



Shaya Crabtree



# Chapter 1

It was perfect. Sort of.

Lara double, then triple checked her angles. Her webcam rested precariously atop the coffee table on a stack of knitting books that were due back at the library a week ago. The camera lens framed her couch, and Lara centered herself in the shot, sitting on the ravine between the cushions like the middle child in the backseat of a car.

The arms of the loveseat were decorated with scraps of unfinished work she couldn't bring herself to complete. Sleeves of sweaters overlapped with six-inch scarves, and the colors melted into a rainbow that looked aesthetically pleasing but not too organized. If Lara couldn't be proud of her work, she could at least be proud of her set design. On screen it looked like she had so much creativity she was forced to spread her energy across several projects, and she spent time nudging each piece into frame to make herself look busy.

The neck of a sweater fell to the ground, and Lara extricated it from the claws of her cat. "Rocket, not right now."

She tossed a fresh ball of yarn to the other side of the living room for him to play with out of frame, then checked her watch. Still five minutes to go.

To be safe, Lara checked her email one more time. She scrolled through the dozens of messages Roger Feldman had sent, searching for the most recent. Yes, the time was correct. Less than three minutes now.

Lara had never met Roger Feldman, but she knew of him. Everyone did. *The Trend Bender* was the premier online gossip mag of the distasteful and easily amused drama queens of the world. A good review of Festive Feline Fashion could put Lara in the next tax bracket. A bad review, well, Lara didn't want to think about it. She hadn't wanted to risk the interview at first because she hadn't needed it. She was getting press from plenty of other publications. Her business was doing fine. Until her life had gone to shit, her motivation had disappeared, and her orders

became more backed up than a California highway. Now Lara needed this. It was the fresh start she so desperately craved.

The Skype ringtone chimed, and Lara scrambled into position: seated with one leg draped over the other, settled into the couch. It was the most natural position she could design, and when she hit accept on the call, she hoped Roger thought she looked as comfortable as Lara did when she looked at her reflection in the little call window.

Moments later, Roger's face popped up. He was calling with his phone resting below him on his desk, giving Lara a great view of his chin.

"Hi, Lara." He waved. "Can you see me?"

"Yep! I can see you." He was blurry, but it didn't matter what he looked like anyway. Lara wasn't the one writing about him.

"Great. We've got about—" He checked his watch. "Twenty minutes. Let's get started, shall we?"

"Sounds good."

"So tell me about your business."

Lara was caught off guard. This was the infamous Roger Feldman? Readers clung to the words of a man who opened his interviews with questions that a high school yearbook editor would ask? She had spent all morning preparing for this?

"Really?" Lara asked. "That's your question? I've already talked about this in every single interview I've given. Don't you think people know about my business by now?"

Roger swiveled slightly in his chair, clearly taken aback. "I figured you'd be willing to tell the story again," he explained. "It's a good one. Young woman builds a successful business out of her favorite hobby and makes enough money to quit her job. I've read all of your news coverage: *The Star*, *Chronicle Weekly*. I've done my homework, Ms. Spellmeyer. I'm not asking you the basics because I'm ignorant. I'm asking because most business owners I talk to are eager to discuss their work. You're not?"

"I am," Lara said, a bit too quickly. "I mean, I like my work. I love my work." She was stumbling now. Were her words meant to persuade Roger or herself? "I just prefer to talk about more specific details. I hate repeating myself. Everyone knows the general story by now."

"Everyone, huh?" Roger looked smug, and Lara hoped that was just her blurry connection.

"That's not what I meant. Of course not everyone has heard of my business, but I assume most of the readers on your site have. Your numerous emails mentioned

how an interview with me has been much requested.” If he could play the leverage game, so could she.

“That’s true. You’re a hot topic,” he conceded. “At the moment, anyway.” Lara didn’t care for the way he tacked on that addition. “Still,” he continued. “People love a good origin story. How does one build a cat sweater empire out of nothing?”

Lara wasn’t falling for his tricky wording again. She wasn’t a boastful person, and she wasn’t going to start being one now. Instead, she’d be so humble that Roger couldn’t make her out to be egotistical unless he cut nearly all of the interview.

