



*the*  
**Wrong**  
*McElroy*

KL HUGHES



# Chapter 1

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M DOING this.” Fiona Ng watched her reflection in the passenger-side window. Her face glowed bright against the shadowy background of the car’s interior. She could just make out Michael’s smile as he resituated himself in the driver’s seat. “I really can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“What’s so hard to believe? You’re doing it because you’re my best friend.”

“I’m seriously rethinking that job position.”

“Oh, so now being my friend is a job?” Michael reached over the console and yanked on a handful of her long black hair.

Fiona faced him. His dark orange curls frizzed out above his ears and appeared brown in the low light, but his freckles were still visible. They splashed across his face in varying sizes, eating up the bridge of his nose and dotting down the length of his neck. “It is when you make me be your beard for your family’s four-day Christmas weekend.”

“Only because I get tired of my mom and grandma nagging me about when I’m going to settle down. I’m twenty-nine, but they act like I’m halfway to the grave and should already have a two-story house and four kids and, like, a 401K or something.”

“I’m not having kids with you,” Fiona said. “That’s taking it way too far.”

“Our kids would be cute, like little ginger Mulans.”

“Mulan was Chinese.”

“I know, but I don’t know any Chinese-Malaysian-Singaporean Disney princesses. Do you?”

“Mulan wasn’t a princess.” Fiona took a sip of her Starbucks iced coffee and smiled around the straw. “You realize your old Southern grandma’s going to have a heart attack, right? Like, I’m going to say my last name, and her brain’s probably going to short-circuit.”

“Probably,” Michael said, “but she at least has enough decency to keep her short-circuiting on the inside.”

“Sure she does,” Fiona said. “I give it twenty minutes, max, before she asks me if I know the man who runs the Chinese restaurant down the street.”

“Nah. There isn’t a Chinese restaurant down the street.”

Fiona leveled him with a glare.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “Look, it’ll be fine. Just relax.”

“When have you ever known me to relax?”

“True. You’ve got the anxiety bug.”

“Incurable, unfortunately.”

“Well, I still love you.”

Fiona snorted. “How generous of you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a shit-eating grin. “But seriously. I know you’re kind of sensitive about your heritage and culture and stuff—”

“Aren’t most people sensitive about their identities?”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “Just that, you know, it took a long time for you to love yourself as you are and want to learn about your family and stuff.”

“This pep talk is giving me a rash, Michael.”

“Shut up.” He laughed and poked her knee. “I’m just saying that if my grandma—or anyone, for that matter—says anything shitty, I’ll put a stop to it. I’ve got your back.”

Fiona lay back in her seat and huffed out a sigh. “You promise?”

“Promise,” he said. “That is, if Lizzie doesn’t beat me to it. She hasn’t attended a single family function in the last five years that hasn’t resulted in her lecturing someone about equality or racism or the benefits of flushing the Republican party down the toilet.”

“Yeah, well, some people *need* lectures.”

“No argument there.” He grabbed Fiona’s coffee and took a drink.

“Is Lizzie the youngest? The one who just graduated high school?”

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“No, that’s Jessie.” He passed her coffee back. “Lizzie’s the one who lives in Los Angeles.”

“Oh, right, the med student.”

“No, that’s Grace. She lives in Seattle. Lizzie’s the film student, though ‘student’ might be stretching it a bit far. She’s taking, like, *one* online workshop thing.”

“You have way too many siblings.”

“It’s true.”

“I mean, your mom really should have banished your dad to the garage or something after the first three.”

“After the first *four*. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been born, and you would be miserable without me.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Ouch, woman. Break my heart, why don’t you?”

Fiona flashed a smile and pulled her feet up under her. She reclined her seat and stretched her arms above her head. “It feels like we’ve been driving for hours.”

“We have.”

“Oh, well, that would explain it, then.”

“Only about an hour left now, though, so you’ll get to stretch your tiny legs soon.”

“My legs are glorious.”

“And tiny.”

“So is your—”

“Don’t you dare.”

Fiona let out a wild burst of laughter, then sighed. “How the hell am I going to remember everyone’s names? A girlfriend would know your family’s names ahead of time, right? Aren’t straight girls always trying to win over their boyfriends’ moms or something?”

“Lesbians don’t try to win over their girlfriends’ moms?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve only had two relationships serious enough to warrant meeting the parents, and with one of them there were no parents. With the other, the parents lived in a different country, so potential disaster avoided.”

“Well, how did they act around *your* parents?”

Fiona cut him a look. “Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t even know why I asked that. There’s no way you’d take a girl home to meet your parents.”

“They’re still convinced that if I spend enough time with you, I’ll change my mind about being a lesbian.”

“They seriously overestimate my swag.”

“They overestimate the entire male population,” Fiona said. “Also, don’t say ‘swag.’”

Michael snorted and shoved her shoulder. “All right. Get the pic.”

“Where is it?”

“On my phone.” He motioned toward the console. “It’s in the family album.”

Fiona scrolled through the image gallery until she found it, the same photo from his apartment back in St. Louis. Staring at her from the screen were all thirteen members of the McElroy family. Orange-red hair blazed from left to right, and freckles surrounded bright, toothy smiles. Michael, his four sisters, three brothers, mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, and, of course, the family cat, Otis, also a ginger, sat against a fake snowy backdrop in bulky Christmas sweaters that appeared itchier than they did festive. “Jesus, this is worse than the family photo my mom made us get when I was six and we all had matching bowl cuts.”

“I’ve seen that picture, and there’s no way this one is worse than that.”

“Your cat is wearing an ugly Christmas sweater. Your *cat*, Michael.”

“Even your grandma had a bowl cut in that picture, though.”

“God, I know. You’re right. Mine’s worse.” Fiona shook her head and used her thumbs to zoom in on the picture. “You know my grandmother has a massive print of it hanging in her house, right? Like, *why*, Gran? Why? She’s proud of it.”

“Honestly, I kind of want a massive print of it hanging in my apartment, too.”

“I will die before I allow you to display my forced bowl cut on your corkboard.”

“Might be worth it.”

“Rude.”

Michael laughed. “All right, so McElroy Family rundown. You ready?” She zoomed back out with a quick tap of her thumb. “Ready.”

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“Okay, so, left to right, starting in the back. You’ve got my grandpa, Charlie. He died four years ago, so on to my grandma, Sophia. She’s my dad’s mom. My mom’s parents both died when she was a teenager.”

“I think you’ve told me that before. Car crash, right?”

“Yeah, so then it goes down to my dad, also named Charlie, and my mom, Rose, but everyone calls her Rosie.”

“I’m already lost.”

“No, you’re not. If you can remember seven billion drugs *and* their side effects in your Pharmacology class, you can remember these names.”

“I mean, seven billion is a bit of a stretch. More like 150, maybe 175.”

“I saw your study guide. It was definitely seven billion.”

“Your mom is cute.”

“Please, no.”

“She’s got those sweet little wrinkles around her eyes.”

“*Stop.*”

“And let’s just say she’s not lacking in the curves department, either. I mean, were your sisters blessed with the same—”

“I swear to God, Fiona.” He reached across the car, trying to cover Fiona’s mouth with his hand without taking his eyes off the road. Fiona dodged, laughing, and refreshed the phone screen.

“All right, fine. I’m stopping. So, your siblings?” She pointed to the first in line, a guy who looked nearly identical to Michael, though older around the eyes and with an abundance of gray sprinkled about his otherwise orange hair. “That’s Charlie, right?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t look at the photo, focusing instead on the road, but Fiona knew he didn’t need to. He knew where every person sat and who wore which ridiculous sweater.

“He’s the one with kids?”

“Two girls, Lucy and Madison. They’re still pretty little. His wife’s name is Paige, but they’re kind of on the rocks right now, so I don’t even think she’s coming.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, no one really knows what’s going on there, just that they’re separated and she hasn’t come to any family functions in a while now. Mom thinks she might be seeing someone else, which of course makes her want to throttle her, but Charlie keeps telling her to stay out of it and mind

her own, which is ridiculous, because I don't think she's minded her own business a day in her life."

"It's a Mom thing."

"It's a Rosie McElroy thing for sure," he said. "Anyway, Charlie was the first boy in the family, so named after Dad and Grandpa. Next to him is Sophie, named after Grandma, and they're thirty-five."

"Both of them?"

"Yeah, they're twins."

"Oh yeah, I remember now."

"They act like twins too. Finishing each other's sentences, reading each other's minds. The whole nine yards. It's really annoying."

"I can read *your* mind sometimes."

"No, you can't."

"I always know what you want to eat."

"Okay, fine. I'll give you that."

"Though, admittedly, it's pretty easy when you only ever want pizza or sushi."

"And yet you always know exactly which one."

"Skills," Fiona said. "Okay, so, what about the rest of them?" She looked down at the picture and followed along as Michael spoke, matching each face to its given name, and trying to burn the information into her mind so she wouldn't mess up when she finally met them all. If she was going to do this whole fake-girlfriend thing, she was determined to do it right. She hadn't majored in musical theater for one semester freshman year for nothing.

"After Sophie is Jack. He's thirty-two."

"He's the one in the Marines?"

"Right. He's stationed in Bahrain right now, though, so he won't be there. And then there's me, of course, the handsome one right there in the middle."

