way that was kind of accidentally sexy. Ava's second wine was slinking through her bloodstream before she even noticed how much time had passed, or the fact that she'd inched her stool closer to Sofia's.

Suddenly, Sofia drank her last sip. "I'm hungry. Feel like eating something?"

She asked Ava as if it were the most normal thing in the world to ask someone that you'd known all of an hour. And in the firing line of her questioning smile, the only response that came to Ava was *yes*. No one had ever accused her of being spontaneous, but something about Sofia made it easy for Ava to forget her usual knee-jerk caution. Maybe it was time to shed her claustrophobic little Sydney life for a moment.

They walked the glittering Friday night city streets and then crammed themselves into a narrow little Korean restaurant among the crowds of suits and students shaking off the week with fried chicken and soju. When their dishes arrived, Sofia scooped rice into Ava's bowl and then her own. Ava smiled. When was the last time someone had done something that small and unthinking for her?

"I'm half-Italian. Making people eat is in my blood, I suppose." Sofia placed a piece of golden, spiced chicken on top of Ava's rice. "Even if I'm a lousy cook." She held out the dish of dark sauce, laced with slivers of ginger. "Embarrassing fact: when I was little, I thought my teachers lived at my school. As in, they even slept there." She leaned in with a small, sheepish smile. "And one night, we were driving past on the way home from dinner, I got worried because the canteen would be closed at night, and they would get hungry. I asked my mum if we could stop and tell my teacher that she could eat the

muesli bar that I'd left in my desk that day. Mum had to patiently explain how jobs worked. And teachers. And schools." She laughed.

"That says a lot about you." Ava smiled, enjoying Sofia's complete lack of embarrassment.

"I love how when you were a kid, if no one explained something to you, you just kind of made it up as you went along until you learned better. What about you?"

Ava rested her chin in her hand. What amusing treats could she lay out at this woman's feet? "I think I leaned disturbingly logical. Once, on a school trip into the city, my teacher asked what floor of a skyscraper we'd want to live in if we could. I told her the bottom so that if there were a fire, we could get out quickly."

Sofia laughed, as Ava hoped she would. "I mean, super practical. But also, kind of dire."

"I was *that* kind of kid."

"Well, I was the constantly somewhat misguided child."

Ava leaned in a little and smiled. "With her heart in the right place, though."

Sofia sent her one of those luminous smiles and topped up Ava's water glass. Ava, assaulted again by the clarity of her beauty, instantly knew she would let this night go wherever Sofia wanted to take it—where she was already hoping Sofia wanted to take it.

It was as if Ava had gone to Melbourne to encounter the utter opposite of Moira, her painfully recent ex. Sofia didn't talk about work or careers or marriage status or any of the usual mundanities. She hadn't even asked Ava what she did for a living. The most prosaic information that Ava received was that Sofia was thirty-four, two years younger than Ava, and that she'd grown up in this city. The rest was a meandering trail of anecdotes and segues. It was dizzyingly refreshing. In Sydney, Moira and her friends only ever talked about their jobs and how they were thinking of moving up or sideways or circling back if the right opportunity presented itself. It was as if all of life's possibilities were contained in one's career—the important ones, anyway. But then, Ava was in Melbourne for a possibility, one so tiny and undecided that she didn't dare to think about it yet.

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Moira wasn't the type to talk about Queensland hair or to tell stories from her childhood. And Moira definitely wasn't the kind to talk you into trying something you didn't even know could be a dessert in a tiny cafe smelling of sugar and mango. She wouldn't buy you a spicy chili martini on the rooftop bar with a city view and a breeze to cool your burning lips, either. And she definitely wouldn't hop onto a step in the buzzing neon of Chinatown just so that she could pull you into a sweet fury of a kiss while drunken twentysomethings lurched between clubs behind you.

That's exactly what Sofia did. They were strolling down a narrow laneway lit by a rooftop of fiery, red lanterns. The moment they turned a corner and the crowd released its grip on them, Sofia grabbed Ava's hand, skipped onto the step of a closed store, and pulled her close. Wearing a small slink of a smile, she looped her arms around Ava's neck.

Ava's blood buzzed with anticipation as Sofia drew her close. Her jasmine perfume gently laced the air. A shimmering sensation skated across Ava's skin. Her blood buzzed. So did her desire. Sofia's lips were as soft and full as they looked. Her tongue slid against Ava's and her hips pressed close. When they finally retreated, Sofia's gaze stayed locked to Ava's. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth as her finger lightly traced a line from Ava's throat, over her collarbones, dropping lower until it lingered just above the spot where a button drew Ava's blouse closed.

Lips still tingling from both the kiss and the martini, Ava looked down and laughed huskily at Sofia's feet on the step. "I guess you have some experience in making up for height differences."

"Don't diss short people." Sofia took hold of Ava's jacket lapels. "We're the world's solution to small spaces."