“I wouldn’t call it an empire. I run a website people order cat sweaters through. It’s fun. I’m not a millionaire.”

“That’s it?” Roger asked, mockingly. “‘It’s fun’ is all you have to say?”

“Like I said, I’ve talked about this before. It was a fun hobby for me that accidentally turned into a business. I didn’t expect this. The details are pretty boring.”

“The general details, you mean.”

She just managed to avoid heaving a sigh. “Yes.”

“Well, let’s go into some specifics, then, like you asked.”

Good. Finally some real questions.

“A woman messaged me a few weeks ago, saying that a sweater you sent her caused her cat to have a severe allergic reaction. Would you like to comment on that?”

*Fuck.* This was not what she’d prepared for. Had that woman really contacted Roger?

“I wouldn’t call it severe,” Lara said.

“Are you a vet?”

“What?”

“Are you a veterinarian?” Roger asked.

Lara didn’t appreciate the patronizing. “No, but—”

“So you have no medical authority to categorize the situation?” Roger’s face was so blank, so impersonal. His mouth was hidden behind the hand holding his chin, and his eyes were hidden behind the glare his office lights cast over the lens of his glasses. He didn’t care about the well-being of that cat. He cared about the drama of the situation.

“That specific cat had a long list of medical issues that I wasn’t made aware of,” Lara said firmly. “If the owner had told me that the cat was allergic to wool, I would have made the sweater out of a different material. The issue has been corrected,

and I use hypoallergenic yarn now just to be safe. That cat is fine, by the way. All the sweater did was make him sneeze. I don't think anyone could call that severe."

"Corrected how?" Roger asked.

"I offered to give the owner a refund and send her a new sweater."

"Was the cat allergic to the second sweater?"

"I never sent it," Lara said. "The owner turned down my offer. All she wanted was her money back."

"So she didn't trust your work?"

"Maybe," Lara said, thinking out loud. "I don't know. It wasn't my work that was the problem. The order form on my website specifically asks which materials the customer wants their sweater made out of. If she knew the cat was allergic to wool, she shouldn't have chosen wool."

"So you're blaming the victim for the incident?"

Lara blinked. This was hardly victim blaming. "If a lactose intolerant woman orders a glass of milk, is it really the restaurant's fault if she gets sick?"

Roger shifted slightly. "I have to say, Ms. Spellmeyer, this seems like a touchy subject for you."

It was, clearly, but Lara tried not to let it show too much. She adjusted her hair, making sure she didn't look too frazzled. "I'm sorry. It wasn't the best situation, as you can imagine, and I thought the issue had been buried. I didn't expect you to bring it up."

"What do you do when you're approached with these kinds of questions online?"

"Pardon?"

"You have over one hundred thousand Instagram followers. Surely an Internet celebrity such as yourself must get tough questions like that on a daily basis."

"I don't consider myself an Internet celebrity. People follow me for the cat pics, not for me. I don't post personal stuff. You don't get a lot of hate comments when all you do is post pictures of cats."

"I see," Roger said. He was quiet for a moment. His chin bobbed as he rocked in his chair. "Well, I think that's all for today."

"Oh." Lara glanced at the clock. "Aren't we supposed to have ten more minutes?"

"Well, you know." Roger adjusted his glasses along the slope of his nose. "The extra time is a precaution. Sometimes you get everything you need sooner than you expect."

He was blowing her off. This guy had pestered her for an interview for more than two months and now that he'd finally gotten it, he was cutting it short after

ten minutes of nothing. She knew he was definitely writing the article. He'd told her the date it would come out. So what was he going to base it on? The questions about the allergic cat?

Wait, when had Feldman started pestering her for an interview? She did some quick time calculations in her head.

*Oh shit.*

## Chapter 2

Two days had passed since the *Trend Bender* article was published, and Lara couldn't bring herself to leave the house. Everyone had read it by now, and it wasn't just the people in town that Lara had to worry about. For once, the digital world was worse than the real one. Lying in bed all day wouldn't stop the hateful string of comments from appearing on her social media, but that hadn't stopped Lara from trying. She was tired. The embarrassment and regret barely let her sleep. It was nine in the morning, but she had gotten maybe three hours at best. She'd spent the night tossing and turning, and when she hadn't been doing that, she'd been checking her phone. First, she'd deleted dozens of comments about the article on her Facebook page, then the Twitter messages requesting follow-up interviews from people who had no intention of letting Lara tell her side of the story and every intention of dragging her back under the bus for another daily news cycle.