"Right. Yeah. The smug one there. I see him. Next."

"Then Brian and Grace, who are also twins, but they don't really act like it. I mean, they're close but not—"

"Not psychically in tune?"

"Right."

"How old are they?"

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“Twenty-eight.”

“So, your mom must have had them pretty soon after you.”

“Yeah, they were almost two months premature, too, so we’re actually only ten months apart,” Michael said. “Brian likes to joke that me, him, and Grace are actually triplets.”

“Damn. Two sets of twins. Your mom’s poor vagina.”

“Ew. Stop.”

“I’m just saying.”

Michael shuddered.

“Oh, grow up. It’s a body part, not the creature from *The Black Lagoon*.”

“Says *you*.”

“Well, if it wasn’t for that creature, you wouldn’t exist.”

“So, *anyway*,” Michael said, “after Brian and Grace is Lizzie. She’s twenty-six, then last is Jessie, and you know she’s eighteen. Just graduated high school in May.”

Fiona laughed and pointed at Jessie’s face. “She’s the only one in this picture that looks more annoyed than happy to be there.”

“Yeah, Jessie’s never been great at swallowing her feelings. Well, feelings of hatred, at least.”

Fiona slid her finger back to the woman right before Jessie, who was sporting a cheesy, wide grin and long hair that was a dark shade of orange like Michael’s. She had two different-colored eyes, one blue and the other green. “Lizzie has heterochromia?”

“Heterochromia? Seriously?”

“That’s what it’s called.”

“Weird-ass eyes is fine,” he said. “No need to get all technical about it.”

“Right, because being an ass is better than being technical.”

“Sometimes.” He shrugged. “Anyway, makes her easy to spot, so that should help you out. Plus, Lizzie’s always the loudest, which means she’s also always the one Mom is yelling at. Charlie’s easy, too, because his hair is more gray than red now, and Grace is the one with the nose ring, so no trouble there either.”

“Sure.”

“I’m serious. It’s going to be fine.”

Fiona clicked off the screen and put Michael’s phone back in the console. “You know you’re paying for every pizza we eat for the next year.”



“Well, I—”

“That wasn’t a question.”

He laughed. “Fine.”

Fiona lay her head back and closed her eyes. “Sophia, Charlie, Rosie, Charlie, Sophie, Jack, Brian, Grace, Lizzie, Jessie.”

“Otis,” Michael added, and Fiona let out a long groan.



The McElroy family home was more of a country mansion than anything, which didn’t surprise Fiona. She knew Michael’s parents were well off. His mom was a caterer, and his dad, though now retired, had owned a hugely successful chain of farm-supply stores that spanned three states. And well, they definitely would have needed the space. Raising eight kids and a cat required ample square footage. Still, standing in the snow ten feet from the McElroy’s massive wrap-around porch and staring up at the towering columns intimidated her.

“I feel microscopic next to this house,” Fiona said as Michael grabbed their bags from the trunk. “I mean, am I suddenly the size of an ant, or is that just my imagination?”

Michael slammed the trunk closed and handed her one of the suitcases. “What do you mean ‘suddenly?’”

“Please don’t make me hit you with my suitcase. It’s heavy, and I don’t want to have to lift it that high.”

“You wouldn’t even if you could.”

“Your parents are going to be really sad when they discover your body in the snow tomorrow morning, frozen like a popsicle, while I sleep soundly and warmly in your childhood bed.”

“Good luck,” Michael said. “I don’t think anyone ever died from blunt force trauma to the *knees*.”

Fiona shoved him. The snow shifted under his feet, and down he went, tumbling to the ground and pulling Fiona down with him. She landed on top of him with a grunt, and her loud laugh transformed into a cloud of fog. He smashed a handful of snow in her hair, then tried to scramble away from her before she could retaliate. “Hold still,” she said, “or it’ll be worse when I finally catch you.”

“Oh, honey, see! I told you I heard something outside.”

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Both Fiona and Michael froze in place, Fiona on top of Michael and Michael wedged down into the snow. They turned toward the porch. Fiona recognized Michael's parents standing inside the open front door, the light from the house haloing around them. They wore matching forest-green bathrobes over pajamas, and Charlie Sr.'s thinning orange hair stuck up on one side. He was tall and lean. His wife was the opposite. The top of her head barely reached his upper arm, and despite her thick robe, it was easy to see her body was curved like a country road.

"Oh, hey!" Michael looked up at Fiona, still perched on top of him, then back to his parents. "Uh, hey, Mom, Dad. What are you guys doing up so late?"

"I told you we were going to stay up until you got home, honey," Rosie said as she smoothed down her coarse hair. "You didn't tell us you were bringing a...a friend with you."

"Oh, right. Yeah." He looked at Fiona again, but neither of them moved. It was as if the snow had melted through their skin and into their brains.

"Uh, son," Charlie Sr. said, clearing his throat, "what are you two *doing* out here, exactly?"

Reality snapped into place, and Fiona shot off Michael as if he'd suddenly caught fire and she was afraid of getting burned. They jumped to their feet and brushed snow off their clothes as they mumbled about how they were "just playing around" and tripped over a snow...man, or something.

"Right," Charlie Sr. said as he and Rosie both visibly fought smiles. "Tripped over a snowman. Seems plausible."

"Shut up." The words chirped out of Michael in the tiniest squeak Fiona had ever heard. He cleared his throat and wiped his hands on his pants. "So, uh, anyway, Mom, Dad, this is Fiona. She's my, um, girlfriend."

"Girlfriend," Fiona repeated with an awkward nod. The smile she plastered on felt as uncomfortable as it likely looked. "Super excited to finally meet you both."



The walk up the grand staircase and down the first hall went on forever. Fiona aged a year with each rapid-fire question Mrs. McElroy hurled their way. It seemed never-ending.

“Since when do you have a girlfriend, Michael? Why didn’t you tell us you had a girlfriend? She’s beautiful, honey. Oh, silly me. Fiona. Fiona, isn’t it? Fiona, you’re just beautiful. Isn’t she beautiful, Michael?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Fiona, will you be staying the whole weekend with us?”

“Yes, Mrs. McElroy, if that’s all right.”

“Call me Rosie, and of course it’s all right. It’s wonderful. I’ve been hoping Michael would settle down now for ages. I always worry about him up there in St. Louis on his own. Don’t I, Charlie? Don’t I worry?”

Charlie Sr. hummed in agreement from down the hall, trailing along behind them, and Rosie let out a sweet laugh. “Oh, Michael, honey, Charlie’s girls wanted to stay in your room, so you’ll have to stay in Jack’s.”

“That’s fine.”

“He face-called us just the other day, you know, and he practically has no hair at all now,” she said. “He just keeps cutting it shorter and shorter.”

“It’s FaceTime, Mom,” Michael said. “And I’m pretty sure he has to keep his hair short.”

“Well, I know that, honey, but *that* short?” She stopped at a door somewhat hidden in a nook at the end of the hall and opened it. “Here we are.” She heaved their suitcases, which she’d insisted on carrying, onto the bed. “If you need any extra clothes, I brought in some of your things from your room. They’re in the closet, and there are spare socks and underpants in the dresser for you, too.”

Michael’s cheeks turned the same color as his hair. “Uh, thanks, Mom. I’m good, though.”

“Okay, but you know you always say that, and then you never have enough.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m good. Really, Mom. Thanks. I’ll just do some laundry if I need to.”

“Well, they’re perfectly good underpants, honey. I don’t see why you don’t just wear what’s already—”

“He’s fine, Rosie,” Charlie Sr. said from the doorway, and Rosie sighed.

“All right, fine,” she said. “I know when I’m being hushed.” She patted Michael’s cheek, then turned toward Fiona. “Now, do I need to set you up in another room, Fiona, or did you two want to stay together?” She looked at Michael and dropped her voice to a whisper. “You know your father and

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I don't have any rules against your girlfriend staying in your room with you, honey. You're a grown man. We just ask that you keep the volume down and be safe."

Fiona had only seen Michael so embarrassed one other time, and it was when he'd gotten food poisoning sophomore year and hadn't made it to the cafeteria bathroom in time. He hadn't even bothered washing his clothes after, because he'd refused to acknowledge what happened. Instead, he'd thrown it all away—his pants, underwear, socks, and even his shoes. She felt his pain this time around, though. Heat made the skin of her chest and neck itch, and she imagined she looked nearly as red and splotchy under her shirt as Michael appeared from the chin up.

"Mom, really? Come *on*."

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Michael. You know, Charlie and his wife used to—"

"I'll take my own room," Fiona cut in, "if that's all right, Mrs. McElroy. I mean, Rosie."

"Really, Fiona. You're welcome to stay here with Michael. Don't feel like you have to separate."

"She said she wants her own room, Mom."

"I heard her, honey. I'm just making sure you two aren't—"

"You know what?" Fiona clapped her hands together. "I'll just stay here. If you're sure it's all right, then I'll stay with Michael."

Michael bugged his eyes out at her, and Fiona mimicked the expression. They stared at one another until Rosie interrupted the showdown by yanking them both by their necks into a tight hug.