"I don't think that entirely plays, but I'm not going to argue." Mostly because Ava just wanted to kiss her again.

And Moira definitely didn't blend so much off the-cuff-charm with a lazy sultriness that there was nothing else you could do but invite her to your hotel room. Which is exactly what Ava did, hungry for the serendipity of this moment and this wide-eyed woman.

And that was how she found herself, hours later, curled naked against Sofia in her huge hotel bed, as they went through the motions of talking each other into something that neither really needed any convincing of.

Sofia's hands made yet another languorous journey along Ava's rib cage. "I mean, it's illogical to not at least see a little of the city while you're here, right?"

"Exactly."

Her lips pressed to Ava's collarbone. "I mean, Melbourne has a lot to offer."

"So true."

Her finger lightly circled Ava's nipple. "A cultural paradise."

Ava let herself wallow in the ripples of pleasure wrought by that touch before sitting up to reach for her phone. Because, apparently, she had to put a stop to this experience ending anytime soon. "You're right," she said in a playful, businesslike tone. "This needs to be addressed immediately." Besides, it wasn't as if Ava wanted to be at home in Sydney, back to the spare room where she'd relegated herself two weeks ago. Or to Moira's silence. It turned out that Ava only wanted to be right here in this room. That's how she found herself on her phone at 2am, delaying the inevitable, because the only inevitability was a few more hours with this woman and this city, which were both slowly, magically, getting a grip on her.

Yet, despite their best intentions, twenty hours later, the sun was setting on a Saturday that had wound up being entirely spent in the confines of her hotel room, lying skin to skin. Ava absently ran her fingers along the now familiar terrain of Sofia's belly and ribs and the soft rise of her breast. How quickly you could map someone in touch, commit them to your sensory memory. As her hands continued to idly explore, Sofia curled her fingers into Ava's hair and let out a lazy hum. Outside, somewhere, cars honked their way through the city. In the hall, hotel maids pushed trolleys and called softly to each other. There were other sounds, too, each a mystery Ava didn't feel like solving. She was too content with everything happening in this room.

Sofia rolled onto her side, rested her cheek on her hand, and considered Ava. "Can I ask you something?"

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“Sure.”

“This kind of thing is not usually like you, right?” Sofia held up a hand. “No offence, I just get the feeling it’s not.”

“That was more like an observation that I seem kind of uptight, with a question mark tacked onto it.”

Sofia chuckled. “Only on first encounter.” She dropped her head, nuzzling Ava’s neck. “Twenty-four hours later and I’m thinking you’re far, far less uptight.”

Laughing softly, Ava let her eyes fall closed for a moment as Sofia pressed another kiss to her neck. “What about you? Is this like you?”

“Maybe.” Sofia lifted her head and pursed those full lips. Her gaze went distant for a moment. Then she smiled sadly and tucked a curl behind her ear. “Definitely not lately.”

Ava wanted to ask Sofia why, but she didn’t know if it was her place to. So, when Sofia lay against the pillows, Ava let the moment go.

Sofia was right, though. Who was this version of Ava? Sydney Ava didn’t do reckless things like this. Business Trip Ava sure as hell didn’t either. Those Avas went obediently to their business meetings, then treated themselves to a glass of wine and dinner and tucked themselves neatly back into their hotel room until it was time to go home. But those versions of Ava had also been pretty lacking of late.

In fact, everything Ava liked right now was happening in this bed. She’d expected some brief relief from the current, woeful state of her life in the form of a short interstate trip, not with an epic, accidental one-night stand with this sexy fizz of a human. And Ava hadn’t expected to have *fun*.

“You know, I’m getting kind of hungry,” Sofia said.

Ava’s stomach held nothing but a hazy memory of room service at some point that morning. “I could eat.”

“I have an idea.” Sofia raised herself onto her elbow and grinned as if she’d just hatched some fiendish plan. “Let’s...*leave this room.*”

Ava feigned shock. “You mean...get dressed?”

“I’m afraid it might have to involve getting dressed. I mean, I’m not so sure of Melbourne’s public decency laws, but I’m pretty sure

it's going to involve more than our current attire." Sofia sat up a little. "What do you think?"

Ava fought the urge to pull Sofia back against the pillows. "Are you *sure* you're hungry?"

"I promise it will be worth it." She dropped a kiss on Ava's shoulder. "Besides, remember, what can get dressed can always get undressed."

A warmth stole through Ava. This was what she had needed: the knowledge that getting up and leaving this room wouldn't spell the end of whatever this was just yet.

As the elevator glided toward the lobby, Sofia leaned towards the mirrored wall, taming her curls behind her ears. This woman made even bedhead look sexy. Before Ava knew it, she was stepping across the tiny space and drawing Sofia into a kiss. Apparently two minutes without touching her were two too many. Sofia's knee slipped between Ava's legs, her arms wrapped around Ava's waist, and she didn't let her go until the elevator door slid open. Blood humming, Ava had to stop herself from pressing the button to go right back upstairs again.