She buried her head under her pillow, but still her phone buzzed. And buzzed. And buzzed. Frustrated, she re-emerged from her tomb of suffocation to see the same two words written on her screen over and over again. *Cat Killer. Cat Killer. Cat Killer.* Someone had commented that on every one of Lara's Instagram posts from the last month. Dealing with people who had read the article was one thing, but confronting people who had only heard about the article through a warped game of telephone that turned cat allergies into premeditated murder was something Lara wasn't equipped to handle. Then there were trolls who didn't even know who Lara was; they'd just heard about the scandal on Reddit and shown up to gleefully watch her career burn. It was the final straw.

Defeated, she turned off her notifications and went back to sleep, hoping that things would somehow be different by the time she woke up.

They weren't. Her phone woke her up a second time, and what Lara thought was the alarm she'd already snoozed ten times turned out to be a phone call. She accepted without thinking.

“Lara?”

Even though she hadn’t heard it in four years, Lara knew that voice instantly. Once upon a time, she had woken up every morning to that scratchy voice saying her name from the pillow beside her.

“Yeah?”

“It’s Paige Daley.”

“I can hear that,” Lara said. “What do you want, Paige?”

“This morning one of my interns read a story about your business that was published in *The Trend Bender*. *The Daily Page* is going to recount it. I was wondering if you wanted to make any additional comments for the newspaper to run.” Paige’s voice sounded rehearsed, like an automated recording.

“Is this a nightmare?”

“Pardon?”

“I’m still asleep, right? Please don’t tell me that my ex-girlfriend actually just called me for the first time in four years to tell me that her newspaper is going to publish a horrible article about me in a town that already hates me and my entire family.”

“It’s nothing against you,” Paige said. “The article made national news, and we’d be remiss if we didn’t cover such a big story about one of Perry’s own.”

“It’s a gossip column, Paige. I thought you took that job because you were passionate about real local news.”

“I did, Lara. You know that better than anyone. I know we haven’t talked in a while, but I’m still me.” Paige could try to appeal to their history all she wanted, but Lara had decided a long time ago that she and Paige didn’t know each other as well as they’d thought. “Besides,” she continued. “This *is* real local news.”

The sad part was that Paige wasn’t wrong. With a population of only a couple thousand people, Perry was tiny. Lara making a national fool of herself probably was going to be the most interesting thing to happen for at least the next month. It didn’t help that she was a Spellmeyer. Perry loved to hate on the Spellmeyers. A girl has one alcoholic grandfather and suddenly the whole town treats the entire family like Roger Feldman looking for his next career to ruin.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” It was too early for this. Lara hadn’t even had coffee. Somewhere in another room, Rocket was meowing for breakfast. Usually the cat’s whining would get on her nerves, but nothing could annoy Lara more than Paige Daley.

“Do you care to comment?” Paige asked when Lara was silent for too long.

“My comment is, ‘Go fuck yourself.’”

“Mature.”

There were Paige’s true colors. Lara was wondering how long she could keep up the professional facade. Apparently, the answer was forty-five seconds.

“And it was mature of you to call someone whose heart you broke to ask them to help you get ahead in your job and open themselves up to even more public ridicule?”

Paige was silent for the briefest of moments. Lara almost thought she had gotten through to her, but—

“Yes,” she said, too much confidence booming in her voice. It sounded overdone, which was surprising. Lara had never known Paige to be lacking in confidence. She was explaining the situation to herself, not to Lara. “I’m putting aside my personal differences for the sake of professionalism.”

Lara rolled her eyes and channeled all her energy into making sure Paige somehow saw it through the telephone. “And that is exactly why we broke up. You care more about professionalism than people’s feelings. How could you ask me this? How could you run a gossip column like that? In what universe is this the hard-hitting news you always claimed to be so passionate about?”

“Lara—”

“Roger Feldman is a scumbag who leeches onto every little mistake someone makes and blows it out of proportion to get hits on his website. I had one bad day and gave one bad interview, and now people are acting like it’s the end of the world.”