"Okay, well, you kids settle in, then, and we'll see you in the morning." She released them and kissed Michael's cheek. "I'm so happy you're home. Lizzie will be here in the morning. She's excited to see you since you two missed each other last year."

"Okay, cool," Michael said, still red in the face. "Night, Mom."

Fiona felt her face stretch again into that same pained smile as before. She nodded. "Good night, Rosie."

"Good night, you two." She shooed her husband down the hall, then closed the door behind her.

The moment she left, Michael turned on Fiona. "Stay *here*? What were you thinking?"

“I was thinking your mom was never going to leave until we made it clear that we love each other so much we can’t stand to sleep in separate beds. I was giving her what she wanted.”

“You never give my mother what she wants. I *told* you this. If you give her what she wants every time she wants something, she’ll keep wanting things until you give her your freaking soul.”

“Oh, Christ, Michael. The woman’s your mother, not the Grim Reaper.”

“But she’s like the mother of all mothers. She could probably literally mother you to death.”

“Fine. Next time, I’ll try to be more adamant in *letting her down* and *disappointing her*, then. I mean, what’s the big deal? It’s not like we haven’t slept in the same bed before.”

“I know that.” He shoved his suitcase onto the floor and collapsed on the bed. “That’s not the problem.”

Fiona grabbed a few empty hangers from the open closet and began taking her clothes out of her own suitcase, hanging them piece by piece. “Then what is it?”

“It’s that my parents and all my siblings and my freaking *grandma* are now going to think we’re in here *boning* every night.”

The shudder that worked its way up Fiona’s spine couldn’t be helped. She tried to fight it, but there was no use.

“See!”

“Yeah, all right, that’s weird, but it’s not like we actually are in here boning, so who cares what they think? I mean, you wanted everyone to think I’m your girlfriend, right? So, there you go.” She stretched out beside him. “At least your mom gets excited for you. I texted my mom that I aced my Physiology exam, and she said, ‘Not bad. Your father bought lemon trees on sale for the garden. Buy one, get one half off.’”

Michael laughed. “I love your mom.” He wrapped his arm around Fiona’s shoulders and sighed. “It’s going to be a long weekend, isn’t it?”

“Definitely.”

## Chapter 2

“WAKEY, WAKEY, EGGS AND BAKEY, loser!”

The words thumped through the haze of sleep mere seconds before the weight of a body slamming into hers jolted Fiona awake. She let out a horrendous scream as the person landed directly on top of her and yanked the comforter off her head. Her arms flailed helplessly as her hair clouded her vision.

“Oh, holy shit! You are *not* my brother.”

Fiona’s heart raced. Her eyes were sticky with sleep and blinded by hair, and all the oxygen in the room seemed to be evading her lungs. She quickly swiped her hair away and blinked up at the petite but curvy young woman straddling her and slowly calmed as she took in each feature: frizzy dark-orange hair, a toothy grin, one blue eye, and one green.

“Lizzie, what the hell are you doing?”

Fiona leaned up to see Michael standing in the open doorway of the bathroom, mouth covered in toothpaste foam and a towel wrapped around his waist. Clearly, he’d been up for a while.

“Uh, apparently making a complete jackass of myself,” Lizzie said with an awkward laugh. She looked down at Fiona, red-cheeked. “Sorry. I’m Lizzie.”

“Fiona.”

“Oh, Fiona! Hey, yeah, Michael’s talked about you before. Nice to finally meet you.”

Fiona pressed a hand to her heart and took a deep breath. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Yeah, the bloodcurdling scream sort of gave that away.”

“Do you always introduce yourself by jumping on people?”

Lizzie smiled, her entire face crinkling. Freckles spotted her face like a game of connect-the-dots, and Fiona suddenly found herself thinking of connecting them, one by one, with the tip of her finger. She used the sleeve of her dark-green flannel shirt to swipe a bit of hair from her face. “Only the cute ones.”

A jolt sparked low in Fiona’s gut. She squirmed, surprised. They stared at one another for a long moment, unmoving, with Lizzie still straddling her and Fiona wondering where she should put her hands. She felt flushed and confused and entirely unwilling to contemplate the fact that the weight of Michael’s sister on top of her felt so much more pleasant than burdensome.

“Uh, Liz?” Michael said.

“Yeah?” Lizzie didn’t look at Michael. Her gaze was fixed on Fiona.

“You can get off my girlfriend now.”

Fiona blinked hard. *Shit*. For a moment, she’d forgotten she was there to be Michael’s Christmas girlfriend. Lizzie slid off her so quickly that she landed on her ass on the floor. She sprang up a second later, hair flying around her face and her thin sweater wrinkled up on one side.

“Girlfriend?” she said. “Huh. Wow.”

“Yeah.” Michael slung an arm around his sister. “Girlfriend.”

Lizzie patted his back and ducked when he tried to kiss her forehead with toothpaste-covered lips. He laughed and went back to the bathroom to spit.

“So, uh, how did you manage to convince someone to date you?” she called after him, her gaze returning to Fiona. “I mean, she’s a real girl, Mike, not the inflatable kind. I’m so proud.”

“Ha.” The porcelain and tile made his voice echo. “Very funny.”

“It definitely took some convincing,” Fiona said as she pulled the blanket up a bit higher to cover herself. It was silly since she was fully clothed, but she couldn’t help it. She felt uncomfortable and slightly aroused, which made zero sense. The lingering haze of sleep, paired with waking to a cute girl on top of her, had clearly caused her brain to short-circuit. *Michael’s sister*, she scolded herself. *She’s Michael’s sister*. The scolding didn’t stop her from tracing Lizzie’s curves with her eyes. She had her mother’s figure—full breasts, wide hips, and, like Fiona, barely passed the five-foot mark.

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Lizzie's boisterous laugh was surprising for her size. The sound of it sent the same jolt through Fiona as before. *Oh no.*

"See," Lizzie said. "Even your girlfriend knows you've got no game."

Michael reappeared in sweatpants and a T-shirt, mouth clean of foam. He grabbed his sister before she could jump away. "Is that right?" He managed to get her in a headlock and knuckled the top of her head until her coarse hair was a frazzled mess of tangles. "Two years you don't see me, and this is the treatment I get?"

"Just telling it like it is, Big Brother," she grunted from his armpit. She then managed to knee him in the back of the leg hard enough to break his balance. He stumbled, releasing her, and she smacked him on the back of the head before taking off out of the room. "I'm telling Mom!"

"Big baby!" Michael called after her, then turned toward Fiona. "Still wish you had siblings?"



The bathroom served as her safe haven for thirty minutes before Michael finally knocked on the door and said, "I hope you're using the air freshener."

"Gross. Shut up."

"I'm just saying. I've known you for three years now, and I've never seen you take more than fifteen minutes to get ready."

"I'm preparing for my soul to depart from my body."

"I thought you said she was just my mom, not the Grim Reaper."

"After meeting her *and* your sister, I'm rethinking my position." Fiona stared at herself in the mirror, her freshly showered face and damp black hair gleaming back at her. The brown skin of her face was bare and shiny from a wash and a tad paler than usual. Sun had become a foreign thing to her, as she'd spent her summer bopping back and forth between the university library and the hospital. She hated the way makeup clogged up her pores, so it never bothered her not to wear it. Not until now. She hadn't expected to feel nervous, yet she found herself hiding in Jack's bathroom, overthinking her natural amount of cuteness and wondering if she should, in fact, be considerably cuter. She couldn't stop smoothing her hands down her plain white sweater and black leggings. *I am a bland breakfast date. What if they don't like me?*



“Let me in.”

She popped the latch, and Michael squeezed in behind her, wearing a red St. Louis Cardinals T-shirt and gray sweatpants. At the sight, Fiona instantly felt better. His nose wrinkled as he closed the door behind him. “You could have at least lit a match or something.” Fiona smacked his shoulder, eliciting a laugh. “Everybody likes you, Fi.”

“You have a point.”

“I always have a point.”

“And occasionally, it’s a good one.” She grabbed her brush from the sink and held it over her shoulder. “Braid my hair?”

“Fine. But you can’t tell anyone it was me.”

“I won’t.”

“Sit down.”

Fiona settled down on the closed toilet seat and turned her back to Michael. She propped her feet up on the side of the tub and slouched her shoulders. Instantly, she heard her mother’s voice in her head telling her to sit up straight or else she would end up a hunchback like her great-great grandmother who she’d never actually met. Fiona scoffed at the internal scolding and slouched even more. Behind her, Michael began to work the hairbrush through her hair, snagging a few times on tangles he then gently worked out.

“Mike?”

“Hm?”

Fiona closed her eyes at the bristles scratching across her scalp. It was soothing. “What kind of couple do you think we’d be if we actually were one?”

“That’s easy. We’d be the hermit couple.”

Fiona snorted. “The *what* couple?”

“You know.” He separated her hair with the brush and gathered up three thin sections to weave together. “We’d be the couple no one ever sees because all we do is sit at home together and watch our favorite shows and order takeout and fight over *Mario Kart* and whether Batman is really a superhero or not.”

“Not,” Fiona said at the same time Michael added, “Which he totally is.”

“You realize we’re never going to agree on this, right?”

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“Definitely not.”

Fiona shifted on the toilet and sighed. “You really don’t think we’d be one of those fun couples everyone wants to hang out with?”