Outside, the sun had disappeared, replaced by a charcoal sky. It felt odd to be clothed after so long without. It was strange to see Sofia dressed too, the way it almost returned her to stranger status as they walked slowly through the arch that announced the start of Chinatown. Here was this woman whose body had moved in rhythm with hers in all kinds of ways, and Ava had forgotten about their height difference.

After yet another dinner in the kind of buzzing little eatery that Ava would never consider on her own, they walked through the streets, absorbing the night.

"So," Sofia turned and walked backwards, smiling up at her. "How do you feel about Taiwanese desserts?"

"Honestly, I harbour no feelings either way." Okay, so maybe Ava didn't want to admit that she didn't even know what Taiwanese desserts entailed. Even meals were an adventure with Sofia, apparently.

Sofia smiled. "Well, would you like to develop some?"

For a moment, Ava just stood there and stared at her. She could not lie. If things were different—very different—Ava could imagine a very real possibility of developing some feelings.

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Under Ava's gaze, Sofia's smile turned curious. "What?"

"Nothing." Ava shook her head. What was the point of even thinking things like that? Tomorrow she'd be home in Sydney, a thousand kilometres away, facing down reality. "Let's go do that."

Two hours and two of the most colourful dishes Ava had ever seen described as food later, they were back in her hotel bed in a snug, naked tangle. Ava refused to look at the clock or to acknowledge the way that time was slipping away too quickly. Instead, she looped an arm around Sofia's waist. "So, I have a question."

"Mhm?"

"Which Spice Girls song was it? At the wedding?"

Sofia chuckled. "Do you really care?"

"No." Ava just wanted to hear Sofia talk some more. "But tell me anyway."

"Guess."

Ava smiled and did what she was told.

Chapter 2

Eight months later

AS THE KETTLE BOILED, SOFIA stared out of the window, chuckling. A uni student was being harassed by one of the resident magpies that considered the avenue of trees outside its territory. Every time that the student took a few steps, the bird swooped and dived, skating the air just above his head. After the third airborne assault, the kid crouched by a bin, his face reddening as some other students walked past, giggling. Until the magpie turned on them. Then they screeched and broke into a run for the courtyard.

“What are you laughing at?” Sayid strolled into the kitchen with his clipboard.

“The magpies are terrorising the campus again.” Sofia automatically pulled down a coffee cup for Sayid. “Maybe we should invest in protective helmets for our volunteers.”

He smirked. “Imagine announcing that as our new occupational health and safety measure. ‘All student tutors must now wear protective headwear when travelling to and from Study Hall.’”

“Who wouldn’t love that as a fashion statement?” Sofia spooned coffee and the required three sugars into a cup for him. “By the way, I hate being eternally complicit in aiding and abetting your diabetic future every time I make you a coffee.”

He grinned and shrugged. “So, are you ready for our little PR exercise this afternoon?”

“PR exercise?” Sofia said vaguely, reminding herself that she needed to pick up her mother’s prescription before the pharmacy closed at six.

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“Remember, some bigwigs from the university are coming down here to see the good work we do?”

“Oh, that.” The head of Humanities and Education and some new task force had requested for a tour of their on-campus tutoring program. Okay, so maybe Sofia had forgotten.

“Should we worry?” Sayid asked.

“No, there’s some new team in charge of WIL programs. They’re probably just putting a face to a budget item.”

“What the hell is a WIL program?”

“Work-integrated learning.” She passed Sayid his cup. “It’s the new education buzz term for things like internships and placements and on-campus projects. Anything where uni students put what they’ve learnt into work practice, like here, where the Education students tutor the high school kids. It’s a big thing right now. Work experience enhances employability, and that’s what the parents care about. So, it’s all about WIL right now.”

“Oh,” he said dully. “Fascinating.”

“You asked.” She sipped her tea. “Anyway, don’t worry, I can do the spiel about this place in my sleep.” It definitely wasn’t Sofia’s first impress-the-bill-payers rodeo. Not by a long shot.

Out in the hall, it was the quiet before the 4pm storm. Volunteers trickled in, shoving bags and coats into the lockers in the corner. High school kids shouldering heavy bags were already arriving, dumping laptops and books on desks. Sofia had been running Study Hall, an afternoon tutoring program where future teachers tutored recently arrived migrant students who were aspiring to get into the uni, for two years now. And one thing she had learned was that the kids might change, but the slight edge of chaos stayed the same. And that’s why she loved it.

“How are you?” she asked, joining Idil, their head tutor, who was frowning at a piece of paper by the door.

Idil shook her head. “I swear, if anyone else comes at me with stupid today...”