“Is that your comment?”

“The part about Roger Feldman being evil or the part about you ruining our relationship and abandoning your ethical principles?”

“That’s not what happened, and that’s not what’s happening now either, but I’ll take that as a yes.”

Of course. Paige was probably getting off on this. She always had to win. She had to show Lara that her business was the more successful one. She had to prove that choosing journalism over their relationship was the better life decision.

The silence stretched out. Lara didn’t know what to say. Paige was clearly going to do whatever she’d set out to do, and rationalizing wasn’t going to get Lara anywhere. Should she hang up? Should she cuss Paige out some more? She didn’t have the fight in her. So she spoke to Paige like a human being, hoping that her ex was still one somewhere in her heart.

“So you’re really going to run this article, huh?” The words hit Lara as she said them. As fulfilling as yelling at Paige had felt, it wasn’t going to improve her public image. With all that Lara had said in the last five minutes, Paige could easily write an article far worse than Roger Feldman’s.

Paige was quiet for a moment, as if she was actually considering Lara’s plea. When she spoke, she sounded off the record, but Lara actually couldn’t tell if Paige was being sympathetic to her plight or rubbing it in her face for the fun of it. “It’s my job, Lara. If I don’t run this, I look out of touch with Perry. Or like I’m playing favorites trying to protect you. I’m not.”

Would that be so bad? This situation was far worse for Lara than it ever would be for Paige. “God forbid you put my feelings first for once, huh?”

There was a grunt on the other end of the line. Then: “I’m sorry, Lara. I’m really not doing this to mess with you.”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s not like I follow your life,” Paige snapped. “I didn’t know about this story until my intern brought it to my attention. I’m covering it because it’s my job. It’s a local interest piece, and I thought I’d be nice and give you a chance to defend yourself. If you don’t have anything else to add, I’ll leave you alone. It was nice talking to you again.”

Paige was going to hang up? No. She didn’t get to decide when this conversation ended. She didn’t deserve the luxury of backing out at her own convenience when she was the one who had made the mistake of calling Lara in the first place. If she wanted this story so badly, Lara was going to make her suffer for it.

“Was it nice, Paige? Was it—”

The click on the other end of the line cut her off. Just like that, Lara was right back where she’d started.

Actually, no. She was worse off.



Mozart Cafe had the perfect name. It was outdated but classic. The coffee shop had always been *the* hangout spot in Perry. Even before Lara was old enough to appreciate coffee, even after the corporate monsters of Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts had wormed their way into the hearts of Perry’s residents, Mozart Cafe was still the place to meet for a Saturday morning brew with friends. She had almost missed it these last couple of years she’d been living in Oklahoma City—as much as she could miss something from Perry.

When Lara walked in, April was already seated at a small corner table just big enough for the two of them. Lara waved at her, stood in line with a fairly sizable crowd of other zombies looking for their morning caffeine boost, and ordered a cup of joe before joining April in the seat opposite her.

She was just starting to feel settled when she noticed the name written on her cup. Instantly, the good mood she was nearing was wiped away. “Really?” She scrubbed at the marking with her thumbs, but the marker refused to come off. “I told them my name was *Lara*.”

“What’d they write?”

Frustrated, Lara spun the cup around for April to read. The fact that she couldn’t do anything about it bugged her more than what was written.

“Spellmeyer?” April asked. “Well, it is your name.”

“But it’s not the name I told them to write. I hate my name. I hate that everyone knows my name. I hate being nothing but another Spellmeyer to this town. I’ve been gone for four years, but only a couple weeks of being back, and it’s like I never left.”

“You having a bad day?” April asked.

“Try bad week.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You’re a super mom with a penchant for community engagement. How do you have a bad week?” Lara grumbled, feeling sorry for herself.

“Are you kidding? I’m a single mom of two kids *and* I work in my son’s high school. Trust me, I have my share of bad weeks.”

“Okay, fair enough. I might have been exaggerating out of self-pity.” Lara had definitely heard about April’s bad weeks before. April liked to talk her head off to someone who would actually listen to her, unlike her ex-husband. It was the reason, Lara was convinced, that April liked her so much. Lara liked April because she was the only person in town who didn’t judge Lara by the rumors she’d heard or by the stories about the Spellmeyer family.