“Sit still.”

“Well, this toilet seat isn’t exactly comfortable, and you’re taking forever.”

“Do you want a good braid or a sloppy one?” Michael thumped the back of her ear. “It’s not my fault you’ve got a bony ass.”

“Just hurry up.”

“I’m going as fast as I can. And no, I don’t think we’d be one of those fun couples. Not to say we aren’t fun. We just never go anywhere.”

“We go places.”

“The grocery store, each other’s apartments, and the movie theater on seven-dollar Sunday don’t count, Fi.”

Fiona deflated. “I’ve become a fossil,” she said, “a sad, lesbian fossil whose longest relationship is with a ginger man, and I haven’t even finished graduate school yet.”

Michael secured her braid with a rubber band from the countertop and said, “People love fossils. There are whole museums dedicated to them.”

“You realize I haven’t had a girlfriend in more than two years, right?”

“You’ve been busy with school.”

“My vagina is a stone.”

Michael quietly began to hum a familiar tune. It took a moment for Fiona to recognize the well-known score of Chopin’s “Funeral March,” and as soon as she did, she whirled on the toilet seat and sucker-punched Michael in the gut. “Hate you.”

A grunt escaped as he clutched his stomach. He then wrapped an arm around her and grinned as he led her out of the bathroom, laughing. “Hate you, too, kid.”



The McElroys’ kitchen was the size of her whole apartment back in St. Louis, and once Fiona saw the entire family stuffed into the space, she understood why. Michael’s siblings crowded around the kitchen island while Rosie cooked breakfast. Together, they made the enormous space appear much smaller, more like a walk-in closet with a stove than

an actual kitchen. The room smelled divine, like smoky, sizzling pork and fresh-baked bread. The sheer goodness of it was overwhelming, and Fiona's mouth began to water. Her stomach rumbled. She imagined it had always been like this in their house—redheaded kids screeching and squealing and scrambling about while the divine scents of a Southern smorgasbord wafted around, room by room. She smiled as an image of a tiny Michael stuffing his face popped into her mind.

“Mike!”

The eldest sibling, Charlie, stood from his stool. He was tall and lean-muscled, though not as tall as Michael, and sported short hair that was mainly gray and a smile Fiona could only describe as contagious. The green John Deere T-shirt he wore was weathered and so faded that the large logo in its center had nearly disappeared.

“Hey, man, get in here.” He yanked Michael into a hug and clapped him on the back. “Good to see you.”

“Yeah, Mom told us all about your new girlfriend, Mikey.”

Another brother, whom Fiona assumed had to be Brian since Jack couldn't be there, stayed seated. He was stockier than his brothers, shorter overall, and thicker around the middle and in the face. His buzz cut appeared in sharp contrast to the shaggy, short styles of the other two, and his face was further distinguished by a dense cluster of freckles just under his right eye. “We thought you might be too *busy* to come down to breakfast, if you know what I mean.”

Fiona snorted when Rosie smacked Brian on the back of the head with a dish towel. She wore the same forest-green robe she'd donned the night before. “Stop teasing your brother.”

“You're right, Mom. I should respect my *elders*.”

“Watch it,” Michael said, then tugged Brian into a quick embrace. He kissed the top of Grace's messy head where she sat beside her twin. Fiona could tell it was Grace by the small rose-gold hoop in her slightly upturned nose. She kept her hair short, a pixie cut that had yet to be tamed for the day, and wore a purple T-shirt with *University of Washington* printed across the front in gold lettering.

Grace patted the side of Michael's face as he leaned over her. “Hey, Mike.” Her voice was low and sweet until he stole a sip of her mimosa. Her tone flattened as she waved toward a glass carafe full of spiked orange juice

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in front of her. “Oh, yes, please drink *my* drink instead of pouring your own. It’s not like there’s an entire pitcher on the counter or anything.”

It was only then that Fiona noticed what sat beside the carafe: a massive, almost perfectly round orange ball of fur occupied a good portion of the island countertop. Fiona frowned and stared, but no one else in the room seemed even the slightest bit bothered by its presence, so she did her best to ignore it. When Michael patted it, however, the giant ball suddenly unfurled itself to reveal a fat, angry-looking cat with a flat, punched-in face.

“Hey, big guy,” Michael said, but the cat didn’t seem interested in responding. He stretched out his front legs, tiny sharp nails popping out momentarily, then put his butt to Michael and jumped off. He hit the floor soundlessly and curled around Rosie’s leg as Michael scoffed. “Fine, then, Otis. Be like that. I didn’t want to pet you anyway.”

“Oh, he’s just sleepy,” Rosie said, adopting the most ridiculous baby voice Fiona had ever heard. She bent, lugged Otis up into her arms, and squashed his flat face against hers. “Isn’t that right, little Oti-pootykins? Yes, he’s just tired. Yes, he is.” She blew on his face, then kissed him, loudly. “You love your bubby, don’t you? Yes, you do. Yes. Yes, you love all your bubbies and sissies, don’t you?” Another loud, smacking kiss, then she sat him back on the floor and squirted a dollop of hand sanitizer into her palm from a pump bottle on the counter. “He’ll let you love on him later.”

“Yeah, right. He hates everyone but you and Grandma.” Michael took another sip of Grace’s mimosa, then set the glass back on the table. “Where’s Soph? And Lizzie?”

Charlie waved a hand to indicate the rest of the house. “Somewhere wrangling my children, most likely.”

“Because he can’t do it himself,” Brian said.

“Incoming!” The familiar voice drew Fiona’s attention toward the door a second before one tiny strawberry-blonde girl in pink leggings and a green sweater zipped by her. A second later, another, dressed in what appeared to be a cross between an elf costume and a pair of footy pajamas, barreled into Fiona’s legs. The little girl stumbled, teetered over, then got up and took off again as if nothing had happened at all. Lizzie was on the latter’s heels. Her hair flew out from her head as she gave chase, and her goofy smile made Fiona’s stomach stir.

“Sorry,” she said, nearly knocking into Fiona as well. She steadied herself by latching onto Fiona’s arm, and the two of them were suddenly sharing the same thin space again. They stared for one tense moment, then Lizzie dropped her hand and carried on after the girls, disappearing into another room.

“Girls, say hi to your Uncle Mike,” Charlie called after them, but they were already gone. He looked at Michael. “Sorry, man. They like Lizzie better than you.”

“So do I,” Brian teased, and Michael whacked them both on the backs of their heads.

A sudden presence behind Fiona startled her. She turned to find a woman with eyes the muted color of a cloudy sky and the same contagious smile as Charlie. She was taller than the other McElroy women, closer to her twin’s height, and her long, auburn hair was pulled back in a low bun. “You must be Fiona,” she said and held out a hand. Fiona shook it gently. “I’m—”

“Sophie.” Fiona hadn’t memorized their names and faces for nothing. “Yeah, I recognize you from Michael’s family picture.”

“Oh God. It wasn’t the one with the awful Christmas sweaters, was it?”

“Actually, it was exactly that one, yeah.”

Sophie groaned. “Well, plus side is you’ve now seen us at our fashion worst, so we can only improve from there, right?”

“Says the thirty-five-year-old woman wearing pajama pants covered in cartoon frogs,” Brian said.

Sophie looked down at her pants and shrugged. “If you can resist Maddi and Lily’s faces, then you tell them you don’t want to wear whatever cartoon-themed clothes they probably got *you* for Christmas this year.”

“Who says they got me anything cartoon-themed?”

“Have you met my kids?” Charlie downed the last of his mimosa and poured himself a bit more. “I mean, if you think cartoon frogs are bad, you’re in for a rude awakening.”

“Anyway.” Sophie rested a hand on Fiona’s arm. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, Fiona, it’s nice to meet—Oh, wait! I haven’t actually met you yet,” Brian said, then elbowed Michael in the ribs.

Michael bent over, clutching his side, and grimaced. “All right, all right.”

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“You make it so easy, man.”

“Really, Michael,” Rosie said as she set a cover over a pan of sizzling bacon, “don’t just leave her standing in the doorway.” She smiled at Fiona over her shoulder. “Come on in, hon. No need to be shy.”

Fiona took a few steps into the room, and Michael awkwardly wound their hands together. “Uh, well, guys, this is Fiona Ng. Fiona, this is my family.”

“Who have no names, apparently,” Grace said with a kind smile.

“I know all your names, actually.”

“Yeah, she made me quiz her on the way here.”

Heat flooded Fiona’s face. “You weren’t supposed to tell them that part.”

Michael quickly called out the names of his siblings, and one by one, they waved, except for Jessie, who didn’t even bother looking up from her phone. She sat with her thick, curly orange hair crowding her face, her rail-thin body swallowed by a sweatshirt three sizes too big for her, and grunted in acknowledgment. Only when the others threw napkins at her did she put her phone down long enough to say, “Michael’s got a girlfriend. Cool. What do you want, a trophy?”

“And, of course, you’ve already met—”

The bang of body to table echoed through the room as Lizzie suddenly slid into the kitchen on her socked feet. “Son of a—”

“Lizzie,” Michael said.

Lizzie rubbed her side. “What *about* Lizzie?”

“I was just saying you and Fiona have already met.”