“Who’d dare do that?”

And Sofia meant it. Idil was a force of nature. By her late thirties, she’d lost her husband to a car accident and raised four kids on

her own. And now that they were all in their late teens, she was putting herself through a law degree. Somehow, Idil still found time to volunteer at Study Hall, helping students with legal studies subjects, drawing up the tutoring roster, and looking out for the small crew of Somali mums who congregated to wait for their children in the corner of the hall every afternoon.

“Somali mums are the new tiger mums,” Idil told Sofia during her first visit to Study Hall, with her reluctant daughter, Khadija, in tow. “Our kids don’t do a thing without us knowing.”

And Sofia now knew from experience that it was true—not that Idil was ever wrong about anything. Even as the mums gossiped in the corner, they always kept one eye glued to their kids, as if the sheer force of their scrutiny could propel their offspring into law or nursing or medicine.

“Ready?” Sofia asked as Sayid joined them by the door.

He grinned and sipped his coffee. “Always.”

Idil frowned at some boys who laughed loudly as they strolled in. “As long as everyone behaves.”

Sofia gave the boys a smile. “They will.” Study Hall only attracted the super high-achieving, focused kids trying to get into uni. They weren’t exactly the delinquent types.

“Good luck, team,” Sayid said, going to help a student who looked lost.

An hour later, Sofia was heading back into the hallway near the kitchen, on the hunt for fresh notebooks. Idil’s daughter, Khadija, was slouched by the shelves, one hand jammed into the pocket of her school blazer, the other glued to her phone.

“Hey, K, you know you’re not supposed to be in here without an adult.” Sofia opened a cupboard and automatically cast out a hand to stop the inevitable cascade of objects.

“But you’re here,” Khadija mumbled.

“For the next thirty seconds. And you know if your mum asks me if you were out here instead of doing your homework, I’ll *have* to tell her.” Sofia pulled out a pile of notebooks. “Idil has way of terrifying the truth out of you.”

“Idil terrifies everyone.” Khadija tucked her phone into her pocket.

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“Exactly. So please save us both from her wrath.”

Before Khadija could reply, a tutor stuck her head into the hall. “Hey Sofia, Sayid said to tell you in a spooky voice, ‘*They’re heeeere.*’”

Sofia laughed. “Thanks.” It was time to run the bigwig’s tour. “Come on, kid.” She flung an arm around Khadija’s shoulder and walked her back into the hall. “Go do some work.”

Khadija groaned, but Sofia just smiled. Khadija might be a small human tornado in a sea of aspiring nurses and engineers, but she was also Sofia’s favourite. Because there was no denying that while chaos was chaotic, it was also a lot more fun.

“Mum is *so* strict,” Khadija grumbled. “Last night I got in trouble for talking to some guy in the line for food at my brother’s basketball match. We were talking about the price of fries. I’m *seventeen.*” She looked up at Sofia. “Miss, were you allowed to have boyfriends?”

“Well, I didn’t want a *boyfriend*, so it didn’t matter.”

“Ooh.” Khadija grinned. “Revelations.”

“Only to you.” Sofia wouldn’t usually tell a student something like that, but Khadija was more like family, and Sofia knew Idil wouldn’t care one bit. Besides, Sofia was a firm believer that the more kids knew that there were queer people in their lives, the more normal it would become. “Now, go back to your tutor and give them the benefit of your stellar vocabulary.”

“But I’m doing my English essay, and there’s, like, *no* lit tutors here,” she whined. “Just science geeks.”

She patted Khadija’s shoulder. “I’ll see if I can find you someone later.” They were always short on tutors for lit and humanities subjects. “Ask Sayid to help for now.”

The small university group was waiting by the door in a cluster of business grey and pinstripe. Sayid was among them making polite and probably awkward chitchat. He hated these things. He visibly relaxed as Sofia approached. The tall, honey-haired woman standing next to the head of Humanities and Education set off these tiny flickers of recognition, but they faded before they became thoughts. Then, as Sofia got closer and the woman turned, the flicker became a shock-wave of awareness.

Ava.

Ava of the lost weekend.

Ava of the liquid smile and husky voice.

Ava who Sofia said goodbye to in a car at the airport eight months ago.

It took all of Sofia's composure to keep moving forward. Deep in the aftershocks of recognition, she remembered what she was supposed to be doing and pulled a polite, incurious smile from somewhere for her final approach. "Good afternoon, everyone," she said cheerfully, directing her smile first towards the head of school, and then at Ava and her colleagues.

Ava had an air like she was holding herself very carefully. Her hands were clasped behind her back, her blazered shoulders perfectly straight. Her hair was pulled into a low bun, not a single stray strand betraying its salon polish. Of course, she was still lovely, with her rosebud mouth and sharp cheekbones. Only Sofia would have been able to detect the way that Ava's hazel eyes reared open for a fraction of a second, or how her lips tightened ever-so briefly. It was almost impressive, the speed at which she returned to neutral.