They’d met in the yarn aisle of the craft store, each reaching for the last ball in a specific shade of blue. After laughing over the coincidence and swapping stories of what project they needed the yarn for, April had let Lara have both the yarn and her phone number so they could get together and talk about knitting sometime. Lara had known right then and there that if she needed something, April would always be there for her, and Lara had vowed to be there for April, too. Even when Lara had moved away, they’d still regularly kept in touch. Saturday morning coffee dates

with April were one of the few good parts of being home. If April wasn't straight, Lara would probably be in love with her.

"A few days ago, I had this interview, and I totally bombed it," Lara said, relishing the chance to vent. "All of my customers have been complaining since the article came out, and I don't know how to fix it. I've never lost this many orders before. I was already stressed out because I had too much on my plate, but now I'm stressed out because I'm scared I don't have enough. This could ruin my business. All because of one bad interview. My life is a total joke."

"Don't say that, Lara. You're being too harsh on yourself. I'm sure the situation isn't as bad as you think it is."

Lara wished she could believe in April's optimism. "That's not even the end of it. It was so bad that a couple days later, Paige called me. As if national humiliation wasn't enough, my ex-girlfriend decided that my hometown needed to hear about the situation in depth."

"What did she write?"

"I don't know. She said the article would be in today's paper, but I can't bring myself to read it. I don't want the entire town of Perry reading this story. They already hate me enough. You're the only person here that likes me."

"That's not true."

"Name one other friend I have," Lara said.

"The dozens of friends we're both going to make when Tight Knit starts."

Right—their idea for a weekly knitting circle that anyone in the community could join. Lara had grown up going to her grandmother's knitting club, and the nostalgia of simpler times made her desperate to bring the tradition back. April was hosting the first meeting, and Lara had promised to do whatever she could to help.

"You know what you need?" April asked.

A miracle? A fresh start? A sense of accomplishment and fulfillment?

"A girlfriend."

April wasn't wrong, but Lara had so many other concerns closer to the top of her worry list that needing a girlfriend didn't have time to be on her radar. Usually.

"Yeah, right." Lara rolled her eyes. "The last woman I dated was Paige Daley. I think it's safe to say that my taste in women is horrible, and I can't be trusted to properly manage my own romantic life ever again."

"Then let me manage it."

Lara raised an eyebrow. Her confusion fueled April's smile, as mischievous as Lara had ever seen it. April leaned forward on the edge of her seat.

“I have a friend.”

“Oh no. No, no, no.”

“You’ll love her.”

“Let me guess,” Lara said. “She’s the only other lesbian you know.”

“Yes! You two would be perfect for each other.”

Lara was pretty sure she knew every lesbian in Perry, which was to say she knew herself and the one other out couple who had been together for about fifteen years. As touched as she was by April’s gesture, Lara didn’t know how she felt about being set up with an older woman or ruining a perfectly happy marriage. “I don’t know, April. I’ve got too much on my plate to worry about dating right now.”

“Nonsense. Love waits for no right time. I’ll introduce you two at Tight Knit.”

Lara had a feeling that her definition of love was very different from April’s. It wouldn’t hurt to meet the woman, though. The whole point of starting Tight Knit with April was to get to know more people. This woman probably already knew who Lara was, though. Lara couldn’t imagine what type of person would be okay with being set up on a blind date with a Spellmeyer.

“You sure this woman doesn’t hate me? She’s probably sitting at home drinking her morning coffee and reading whatever slander Paige wrote about me right now.”

“This article can’t be that bad.”

“You don’t know Paige.”

April took that as a challenge. “Here. Let me go get the paper.”

“No, April!” Before Lara could stop her, April was out of her seat and at the front of the store, browsing through the news rack. She found what she was looking for and came back to the table. Lara thought about spilling her coffee on the paper so that no one in the store could read it ever again, but the rack held what felt like an endless supply of copies; she couldn’t spill coffee on them all. Besides, April held tightly onto the pages, flipping through until she found Lara’s segment featured somewhere in the middle.