“Oh yeah.” Lizzie squeezed past Charlie to snatch a piece of bacon from a paper-towel-covered plate on the counter. She crunched it down quickly while dodging her mother’s swatting towel. “Sorry again about tackling you in bed this morning.”

Jessie’s eyebrows shot up over her phone. “Whoa.”

At the same time, Rosie exclaimed, “Elizabeth Dawn, you did *what?*!”

“Relax, people,” Lizzie said. “It’s not what it sounds like.”

“It’s actually exactly what it sounds like,” Fiona said, and Lizzie bit her lip to fight a smile. The sight made Fiona’s face hot again. She ignored the feeling and turned toward Michael, releasing his hand to lay hers, instead, on his upper arm. It wasn’t exactly intimate, but Fiona figured it looked

endearing enough. “Apparently, Michael and I make similar-looking bed lumps.”

Rosie huffed out a laugh. “Elizabeth, I swear.” She thrust a basket of silverware toward her daughter. “Go set the table up.” A stack of empty plates went to Brian next. “Come on, now, all of you. Time to eat.”

“Where’s Dad?” Michael asked as he took a plate piled high with bulging, grease-speckled sausage links from his mother.

“Oh, he ran down the road to pick up Grandma, but you know it takes her a while to get up and out since her hip surgery.” Rosie handed the fried potatoes to Fiona and patted her shoulder. The act made Fiona smile. She hated all the awkward hovering that usually accompanied the experience of not knowing anyone. Thankfully, Michael’s family wasn’t the type to let anyone linger in that space for too long. They were the kind to pull you in and make you one of them. It felt almost familiar, as if Fiona had been a part of their family for years.



A heavy, handcrafted oak table occupied the center of the formal dining room and ran nearly its entire length to accommodate the McElroy clan. Seats were squashed together with barely enough room for elbows, and the chattering began before a single one was filled. Fiona followed Michael in with the last of the breakfast dishes and took the seat beside him. She was surprised when Lizzie plopped down next to her, close enough that their arms touched and Fiona could smell the lingering scent of conditioner in Lizzie’s hair. Apricots.

“Hey.” She snatched a yeast roll from a basket and took a huge bite, chewed once, then stored the bread in her cheek so that she looked like a redheaded chipmunk. “Mind if I sit here?”

Fiona shook her head. “It’s your house.”

“Correction.” She swallowed the bite of roll and choked. “*Used* to be my house.” The instant the words were out, she began to gag and cough.

“For God’s sake, Elizabeth!” Rosie reached over and whacked Lizzie’s back hard enough for the thud to echo around the dining room. “If you’d take the time to actually chew your food before swallowing it, you wouldn’t risk killing yourself every time we have a meal. Put your arms up.”

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Lizzie threw her arms up over her head as Rosie whacked her on the back again. When the coughing fit passed, Lizzie took a drink of orange juice, then stuffed another massive bite of roll into her mouth. “Can’t help it, Mom,” she said around the bite, ducking under Rosie’s stern glare. “It’s too good, and I’m a starving artist, remember?”

“Your baby-fat cheeks say otherwise,” Brian teased.

Lizzie curled her top lip at him. “That’s the *roll*, jackass!”

“Language, please.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mom. *He* started it.”

“He’s mean as a striped-tail bug, I know, but there’s no help for it. He’s the Devil’s child, that one.”

Brian snorted and bit off the end of a fat sausage link. His fingers were already coated in grease. “Ah Mom, you’re going by The Devil now? It’s so formal.”

“She doesn’t claim you, Beelzebub.” Lizzie held her fingers up in a cross formation and hissed at him. “No one does.”

Fiona couldn’t hold her laugh in any longer. Her shoulders shook as she turned to Michael. “Is it always like this?”

“Unfailingly.”

“What did your mom say? Mean as a what kind of bug?”

“Oh, the rare striped-tail bug, hailing from the seventh circle of Hell. You haven’t heard of it?” He laughed. “The imaginary kind, Fi.” He then dropped a couple spoonfuls of scrambled eggs onto his plate. “You want eggs?”

“Of course she does, honey.” Rosie passed a heavy bowl of thick white gravy to Charlie. “She’s thin as a pole. We need to fatten you up a bit, Fiona. Little meat on your bones is good for you.”

“Oh, I’ve always been small,” Fiona said. “It kind of runs in my family.”

“Well, this one’s that way, too.” Rosie pointed her fork at Jessie. “Though for the life of me, I don’t know how. She’s eaten enough for four since she hit puberty. Her daddy’s downright convinced she’s got a hollow leg.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being thin, Mom,” Michael said.

“I know that, silly. I just think a woman ought to have a bit of cushion on her. Keeps her warm.”



“Just in case you’re planning on hibernating and living off your stored fat anytime soon,” Sophie said, causing an uproar of laughter around the table. “Right, Mom?”

“Oh hush, you,” Rosie said, though she wore a wide smile of her own. She waved a hand at Jessie impatiently. “Lizzie, hon, pass down that plate of potatoes, will you?”

“I will if you get my name, right,” Jessie said as she held the plate of fried potatoes hostage.

Rosie closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. “Jessie. Good grief. You knew what I meant.”

“Sure, *Dad*.”

“Hush, you rotten egg.” Rosie picked up her napkin and swatted at her youngest. Jessie, however, was out of her reach, so she only managed to hit the table. “Hand me the damned plate already.”

“Language,” Lizzie chirped at her, only to receive an identical napkin swat a second later. This one successfully nailed its target.

Brian shoved a huge forkful of syrup-laden pancake into his mouth. “Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I fully plan on hibernating for at least an hour after this breakfast.”

“Guess that would explain the ten sausage links you’ve eaten in the time it’s taken the rest of us to pass the plates around,” Jessie said from Michael’s other side. She sipped orange juice through a bendy straw and casually clapped Grace’s hand in a quick high five.

Brian’s response was lost to Fiona as a nudging elbow distracted her. She turned toward an insistent Lizzie and found two interested eyes pinned on her, one blue and one green. “So,” Lizzie said, “how are you liking your first McElroy family meal?”

But Fiona had just taken her first bite of food, a mouthful of gravy-covered biscuits, and Lizzie’s words seemed like a distant memory as she closed her eyes and moaned. She opened them again when the entire room went quiet. The moment she did, however, every single person at the table burst into a fit of snickering.

“It’s the gravy,” Michael said. “Every time, without fail.”

“This is not gravy.” Fiona greedily licked her lips. “This is the nectar of the gods.”

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Rosie beamed and nudged the gravy bowl, which had made its way around to her again, back toward Michael. “Give her some more, hon.”

“What’s in this?”

“Oh, little of this, little of that.” Rosie winked at her. “Recipe’s been in my family for generations.”

The warm press of a leg against hers distracted Fiona. She leaned back just enough to cast a subtle glance under the table. Lizzie’s leg rubbed slowly up and down against hers, though deliberately or by accident, she didn’t know. She looked up at Lizzie but was greeted with an eyeful of frizzy hair. Lizzie was leaning over the table, focused on Jessie, the two of them trading barbs about their musical tastes across the space Michael and Fiona both occupied. It was as if neither were there at all. No lusty glances sent Fiona’s way. No cute little lip-nibbling as if to say, “Oops. Is *my* leg brushing *your* leg? Gee, how awful.” There wasn’t a wink in sight. No way had it been intentional.

The voice in Fiona’s head scolded her. *Of course it wasn’t intentional. That girl doesn’t want you, Fiona. This is an innocent family breakfast, to which you were kindly invited by the best friend you’re supposed to be helplessly in love with, remember?*

“Get it together,” Fiona muttered under her breath.

“Hm? You say something, babe?”

Fiona tried not to frown as she turned toward Michael. *Babe? Really?* Once she saw his strained expression, however, her effort to keep from frowning became one to keep from laughing. “No, just, um, a song stuck in my head or whatever,” she said. “Can’t stop singing it. You know how it is. Right, *babe?*”

They stared one another down, barely suppressed laughter pulling at their lips. When Fiona snorted before she could stop herself, however, neither could restrain themselves any longer. They roared in each other’s faces, shoulders shaking and eyes clenched closed. Fiona tossed her head back. Her mouth hung open, but no sound escaped behind the tiny grunts of someone catching their breath every few seconds.

“Stop,” Michael said, between fits of his own. “Stop. You know I can’t handle the quiet laugh. Stop it.”

Fiona forced in a deep breath and blew it out slow. “Because your donkey laugh is so much better?”

“I can’t *breathe*,” he defended himself. “Stop it.”

“You telling me to stop makes it ten times harder to stop.” Fiona wheezed between the words. The laughter lost any semblance of purpose. They didn’t even know why they were laughing anymore, but they couldn’t make themselves quit. “Okay. Okay. Okay. We’re stopping now.”

She drew in a huge breath and held it. He did the same. “Don’t look at me,” she said, though she didn’t quite say it at all. It was more what she *meant* to say, because her lips were rolled under and pinched closed, so the best she could do was hum the words and hope he understood. Of course, they’d been in this predicament enough times that he did, and he quickly turned away.