During the head's introductions, Sofia learned that Ava had been plucked from a private college in Sydney to lead a team that had been created to maximise the work-integrated learning programs in the School of Humanities and Education.

Ava's greeting was crisp. Her gaze contained a warning: there would be zero recognition. "Nice to meet you."

"You too." Sofia wasn't convinced that Ava thought it was nice at all. She shook the slightly cool proffered hand, trying not to think of her last encounter with it. "Welcome."

As Sofia ran through her routine spiel about how the tutoring program was started by the university five years ago, Ava's presence burned at her periphery. What were the chances that a one-night stand turned up at your workplace over half a year later? Okay, a *two*-night stand, if you were a stickler for details. And from the way Ava wrote careful notes in a small book as they toured the space, Sofia suspected she probably was.

They strolled around the hall. Sofia pointed out the choice sights, doing her best to seem unphased. Ha-Joon was working with students

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on maths, and Idil was lecturing the legal studies students in the corner. A quiet cluster of kids gathered around a history postgrad, looking at their French Revolution book.

“Are all the students from migrant backgrounds?” someone asked.

“That’s right,” Sofia said, passing by the window where the mums sat, armed with teacups and scrutiny. “The program is expressly for families of migrant backgrounds.” Sofia nodded. “Research tells us that while these kids are often super motivated toward higher education, they face many and diverse barriers that other kids don’t experience on their journey to university.” As she spoke, Sofia was hyperaware of how Ava never once looked up from her notepad. Sofia didn’t know if it was avoidance or diligence. “This can range from economic barriers to experiences of trauma to English-language acquisition, or just a lack of social capital.” Sofia forced herself to stop talking because she could go on about this all day if someone let her. She was, quite literally, writing a thesis on it.

“And this university prides itself on its diverse student body,” the head said, looking around with one of those benign, credit-taking smiles of people in authority. “*And* in the fact that we have a significant number of students who were the first in their family to attend university. Programs like this show how invested we are in these students and in the local migrant community. With a little support, more of them can be our future students.”

“And all the tutors are university students?” someone asked.

“Yes,” Sofia said, unable to stop herself from sneaking another glance towards Ava. She was still buried deep in her notetaking. “Education students must all do volunteer work as part of their studies to build their experience. With Study Hall, they can do it right here on campus. But anyone who is interested can help, even university staff.” She pointed out a history academic who came twice a week to help the senior students prepare for exams and an admin assistant from the law school who missed her old teaching days and helped Idil look over students’ essays.

“It’s so interesting to see a program embedded on the campus,” one woman said. “We might ask you to chat to us more about this at some point, mightn’t we, Ava?”

Ava's head jerked up from her notes. Her gaze landed somewhere past Sofia's left shoulder. "Uh, yes."

"Sure," Sofia said briskly. Avoidance it was. Would it hurt to make simple eye contact? "I can chat whenever you like." People were always saying things like that when they discovered the program, but it almost never eventuated. So Sofia always said yes, safe in the knowledge she'd never hear from them again. In fact, right now she'd have bet money that this would be the case with Ava.

Back at the front of the hall, Sayid showed them the Graduates Wall, his pet project, featuring pictures of all the kids who'd come through here and were now at university. Sofia hung back, grabbing the opportunity to properly take in Ava's presence, to try and locate some familiarity in this version of the woman she met eight months ago. Ava had apparently chosen this moment to do the same, and before she could whip her gaze away like she had every other time their eyes had even threatened to meet, Sofia offered a small, warm, *isn't this weird?* smile.

Ava just sent her a blank one in return and edged towards the door.

Wow. Stung, Sofia moved away. Was she really such a humiliating memory that Ava couldn't even privately acknowledge how strange this was? Sofia was careful not to look her way again, even when Ava thanked her for the tour in that same husky voice that had once asked Sofia back to her hotel room on a crowded street.

When everyone finally left, Sofia let out an extravagant sigh.

"What?" Sayid said. "I thought it went well."

"Of course. It was fine." It was fine if you liked thoroughly awkward encounters with one-night stands turned sort-of colleagues.

Which Sofia did not. Not one bit.

* * *

As soon as they said goodbye to the head of Humanities and Education and headed across campus, Ava immediately stopped pretending to be *on*. She tuned out her colleagues' chatter, waited for the last traces of heat to cool from her cheeks.

The Best Mistake

At first, when the small, vivid woman with huge blue eyes crossed the room towards them, it had been impossible to untangle the cause of her familiarity. If Ava's life were a TV show, Sofia's character was supposed to have a one-episode arc, no chance of recurring. Instead, life had decided to unleash all kinds of awkward, narrative-breaking rules. There she was, small and sparky and casually sexy in her fitted, dark jeans and maroon shirt, wearing the same airy smile she'd greeted Ava within a bar eight months ago.