“‘Local Business Receives National Attention—And Critique,’” she began.

“No! Don’t read it out loud!” Lara’s voice dropped to a hushed whisper. “There’s people here!”

April didn’t listen. “‘Lara Spellmeyer is well-known throughout Perry for her successful online business.’ Looking good so far.”

“Great. Stop reading now while I’m ahead.”

“‘But recently her firm Festive Feline Fashion has fallen under fire.’ Holy alliteration. I don’t know if I can read this out loud.”

“Awesome. Please stop.”

“I’ll just skip down. Get to the good parts.”

Lara buried her face in her hands. If she couldn’t see anyone in Mozart, then they couldn’t see her either.

“Feldman assures his audience that he remains an unbiased reporter whose primary goal is to provide a platform where all sides of any story can be told. However, Feldman admits that he can relate to Mrs. Rushmore’s negative account of Lara’s business. He too claimed to feel viciously attacked by Ms. Spellmeyer’s cold-hearted attitude.”

“Viciously attacked?” Lara resisted the urge to slam her head into the table. The public embarrassment was already great enough without her making a scene. “They make me sound like some kind of guard dog. I don’t even like dogs. I run a business for cats.”

“Wait, hold on. It gets better. ‘Spellmeyer, however, contests Feldman’s integrity, insisting that her words were bent out of context and that the situation was blown out of proportion. She says that her seemingly poor attitude was merely the result of a particularly bad day. She also contends that all issues with her products mentioned in *The Trend Bender* had been resolved long before the article’s publication. While Spellmeyer also had some choice words for Feldman that cannot be legally transcribed in print, her upset is a clear indication that her passion is still very much alive, voiding Feldman’s claims that she no longer cares about her business.’ See, that’s not so bad.”

“Paige wrote that I cussed him out so obscenely that she couldn’t repeat what I said. In what world is that ‘not so bad’?”

“She also used the quotes that you gave her to defend yourself.”

“You weren’t there, April. I didn’t say that stuff to defend myself. I said it to hurt Paige. I blew up at her. The article doesn’t *sound* bad, but I was there, and the whole conversation was awful. I can’t remember the last time I lost control like that.”

“Yeah, well, love makes us do things we’re not proud of.”

Lara’s name had received plenty of slander in the past week, but this was by far the worst. “I do not love her.”

“Someone’s being defensive,” April teased. “No wonder you didn’t want me to set you up on a date.”

“I’m not being defensive!”

April gave Lara a pointed look.

“Fine, I am defending myself, but can you blame me? I do not love Paige Daley. I can’t believe I ever did. Thinking about it makes me nauseous. Who was I?”

“All I’m saying is that if you truly didn’t care about her, you wouldn’t be so torn up about this article. An article that is not that bad, I repeat.”

“I do care. I care greatly,” Lara said. “But that care is fueled by hatred, betrayal, a need for justice and revenge. I feel a lot of things towards Paige Daley, but none of those things are love.”

“Whatever you say.” April snapped the newspaper pages in front of her face like a dad avoiding a conversation. “Here, let me read some more.”

“Please put the paper away,” Lara pleaded. “I can’t bear it anymore.”

“Fine. Just let me check one more thing.”

“Is it the obituaries?” Lara asked. “I might be in there: Lara Spellmeyer: murdered by Roger Feldman and Paige Daley, who were acquitted of the crime they obviously committed by a heavily biased jury of Lara’s peers. She accomplished nothing and is survived by everyone. No one will miss her.”

“Hush.” April set the paper on the table and sifted through it, her frown drooping lower and lower as she neared the back page. “Of course. It’s not in here again.”

“What isn’t in there?”

“Do you remember how I said I was going to put out an ad for Tight Knit so that plenty of people came to the first meeting?”

“Yeah.” Lara was too petty to read *The Daily Page*, but no one else in town held the same grudge against Paige Daley that Lara did. Everyone would have seen the ad by now. It was one of April’s many great ideas.

“The ad was supposed to run a few days ago, but it never did. I’ve been checking the paper every day, and it’s still not in here.”

Classic Paige. Screwing over Lara was one thing, but screwing over the nicest woman in Perry was another. “Did you call them?”