Fiona clapped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. She counted to ten in her head, the last of the laughter’s tremors vibrating their way out of her shoulders. When she felt calm enough, she dropped her hand and let out her breath. She heard Michael do the same and glanced over. He was looking at her again, grinning.

“You’re so annoying,” she said, to which Michael winked and stabbed one of her gravy-laden biscuits with his knife. “Hey!” He popped half the thing into his mouth before she could stop him, the other half falling haphazardly onto his plate, and pumped his fist victoriously as he chewed it down.

It was only then that Fiona became aware of the complete absence of sound. Michael noticed, too, given the way his fast, messy chewing quickly ended in a painful gulp. They looked around the table at the now silent family, then at each other.

“Well, that was probably the most sickeningly cute thing I’ve ever seen you do, Mike,” Grace said.

Michael suddenly seemed rather captivated by the table’s wood grain. He pursed his lips and dragged his finger over one dark section. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please.” Charlie scrunched his face up and let out an obnoxious laugh, hee-hawing like a donkey with every breath. Beside him, Sophie threw her head back, mouth open, and pretended to laugh. Her shoulders shook so intensely, she appeared to be seizing. They pushed at each other’s arms as they did so, and Charlie said, “Stop it. No, stop. I can’t handle your adorable silent laugh!”

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“No, you stop.” Sophie pushed his shoulder. “You know I can’t withstand your donkey sounds. They’re too ridiculous and cute!”

“Stop.”

“No, you stop.”

“No, *you* st—”

“Okay!” Michael chucked a yeast roll across the table. It smacked into Charlie’s shoulder and nearly rolled to the floor, caught by Brian in the nick of time. “We get it. That was gross.”

Grace agreed with a nod. “Totally gross.”

“Gross,” Lizzie chimed and popped the last bit of a scrambled egg into her mouth.

“Grossest thing I’ve ever seen,” Brian said. “Right, Jess?”

“Huh?” Jessie’s head popped up from where she was subtly checking her phone under the table. “What? Oh, yeah, totally threw up in my mouth. Gag.”

The rapid thudding sound of Rosie’s fork knocking against the table drew everyone’s attention. “Oh hush, all of you,” she said. “Jessie Lynn, off your phone right now. Don’t make me tell you again. And the rest of you, stop teasing your brother and Fiona. They can’t help that they’re in love.”

“Whoa, Mom.” Michael shook his head, cheeks pinking up as fast as it took him to say the words. “Let’s not get crazy, okay? We’ve, uh, we’ve only been together a little while. Right, Fi?”

“Right. Yeah. Early stages, Mrs. McElroy. I mean, Rosie. But we’ll see where it goes.”

“Well, I just think you two are adorable together,” she said after a sip from her coffee mug. A smudge of peach-colored lipstick remained on the rim when she returned it to the table. “Tell us more. How’d you two meet? When did you get together?” She smiled at Michael. “I’ve been trying to convince this one to get himself a nice girlfriend for years now, and all the other kids have brought someone home to meet us at one point or another, though we like to pretend Jessie never did, given how all that mess turned out.”

“You said we’d never talk about it again, Mom,” Jessie snapped.

“I’m not talking about it.” Rosie sipped her coffee. “Then there’s Lizzie, of course. She’s never brought a boyfriend home, not even in high school, but then she’s always been a bit of a homebody. Always had her nose stuck in

her books in school, though where all that ambition went after graduation, you've got me."

"Gee, thanks, Mom." Lizzie stuck her tongue out and made a sound similar to that of a goat. It didn't make the slightest bit of sense to Fiona, but she laughed anyway.

Charlie propped his youngest, Madison, up on his knee and took a thick cloth napkin to her gravy-covered mouth. "So, what's the story, Mike?" Madison squirmed under his cleaning hand, but he kept a firm grip on her. "Sit still, Maddi. It'll be over faster if you just let me do it."

"Uh, well, we met at school sophomore year, and I guess we just hit it off."

"Ah, college hookups," Lizzie said with a dreamy look in her eye.

"Excuse me, Miss?" Rosie leaned across the table to poke her daughter. "Do you have a beau you've been hiding from us, too?"

Lizzie perked up as if someone had just jabbed her in the back with a cattle prod. Her spine went rigid, and her eyes bugged like those of a deer caught in headlights. Fiona couldn't tell if it was a look of fear, guilt, or something else. Maybe Lizzie just didn't like talking about her private life and relationships. Or maybe she was hiding something. Either way, Fiona found herself leaning toward her, as if she could possibly miss a thing from less than two feet away. She was painfully curious and didn't want to miss whatever was about to pop out of Lizzie's mouth.

"Ew, Mom. Stop." Jessie grimaced as she chewed the remainder of her biscuit, sounding as if the taste had suddenly gone bitter.

"What?"

"Don't say 'beau.'"

Lizzie's frozen spine thawed, and she relaxed as the new topic took hold—quite clearly saved by her sister's undying disapproval of, well, *everything*.

"Why not?"

"Because it's gross and old-fashioned. You might as well call yourself dad's 'little lady' or whatever." Jessie vibrated with a full-body shudder. "I gave myself chills just saying that. Ew."

"Anyway," Michael said, "where was I before I was so *rudely* interrupted?"

"You and Fiona met in college." Lizzie leaned back and stretched her arms up over her head. Her plate was scraped clean, the yolk-covered fork

lying in its center like a bloody sword discarded on a battlefield. She'd faced a giant made of food and slayed it with fervor. "And she took pity on you because you're a sad little ginger who's been in college for, like, seventeen years now and still haven't gotten a degree. Am I warm?"

Fiona snickered. "Eh, he's not so little."

"It's true. He's gargantuan."

"Okay, first off," Michael said, "I didn't even start college until I was twenty-four, and then, you know, it takes time to figure out what you want to do. So, shut it. And second, I can't help that I'm tall. Besides, you're one to talk, Liz. You might only come up to my belly-button, but you're plenty wide."

"Damn right, I am," Lizzie said, "and every last bit of me is perfection."

"That's right," Rosie said with a chuckle. "All my girls are perfect just the way they are." Brian cleared his throat pointedly, and Rosie gave him a look. "All my boys are, too, you ornery thing." She turned her focus back to Fiona. "So, where did you and Michael meet exactly? Did you have a class together?"

Fiona wiped her mouth, having finished her last bite. She was so full, she was in physical pain, but she did her best not to show it. "Yeah. Yes, we had Calculus together, actually." She glanced at Michael. Maybe they should have come up with some special sort of story to tell about an awkward meet-cute kicking off their soon-to-be epic love story. Then again, it wasn't like the truth proved she wasn't his girlfriend. Plenty of people met their significant others in college. Besides, Michael was smiling as if he didn't mind, and it was too late to backtrack now anyway.

"Oh, are you a math major, too?"

"No, I'm actually working toward becoming a nurse practitioner. It's just a long road, and I've had a few light semesters along the way. Michael and I actually bonded over the fact that we were the oldest people in that class. Everyone else was, like, nineteen."

"Well," Rosie said, "I always say it doesn't matter when you start, just that you do."

"What if I start drinking?" Brian asked.

Beside him, Grace snorted. "A little late for what-ifs on that front, little brother. Didn't you start when we were, what, sixteen?"

“Stop calling me ‘little brother.’ You’re literally three minutes older than me.”

“And every second of those three minutes counts.”

“It’ll count when you *die* three minutes before me, too.”

“Yeah, three minutes of having Heaven all to myself before my ignorant twin brother arrives.”

“Statistically speaking,” Fiona said and pointed at Brian, “you’re more likely to die first.”

Brian balked. “What statistics? That say what? Girl twins live longer than guy ones?”

“That women live longer than men. So, yes, I guess that would probably apply to twins as well.”

“How much longer?”

“Around three years on average, I think.”

“Listen, Mike,” Brian said, “your girlfriend, here, is really bringing me down with her so-called ‘statistics.’”

“She’s a medical student, idiot.”

“So?”

“So, I’m guessing she’s studied a lot more statistics than you with your general-studies major that you never actually completed since you dropped out.”

“Hey! General studies means I studied a lot of things, in general, and I *had* to drop out to take over the stores with Charlie.”

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter who’s studied what statistics,” Fiona said. “You can verify what I said yourself. Google is your friend.”

Brian narrowed his eyes at her, then pulled his phone from his pocket. “Mom, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to break the no-phones rule for a second.”

“No, you don’t. Put that away.”

“Mom, it’s a matter of life or death, literally.”

“Well, you’re not going to die right now, son,” Rosie said. “You can look up your expected lifespan after breakfast.”

“It’s already after breakfast.” He stuffed one last huge piece of biscuit in his mouth and held up his hands. His voice muffled around the bite. “I’m done. See?”

“Uh-huh. Swallow first.”

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As if on command, Brian immediately swallowed down his mouthful of biscuit. He winced as if it hurt, then choked. His eyes watered as he dissolved into a fit of coughing, as the rest of the table laughed and Rosie rolled her eyes.

“Grace, clap him on the back,” she said, just as Charlie Sr. shuffled into the dining room from the kitchen. The tip of his nose beamed as red as Rudolph’s, beat from the cold. A few strands of his gray hair were specked with fresh snow that hadn’t yet melted. He frowned at Brian.

“What’d I miss?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Rosie said. “Brian’s concerned about dying.”