What kind of cruel karmic trick was this? Right when Ava had started a brand-new job—as boss, no less? Nothing raised a leadership red flag like being unable to keep your work and the spicier corners of your sex life separate.

“What about you, Ava?”

Ava was yanked from her thoughts by her colleague. She frowned. “Sorry?”

“I was just saying that I didn't know if you drive to work,” Nita said. “Parking prices here are astronomical.”

Before Ava could summon a response, her other colleague, Sara, said, “That's because the new boss is the mysterious type.”

“Far from it, actually,” Ava said in a clipped tone.

“Okay, well, you're light on details. But this is what I have on her so far,” Sara told Nita. “Moved here from Sydney for the job. Lived and worked in London before that. No family in town. Almond milk latte, no sugar. Eats noodles for lunch every day but still has legs like that. Impeccable taste in workwear. No mention of a significant other.”

Ava tempted to say that the reason Sara didn't know anything was because it was none of her business, but she refrained. She suspected her team already thought she was cold. Nervous Ava tended to become tense Ava. She knew she was good at what she did, but she'd never done it from the front of the room. Two weeks into this leadership gig, and Ava still felt as if she were walking a plank. She'd been purposefully light on life details with her new colleagues too. It was hard to know what to share when you're trying to fashion this new version of yourself. Or to recover some old one. Ava wasn't even sure which was the case.

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“I haven't gotten a chance to shake some more facts loose.” Sara said. “By the way, Ava, if you *are* single and on the market, I have a friend looking to start dating again. A lawyer, but funny. Rich but not an asshole. Tasteful but minimal. Or if you're interested, I also have a doctor friend.”

Ava sent her a chilly glance. “Or, if *you're* interested, maybe we could talk about where you are with the material that's due tomorrow for the interim report?”

Sara only managed to look sheepish for a moment before she flung Nita a knowing smile. “I know a subject change when I hear one.”

Chapter 3

MIHO'S HUSBAND, LEVI, FLUNG OPEN the door. "Ava! So great to see you. She's in the kitchen." He strode off down the hall. "Forgive me. I have a Zoom meeting in two minutes."

Ava entered the kitchen, which was all polished concrete and steel. Miho turned from the counter with a wide smile. "You're here."

"Look at you." Ava gestured to her friend's belly, which shoved at her black smock dress.

"I know. It's strange." She drew Ava into a careful embrace. "I'm so glad we live in the same city again."

"Me too."

They sat at the wooden table, patchworked with afternoon sunlight. The kitchen was pure Miho, the clean lines and angles of the architecture contrasting with the odd shapes of earth-toned ceramics she loved to collect. Nothing matched, but everything did, somehow.

Miho pushed a cup towards Ava and filled it with coffee. "Have you settled into the job?"

"Sort of. I'm still waiting for being project leader not to terrify me. And how are *you* feeling? You're due really soon, right?"

"A fortnight. It's..." Miho tipped her head. "Like I'm standing on the edge of something scary, but I don't know what, exactly."

"I can imagine."

"Do you miss Sydney?" Miho asked.

"Honestly, not really. When I came back from London, after the funeral, I was so..." What were the words for the grief Ava had been staggering under in those first months? "I think I might have rushed too hard to try to build a life again, and I got it very wrong."

"I understand." Miho had always said that. Maybe what her friend meant was that she was *open* to understanding. Even about stupid mistakes like Moira. And for that, Ava had always been grateful.

"It's definitely time to figure out how to stand on my own two feet." Ava also needed to figure how to live without her brother in the world, but she didn't say it. She was supposed to have figured that out already. It had been a year-and-a-half.

"How do you like your new life?" Miho asked.

"It's hardly a life yet." In her devotion to getting the new job right, Ava had become a pattern-seeking machine. Life was a series of drills arranged around getting the best out of her workday, all healthy meals, long jogs, and eight-hour sleeps.

"We should explore the city. I haven't had much of a chance yet myself. I had such bad morning sickness the first few months." Miho touched her belly. "And I might not get much chance, soon."

"Do you feel ready?"

"I think so. I'm a little scared of the pain."

"I know I'm supposed to be saying something comforting, but I would be too."

"They say the brain is programmed to forget the pain after birth so you'll do it again." Miho laughed and shook her head. "I don't know how to begin to feel about that."

Ava didn't know if she'd be brave enough to do it even once. Moira's friends with kids always said patronising things like "Oh, wait and see. You think that, but then you change your mind." But Miho wasn't the type to assume people always wanted to follow the same path.

"Do you remember when your brother broke that bone in his foot by dropping a frozen chicken on it?" Miho smiled. "And we took him to the hospital on the back of your bike?"

"Yes, and the doctor thought he was joking at first. I mean, who does that?"