“Only about a hundred times. I need to talk to Paige, apparently, but I can’t get ahold of her.”

“Sounds like Paige.”

“I’ll have to take a day off and go down there sometime next week.” April sighed and rubbed her temples. “Maybe you can call her again and butter her up enough to give me a civil conversation.”

Lara felt bad for April—she could sympathize with her fruitless plight—and the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. “I could help you. Maybe.”

April perked up. “Really? You’ll call her?”

Lara shook her head. “No, I’ll...” Lara’s eyes closed in a feeble attempt to shield herself from her own stupidity. “I could go down there for you.”

“Lara, that would be wonderful! Are you sure you’re not too busy?”

After that *Trend Bender* article? “Definitely not.”

“Oh, thank you so much.” Not even April’s smile could make Lara feel great about what she’d just agreed to do, but it did help a little. “You could use this to your advantage, too,” April added. “Doesn’t she owe you a favor after what she did to you? Make her feel guilty. Get her to apologize and run the ad as penance.”

“It’s not penance. It’s a business transaction. You paid her. She should run the ad no matter what.” But it would be nice to get something in return for all the things that Lara had done for Paige over the years. Still, would one last opportunity to be vindictive make up for having to see Paige’s face again?

It would have to be. Lara couldn’t let April down.

“I’m so excited!” April gave a small squeal. “This knitting circle will be great for the town.”

It would be. Everything April did was great for this town. If everyone were like her, Perry wouldn’t be such an awful place to live, and Lara never would have moved away. April was the only person who had always been on her side. And if the press was so hell-bent on making her life worse, then Lara had better keep her only friend around to help her get through it.

## Chapter 3

People like Roger Feldman and Paige Daley were the reason Lara's phone screen was cracked.

Okay, that wasn't true. Rocket had punted her iPhone off the kitchen table last week, like her grandmother chucking pucks down a shuffleboard table on her annual cruise. Staring at her screen's GPS, Lara tapped the fractured glass like a challenge. If she pressed just a little harder, the screen would burst and fade to black. No more bad reviews, no more anger, and no more excuses for putting off buying a new phone. She could tell April that she hadn't been able to find Paige's office.

She couldn't do that, though. Lara had been dreading this meeting all weekend, but if she put it off, the ad would never be published before Tight Knit started. She had to do this.

Lara's eyes shifted from the fractured glass of her phone screen to the smooth pane of glass on the storefront in front of her. The frosted gold letters of the sign glittered in the sunlight. *Home of Perry, Oklahoma's Only Newspaper: The Daily Page.*

God, she really hated that name.

When Lara stepped into the office, she let herself see the building for the first time. For a small-town newspaper, *The Daily Page* was an impressive operation that seemed out of place in the historic downtown district otherwise populated by rustic buildings and ancient local landmarks. The open glass architecture of the building was reminiscent of some of the nicest places in Oklahoma City, and the main floor had a sleek, minimalist layout. The ringing of phones accompanied the din of lively conversation, and the way the floor was swamped with employees—running from station to station, chatting with others, and carrying stacks of papers and folders—gave the place an urgent feel, as if this quiet little town had real news to report on, as if everyone here was convinced they had come across the next big scoop that was going to launch their name into journalistic stardom.

Lara located the receptionist, an older woman almost out of place among the young staff, and approached the desk, her head bowed lest someone recognize her. “I have an appointment with Paige Daley.”

“I’ll let her know. You can wait over there.” Lara’s eyes followed the receptionist’s guiding hand to the waiting area.

“Um.” Lara bit her lip, ashamed of what she was about to say. “Do you have a copy of Saturday’s paper?”

“Probably. You’re Lara Spellmeyer, right?”

Fuck. Was there a picture of her in the article? God, this was a mistake. Lara wanted to say the woman had confused her for someone else and walk away to forget this ever happened, but the woman worked here. She obviously recognized Lara. There was no point in denying it.

“Yes, I am.”

“How’s your grandmother doing?”

Oh. Right. She recognized Lara because everyone in Perry recognized Lara. “Better. Not great, but better.”

“I’m praying for her. Tell her we miss her at Bridge.” She ducked beneath her desk and rummaged around. Moments later, she reappeared with the newspaper in hand. “Here, you go. Saturday’s paper.”