“Huh,” he said, then shrugged. “Well, does seem like he’s well on his way, don’t it?” He kissed the top of Rosie’s head and took a biscuit off her plate. “Arms in the air, son.” He tore a bite off the biscuit and chewed it with his mouth open. “Pass me some of that gravy, will you, hon?”



## Chapter 3

GRANDMA SOPHIA WAS EVERYTHING FIONA imagined she would be: older than dirt, adorable, and lacking entirely in the filter department. Her thick red hair was peppered with gray, and she had the same dense cluster of freckles under her right eye as Brian, magnified by one thick lens of her oversized square glasses. Her festive red Christmas sweater, featuring a jovial Mrs. Claus, clashed with the royal-purple cotton slacks she wore and the gold oxford shoes adorning her tiny feet. To top off the look, an unlit Virginia Slim cigarette sat poised like a toothpick between her lips. It bounced as she spoke but never once fell. She hobbled into the family sitting room at an angle, leaning on a cane that looked more like a gnarled limb she'd hacked from a tree than anything store-bought. One by one, she loved on her grandkids, squishing their cheeks and hugging their necks, until she finally reached Michael, who hovered at the edge of the room with his fingers laced through Fiona's.

"Hey Grandma," he said as she approached. He stooped to embrace her with one arm and let her pat his back. "How've you been?"

"Oh, I'm gettin' by, hon." Her grainy, weathered voice was the clear opposite of Fiona's own grandmother's voice, whose speech could be described more as a series of mouse squeaks than as actual words. "Come down here. Let me see your face." She adjusted her glasses, then cupped his cheek. "You're just growin' on up, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He placed his free hand over hers. "Looks that way."

Fiona smiled as she watched them together. She noticed that the more Michael was around his family, the more he was starting to sound like the fresh-faced country boy she'd met years earlier. Her smile fell, however,

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when Sophia's blue eyes suddenly landed on her. They dropped briefly to her hand, where it was entangled with Michael's, then crawled back up again.

"Oh, Grandma," Michael said, "this is Fiona Ng. She's my girlfriend."

Sophia's eyes narrowed a moment, then her wrinkled face split into a smile. Fiona couldn't tell if it was genuine or manufactured. Old people were always either the best liars or the worst. They'd had decades to practice their poker faces or decades to stop caring if people knew how they truly felt or not. It felt a little like Russian roulette; you never quite knew what was hidden in the chamber—disapproval or joy, loathing or acceptance. Fiona sincerely hoped that whatever was lurking behind Grandma Sophia's smile was more the latter.

"Finally got tired of us asking, huh?" Sophie waved Fiona down to her level and held out her hand. It was smooth and soft to the touch. Her bright-blue veins bulged and sprawled like spider legs under her thin, pale skin, but her handshake was firm. "Well, she's a pretty one, ain't she?"

"Thank you," Fiona said, breathing her in. The scent of stale cigarettes mingled with the overwhelming odor of menthol. She imagined Michael's father helping her rub Bengay on her joints right before heading over. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mrs. McElroy."

Sophia chuckled. "And such good English, too."

"Oh, Christ." Lizzie scoffed from where she stood leaning against the opposite wall. Fiona realized, in that moment, that everyone in the room was watching them. "Really, Grandma? You couldn't just say 'Nice to meet you, too?'"

"What?" Sophia wobbled around to look at Lizzie, keeping hold of Fiona's hand in the process. "It was a compliment."

"Mom," Charlie Sr. said and shook his head at her.

"Oh, don't 'Mom' me." She waved a dismissive hand at him. "You kids are so sensitive these days. Can't even give my own grandson's girlfriend a kind word."

Fiona didn't want the situation to spiral, so she said, "Actually, Mrs. McElroy, English is my first language."

"Well, is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Oh, enough with this *ma’am* nonsense.” She patted Fiona’s hand. “Call me Sophia.”

“All right, then, Sophia.”

“I meant no offense, hon,” she said. “Back in my day, all the Chinese was immigrants.”

“Grandma!” Lizzie’s outcry nearly brought a wave of laughter up Fiona’s throat and out. The sheer discomfort of the moment stirred in her belly, and Fiona’s response to being uncomfortable had always been to laugh. She’d never been able to attend funerals because of it. She always just sent flowers or a card instead.

“What?” Sophia snapped at her granddaughter again. “What’d I do now?”

“Not all Asian people are Chinese,” Lizzie said. “You shouldn’t just assume where someone’s from based on how they look.”

“Well, excuse me, Elizabeth. I didn’t realize Chinese was an insult now.”

“I actually am Chinese,” Fiona said, still awkwardly holding Sophia’s hand, “but only part.” She didn’t have the slightest clue why she felt the need to elaborate or explain, but the words barreled out anyway. “My dad’s Chinese. My mom is Malaysian. They both grew up in Singapore, though.”

“Oh, is that right?” Sophia’s eyes glazed.

Fiona still felt the need to clarify. “I was born in Los Angeles,” she said. “I lived there all my life until I moved to St. Louis for college.”

“Well, that’s nice, isn’t it?” Sophia patted Fiona’s hand, then wandered off toward the kitchen, leaning on her cane. “Rosie, is there any bacon left, hon?”

As she shuffled away, Rosie gave Fiona a smile that made her look constipated and uncomfortable and followed after. Fiona turned toward Michael and raised a brow. She could sense every eye in the room on her, stares boring into the side of her face. Her stomach felt like it was trying to fold itself in half.

Michael looped an arm around her and pulled her into his side. “Hey, at least she didn’t mention any Chinese restaurants, right?”

“Oh yeah, because what she *did* say was so much better.” Lizzie appeared at Fiona’s other side. “Sorry about her. *Her* grandparents emigrated here and pretty much spoke only Scottish Gaelic, but for some reason, she still thinks she’s more American than anyone with a skin tone two shades darker

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than hers.” She looked down at the pale skin of her own arm and laughed. “Which includes just about everyone outside this family.”

When Lizzie looked up again, her different-colored eyes caught Fiona and held her. She offered up an easy smile that made Fiona suddenly wish Michael’s arm wasn’t around her. It became the elephant in the room, a weight knocking her down a size or two as she tried to decipher the weird energy bouncing between Lizzie and her and figure out why she felt so comforted by her presence.

“I guess that’s just the South for you,” Michael said. “It pretty much stays the same while the rest of the country evolves.”

“That’s *most* old white Americans, actually,” Fiona said, “no matter where they’re from. Missouri isn’t any better, and you know it.”

“True,” Lizzie said. “She’ll probably die before she changes her views.”

“Who’s dying?” Charlie Sr. had made his way over, shoulders hunched up awkwardly toward his ears, the same constipated expression on his face that Rosie had worn. Fiona had seen that look so many times in her life. It was nearly as uncomfortable as the conversations that always inspired it.

Jessie, who passed by them toward the foyer, said, “Everyone this afternoon.”

“You wish,” Brian called after her from the living-room couch.

“Oh, I don’t have to wish.” She paused at the intersection of the two rooms. “It’s a scientific certainty, Brian. You need to come to terms with that. In fact, you all do.” She pointed at her own eyes then at everyone else in the room. “Prepare yourselves.”

Fiona looked up at Michael. “What are we preparing ourselves for, exactly?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Charlie Sr. chuckled at his daughter. “That’s a lot of big talk, Jess.”

“I can back it up,” she said, then disappeared into the foyer.

Once she was gone, Charlie Sr. focused on Michael and Fiona. He glanced between them, tucked his hands into his jean pockets, and shrugged. “Listen, hon,” he said to Fiona, “I just want to apologize for my mom. She means well. It’s just, she’s from a different time, you know.”

The familiar compulsion to comfort him hit Fiona like a tidal wave. She felt obliged to tell him it was all right, to tell him that he didn’t need

to apologize. She'd struggled with that compulsion for as long as she could remember. It sprung up like a weed in every similar situation she'd ever found herself in. She was driven to assuage guilt she wasn't responsible for rather than stand up for herself, rather than comfort herself, rather than address the issues of offering an excuse dressed up as an apology. It should've been easy, as easy as saying, "Hey, so that's not the best way to go about this. Try this instead." But it wasn't. It wasn't easy, and it never had been, because no one liked to hear that they were in the wrong, that they'd done something offensive, that they needed to change. It invited controversy and, as Fiona had learned in the past, opened her up to worse issues than the ones she'd started out with.

"That's really not an excuse, Dad," Lizzie said, stepping up to the bat before Fiona could even work out what she wanted to say. Michael, on the other hand, only shuffled in place, quiet and apparently content to let the issue die unaddressed. "We all grow up in different times. That doesn't mean we can't learn to adapt or change the way we look at things. People do it all the time."

"Well, I know that." Charlie Sr.'s shoulders hunched even higher toward his ears so that his neck rapidly began to disappear under the rising collar of his flannel button-up. "But you just got to acknowledge that these things take time, you know? She didn't grow up the same way all you kids did."

"We grew up right here, in friggin' rural Arkansas, with the same outdated ideas as everyone else who grows up here. You think we had anything but white Christian kids at our school?"

"Well, I'm not going to argue with you about it, Lizzie, so..."