"Josh did." A smile of recognition passed between them, one of knowing that you both were the people who knew someone best in the world. Here, in the land of shared memories, he got to live largest.

The Best Mistake

Ava's and Miho's friendship had started with Ava's brother over ten years ago in Sydney and continued long after Miho and Josh broke up four years ago. When Josh first met her, Miho had just completed her business degree in Osaka and travelled to Australia on a working holiday visa to avoid a career in the clutches of the Japanese office culture she dreaded. In Sydney, she made exquisitely brewed coffee in a small hipster café not far from campus and sold at art markets pedantically detailed silver necklaces that she made in her free time. She wore baggy jeans and oversized men's shirts and was slyly funny.

At first, Miho and Ava bonded by ganging up on Josh, teasing him relentlessly, which he loved. Then their friendship became its own thing. They started taking cruel exercise classes together and would lie in the park together afterwards, groaning. They taught themselves to cook Indian food, filling Josh's run-down student house with the smell of charred spice. Miho counselled Ava through her first serious break-up with the kind of wisdom that no 22-year-old had business possessing.

That Christmas, when Josh and Ava's parents had announced their lack of festive season availability via a cursory text, the three of them had roasted a chicken in Josh's kitchen and spent the day in the backyard, drinking cider and playing Scrabble. And for the first time, Ava didn't bother being upset about their parents' benign, routine neglect.

"I miss him." Miho smiled sadly.

"Me too." Ava wanted to add, *all the time*. Because the sadness was always crouched, waiting to leap out at her at any time. But she didn't know how to tell Miho that.

When it was time for Ava to go, Miho squeezed Ava's hand by the front door. "I'm so happy you're here. When she's born, we'll show you the city."

"She?"

"Yes." She smiled and touched her belly. "We'll call her Mitsuko."

Ava folded her friend into a tight hug. "I can't wait to meet her."

Outside, the city was all neon and shadow and the small, moving theatres of passing trams. Ava opened her map for the umpteenth time to check the way home. When would the city stop being strange—less plot twists and more connections? In fact, it was getting lost last week-

end that had made Ava think of Sofia for the first time in months. A laneway had unexpectedly dumped Ava into Chinatown's hum. As she had turned and joined the tide of people deciding where to eat, there'd been that same café with its window photos of whimsical desserts. It had conjured an instant memory of Sofia's light laugh as Ava had flinched through her very first bite into a taro ball. There it had been again—that alive, almost reckless, feeling she'd allowed herself that weekend. And the memory of how, as she'd watched Sofia dig into the dish with her own spoon and a laugh, there had been those first beats of hope that the night wouldn't end there.

But it had been only fleeting. Then there'd been the sludge of guilt. Because of what Ava had done to Moira. Of what Ava had done to her own idea of herself. Not cheating, but it might as well have been.

* * *

Hands full of grocery bags, Sofia pushed open her front door. Voices drifted down the hall.

In the kitchen's lamplit clutter, a couple of her mother's postgrad students sat at the table, clutching coffee mugs and arguing. Sayid was at the stove, stirring a pot of something that was sending small, spiced messages into the air. The kettle had just boiled, pushing steam into the shafts of sunlight crossing the room.

"Hey, team." Sofia dumped the bags onto a clear bit of counter. "How are we?"

"The general consensus seems to be that we hate misogynist lecturers but we love Sayid's curries," her mother, Riina, said.

"Sounds about right." Sofia laughed and kissed her mother's cheek. Sayid peered into the bags. "Dinner isn't far off."

"You don't have to cook every night," Sofia told Sayid. "I feel guilty. I can do it sometimes."

"It makes me happy to cook for you guys." He slung an arm around her shoulder. "And it's the only way you ever let me help you."

"Alright, then you can keep doing it," Sofia joked, as if bestowing some great honour, but, really, all that existed was endless gratitude that she had one less thing she had to do today.

The Best Mistake

A year ago, Sofia had brought Sayid, then her new colleague at Study Hall, home for a coffee and to see the small granny flat for lease in their backyard. He was sad, fresh from his break-up from a two-year relationship with an engineering major who'd told him she liked practical boys better. By the end of that night, he'd made them a delicious chickpea curry and said non-idiotic things about a book that he and Riina had both read. Riina had practically thrust the keys to the flat into his hand. There hadn't been a time in Sofia's life when there wasn't a struggling student or visiting professor staying in there, or the kitchen heaving with visitors arguing their points over tea or wine, even back in the days when her mother still left the house.

After the shopping was unpacked, Sofia defected upstairs. Sometimes, after the buzz and chaos of a tutoring session and clean-up, Sofia was not quite ready for the buzz and chaos of home, or the laundry that needed her attention. Especially after today, with the lingering, gritty residue of that jarring Ava encounter.