"I'm not trying to argue," Lizzie said. "I'm just saying that if she can learn to use the iPad you and Mom got her, she can learn not to be a racist. That's not an argument, Dad. It's a fact."

"Oh my God, Lizzie, we get it," Brian groaned from the couch. "You live in L.A, so now you're super 'woke' or whatever. What do you want? A pat on the back? Let it go already."

"That's exactly the attitude that keeps things the way they are, though," Lizzie said, and the room went silent, so silent that the air seemed to vibrate. It pulsed in and out around Fiona as if the walls were trying to decide whether to close in on her or not. Her throat tightened, making it hard to breathe. The longer she stood in the feeling, the more desperate she became

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to escape it. The longer Michael stood beside her, silent in the middle of it, the more upset she became.

She barely managed another two minutes before she shrugged Michael's arm off her shoulders and said, "I think I'm just going to run upstairs for a bit."

"Hey," Michael said, stepping after her. "You don't have to go anywhere."

"No, it's fine." She shook her head and backed toward the foyer. "I just remembered I told my mom I'd call her when we got here, and I never did. So, I should. I'm going to go do that now."

As she turned to go, Lizzie reached for her. Their hands brushed, then caught. Fiona squeezed Lizzie's fingers as hard as she could manage in the moment, her own silent way of thanking her for caring enough to occupy the uncomfortable space so few others, even Fiona's own best friend, were willing to occupy.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm fine." She shook her head again. It felt like the movement of a robot trained how to respond. She didn't care. All she wanted was to get out of that room before the space got smaller, before the conversation went deeper, or totally superficial, which might be even worse, and before she grew so uncomfortable that she wouldn't be able to choke back the awkward giggles she was prone to. Those giggles had, on more than one occasion, been mistaken as acceptance or forgiveness. She was no longer willing to offer them up in situations where neither were warranted.

As she left the room, crossing through the foyer to the stairs that would lead to her freedom, she heard the conversation carry on without her. She paused briefly to listen.

"You see what you done now, Lizzie?" Charlie Sr. said. "You ran her off."

"I ran her off?"

"Now she's going to think the whole family's a bunch of racists, thanks to you," Brian said. "Good going, Liz."

"Well, maybe she wouldn't think that if y'all wouldn't just let Grandma say stuff like that and not even call her out on it," Lizzie said. "Everybody just makes excuses for her because she's old."

Brian laughed. “Jesus, Lizzie. It’s not like she spit on her or something. Every time you come back now, you’ve got some new issue you think you need to educate us all on. You’re not better than us just because you voted for Hillary and bought a Black Lives Matter T-shirt. Just drop it already and get over yourself.”

“All I’m saying is if the girl was uncomfortable, she could’ve just said so,” Charlie Sr. said.

“Or maybe,” Lizzie said, “we could try to be more self-aware, instead of expecting everyone else to make allowances for us and tell us when we’re being assholes.”

“Now, Elizabeth, I won’t be talked to like—”

Fiona didn’t stick around to hear the rest. She could predict well enough where it was headed, a circular battle in which Lizzie would end up repeating herself a dozen times to dismissive remarks and *well, but,* and *so,* arguments as thick as brick walls. Fiona had found herself in the same cycle countless times. This one wasn’t hers to endure. The McElroy family could run the circuit on their own, in their own time, in their own way. She could only hope it eventually got them somewhere and that, along the way, Michael might join Lizzie in trying to steer them out of the loop and onto a path forward.

She ran up the stairs and down the hall to the room designated as her weekend home and collapsed on the bed. She’d never actually told her mother that she would call, but in that moment, she found that there was nothing in the world she’d rather do more. Her mother’s voice, clear as day in her mind, was exactly what she needed to hear.



On the bed, limbs spread wide, Fiona stared at the ceiling. Classical music sung quietly from her phone, which lay beside her head. She’d never much cared for music without lyrics until she’d dated her last girlfriend, a music-history major and Taylor Swift-bashing enthusiast. It had only lasted a couple of months, but the short-lived relationship had left its mark. Fiona had since significantly reduced her daily allowance of repeats on Swift’s “Bad Blood” and added five different classical stations to her Pandora playlists.

It soothed in a way that music with lyrics couldn’t. She would lie back and let herself be carried off into the notes until it felt as if she was floating,

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drifting, dissolving into nothingness. Classical music had become a sort of meditation for her, a way for her to clear her head and release all the tension trapped in her body. Michael, who rarely missed Friday nights' Vinyasa sessions in Forest Park with Yogini Lauren, had tried more than once to convince Fiona that yoga achieved the same result and was "better for your body." But after he'd successfully talked her into one session, she'd refused to go back for another, and Michael had never really forgiven her for saying that drinking cheap wine and sticking their asses in the air was more ridiculous than relaxing.

"I don't recognize this one."

Fiona sighed at the sound of Michael's voice and kept her eyes on the ceiling. "Did you become a classical-music aficionado on the long walk up the stairs?"

"Not a chance." He laughed. "Guess I've just gotten used to the things you usually play."

"It's Thomas Bergersen."

"Oh. What happened to Beethoven?"

"If I recall, you said my phone was going to mysteriously find its way into the garbage disposal if I played *The Moonlight Sonata* one more time."

"It's so depressing."

"So is your face."

"Ouch." The bed dipped with Michael's weight as he sat on the edge. "Guess I don't need to ask if you're mad at me." He gently pushed her leg aside and raised her arm long enough to position himself under it. He lay down beside her, let her arm rest across his chest, and slung one leg over hers. "I'm sorry Lizzie made things uncomfortable."

They stared at the ceiling together, at ease with one another's warmth and touch. Fiona fingered the edge of Michael's shirt sleeve, rubbing the material between index and thumb.

"Is that what you think happened?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Completely."

"Oh."

The music filled up the space between their words, and Fiona pondered how she should go about explaining how she felt. It had always been simple enough with Michael. Their relationship had never demanded she walk



on eggshells. She could blurt out her feelings, no filter, no thought, and he would navigate his way through them with ease. If he was confused, he would ask her to clarify. If he was hurt, he would tell her, and if he didn't agree, he'd never had any trouble explaining why. That was part of the wonder of who they'd become together over the years of their friendship—they'd learned to ride each other's waves with trust. There was no need for walls between them, no need for defensiveness or word-mincing. At the end of the day, no matter what they said to one another, there was genuine love and respect between them, and it kept their relationship steady, healthy, and honest.

This time, however, she was unsure of how to go about it. She didn't want to babble about how she felt. She wanted to be clear and concise. She wanted him to understand without her having to elaborate or talk herself in circles, because no matter how she chose to address it, it was going to be uncomfortable. The less time she had to occupy that discomfort, the better. She had had enough for one day already.

Michael said nothing, content to let her marinate however long she needed. Instead, he lay still beside her, his thumb slowly rubbing back and forth along the underside of her arm. The soft touch soothed her. Fiona closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the sensation of touch, the rise and fall of the music, and the reassuring familiarity of being close to Michael, close to someone who loved her.

"Lizzie didn't make things uncomfortable," she said after some time. "Things were already uncomfortable. They may not have been for *you*, because you weren't the one having racially charged assumptions made about you, but they were for me. Unfortunately, that's something *I'm* used to. I don't like it, and yeah, it makes my skin crawl, but it's something I've had to learn to navigate."

She took a deep breath and released it in another long sigh. "What I'm not so used to is someone stepping in to challenge those assumptions the way your sister did. It made you guys uncomfortable when she did that because, up until that point, you were all content to just stand there and let your grandma say what she wanted to say and pretend like it wasn't a problem, or make excuses for her and expect me to smile and laugh it off so none of you would have to feel guilty about it."

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Michael continued to keep quiet, though she could see in her peripheral vision that he had turned to look at her. She didn't want to look back, because she was afraid to see his discomfort. She didn't want it to sway her or shake her or make her feel obligated to comfort him. She wanted to be firm and resolute, and that was hard to do when staring at a scorned puppy-dog face. But he was also her favorite person, and she wanted to comfort him, even when she *didn't* want to. So, she rolled onto her side and looked at him anyway.

The frown tugging his features down appeared more contemplative than upset. Fiona pressed the pad of her thumb between his eyebrows and pulled the skin upward.

"You promised you would put an end to it if your grandma said anything shitty." His skin turned whiter around the edges of her thumb as she slid it down his nose and over to one corner of his mouth. Her eyes burned and watered as she pulled that side of his frown upward. "You didn't."

He wormed his way closer, laying one large hand over the top of Fiona's where it now rested on his cheek. "I should've done what Lizzie did," he whispered, the words nearly lost beneath a sudden swell in the music enveloping the both of them.

"Yeah." She pinched his cheek then flipped over and put her back to him. "You should have." He lay silently behind her, nothing touching her but the warmth emanating off his long body. The morning winter sun, shining in through the sheer window curtains, didn't offer the same comfort. The contrast of her cool chest and arms and warm back made her shiver, so she inched back a bit. "Hold me."

He did. His pale, freckled arm, decorated with white-blond downy hair, circled her torso and slid her back against him. Warm breath puffed against the back of her neck as he rested his forehead against her loosened braid.

"Michael?"

"Yeah?"

"Do better."

"I will."

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# THE WRONG McELROY

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