The whole upstairs of the house was Sofia's. The first thing she always did when she got to the huge room that used to be their living room and was now her bedroom, was to pull up one of the huge windows. A breeze instantly sent the papers on her desk rustling. Even as the late afternoon sun shone its last rays, it was leafy and cool out on the balcony with the tubs of shrubs and vines she'd coaxed across the wrought iron, creating another room made of leaf and bark and soil. She curled like a cat against some cushions on the extra mattress she'd pulled out here last week. Back in Thailand, Sofia had once slept on a bamboo deck with just the light protection of a net and the warm night air blanketing her skin. When the warm weather returned, she planned to do the same here.

The late afternoon hummed. On days like this, uni students lay on the grass verge that divided her street, studying and chatting. Next door, someone fried onions, and another was practising violin, the slow squeak of beginner's scales, ugly but endearing. Sofia liked being alone up here, still wrapped in the embrace of the life that teemed around her.

Today, she found herself staring down a memory. It was just old enough to take on that hazy photographic quality of something your

brain had committed to the archives: Sofia in her car outside the airport, saying goodbye to a loose-haired woman wearing a stupid-cute tourist T-shirt saying *I Love Melbourne* because she hadn't planned to outstay her luggage. Inside Sofia's memory, they sat in the car, staring at each other. Finally, Ava's smile slid further into being. She reached for Sofia's hand across the console. "That was..." Ava started to say, but then shook her head, as if she didn't know how to end it.

Sofia nodded because she had no words either. Then they'd kissed, in an awkward, hungry reach between the seats. A hurried, late-at-the-airport kiss that deserved so much better. Ava held her face close to Sofia's for a long moment before pulling away and climbing from the car. She turned once and smiled before leaving her for good.

Or so Sofia had thought.

That day, as Sofia had pulled away from Departures, she'd taken in a long, breath, inflected with more loss than the occasion probably deserved. With her sister in town, it had been Sofia's first weekend off from caring for her mother in months. She'd thought it would involve a fun night out, or maybe the bliss of a whole day in bed reading, not some fever-dream weekend with a beautiful stranger. The reality-check corner of Sofia's mind told her it was probably the parentheses around the encounter that made it what it was: long for a one-night stand, but short enough that they knew nothing about each other to take the shine off, even though it had been clear that they were very, very different.

All through that weekend, Sofia had suspected she was seeing Ava letting go, as if this kind of spontaneity were not her normal. And when Sofia had dared ask the question, Ava had as good as confirmed it. And the smiling woman who'd said goodbye at the airport was a world away from the elegant woman at the end of the bar, who had been so buttoned-up and commanding and somehow...alone. And a world away from that taut, note-taking woman today.

Maybe, given the chance, Ava would thaw. Besides, Sofia had always had a thing for finding cracks in armour. And for the kind of people who let them show.

After dinner, Sofia tapped at her mother's study door. Riina, as usual, didn't answer. "Mum?" Sofia pushed the door open. "Ma?"

The Best Mistake

“Sofia, darling.” Riina was at her desk, her crutches at rest beside her. She spent most of her time in this room, producing her polished academic gems for other historians to hold up and admire.

“Did you go out with Surpreet today?” A student from the university came every day to help Riina with whatever she needed.

Riina tipped her head as if her mind were trying to reach back into the depths of the day. “Not today.”

Sofia sighed. This was an endless game these days, playing her mother’s mother. The nagging was painful but necessary, or Riina would never leave the house. “Please try to go for just a short walk. The doctor said it’s important.”

“I forgot. I’ll go tomorrow.” Before the accident, Riina was everywhere all at once: guest lecturing, supervising PhD students, travelling three or four times a year to conferences. Now, she’d shrunk her social life to the confines of online and her kitchen.

“No pain today?” Sofia asked.

“No pain.”

“Is the physio coming tomorrow?”

“Not sure.”

Sofia checked her phone calendar. “Yes, she’s coming tomorrow. Don’t forget, okay?”

“Yes, yes. How are you, darling?”

“I’m good.” Because Sofia didn’t get to not be good. Sofia had so much to do that good was the only option.

“Did you get some writing down today?” Riina asked.

“Some,” Sofia fibbed. Instead of writing a new chapter of her master’s thesis, she’d sat in her office and tinkered with her literature review chapter before heading off for the hall. “I’ll try to do more before bed.”

“Like I tell every postgraduate student I’ve ever supervised, there’s one fact that you all have to come to terms with: the thesis does not and never has written itself through the sheer force of good intentions.”

“And as both your daughter and a postgraduate student, I have heard this a thousand times before.” Sofia smiled wearily. There were

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still dishes and laundry to do before bed too. "Night, Mum. Love you. Please don't forget tomorrow."

She pulled the door closed, not expecting an answer.

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THE BEST MISTAKE

BY EMILY O'BEIRNE

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