“Thanks.”

Lara took it quickly. At least her embarrassment wasn’t on the front page. Still, she tucked the paper beneath her own folder and carried it discreetly to the waiting area. No one else was there, and Lara claimed the best seat in the house, the one in the corner farthest away from the receptionist, a.k.a. the only person in the world who knew that Lara Spellmeyer was about to read an issue of *The Daily Page*. Lara took a deep breath, made sure no one was watching her, and dove in.

There was no picture, only a headline that wasn’t even the largest print on the spread. The article was given poor real estate, tucked away in the corner of a page next to an ad for fertilizer, which said a lot about where Paige thought Lara belonged. Lara knew she should be happy that Paige hadn’t made the article such a big deal, but she wasn’t. It still existed, and it still made her look bad. The fact that Paige didn’t consider the story major news almost made it worse. It was a routine story, unsurprising for anyone. Just one more piece of evidence that confirmed what Paige and Perry already knew: Lara Spellmeyer was a screwup.

Even the article was uninteresting. Most of it April had already read. Everything else was didactic, the small, boring details that no one cared about. There was one

piece that caught Lara's eye, though: the byline. Where Lara expected to see Paige's name, she saw someone else's instead. Lorraine Bauer.

Who the hell was Lorraine Bauer?

"Lara Spellmeyer?"

Lara didn't mean to greet the assistant with a scowl, but she could feel her lips slouch into a frown regardless. She grabbed the manila folder in the chair beside her and stood from her seat.

"Sorry for the wait. Ms. Daley is ready to see you."

Lara nodded and thanked the young woman, trying to be as polite as possible despite her sour mood. She was an innocent bystander. Lara's anger was best reserved for people like Roger Feldman. Or Paige Daley.

Lara took a deep breath, centered herself, and let the assistant guide her into Paige's office.

Paige hadn't aged a day. She'd aged years. She looked so different, rigid behind her work desk in a blazer, not as she had once looked slouched behind her school desk in jeans. Lara almost didn't recognize her.

Paige didn't have as much trouble placing Lara. The pen twirling between her fingers screeched to a halt as her green eyes flashed with recognition.

"What are you doing here, Lara?"

"You wrote an article defaming my business no less than two days ago. Are you really that surprised to see me show up?"

"I heard you were in town, but I didn't expect to bump into you here. Figures you'd come to yell at me about the article again." Paige sank into her seat and rolled her eyes, preparing for another verbal beating.

"I didn't. I'm here on other business."

Lara tossed the manila folder onto Paige's desk. It was merely a flake on the snowfall of papers already blanketing the surface. Each page was a different color, a different size, and twisted into different angles. The desktop was a mess, almost as disorganized as the cabinets and shelves behind Paige. Drawers were open. Awards were displayed crookedly. It reminded Lara of Paige's old dorm room, and she felt herself sinking into her seat like it was the bean bag chair at the foot of Paige's old bed. As soon as Lara caught herself drowning, she sat up, straightened her spine, and held onto the arms of the chair like a raft. She was here on business, not to take a stroll down memory lane.

"And what would that be?" Paige's voice was tired, gruff. Lara expected to see the signature pack of cigarettes peeking its head out of Paige's blazer pocket, but it wasn't there.

“I’m here for a friend. April Helm. She put in an ad for last week and it never ran.”

Paige’s eyebrows twitched as she clicked the tip of her pen closed and picked up the folder. She sifted through it meaninglessly, eyes not moving enough to read the text.

“That’s the ad,” Lara said.

“So what is it that you’re asking me?”

“I’m asking you to do your job.”

Paige flipped the folder from cover to cover again, no more attentive this time than she had been the first. “What is it that you want me to do exactly?”

“Run the ad tomorrow.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because my friend paid for it, and you’re obligated to.”

“Right. *Friend.*” Paige sounded unconvinced. It wasn’t like Lara could blame her. Paige knew exactly how many friends Lara didn’t have.

“Look,” Paige said, her voice softening. Lara knew that opener well. It was Paige’s “I don’t want to be the bad guy” façade that she only put on right before playing the bad guy, a way of shifting blame off herself. She never could own up to being an asshole. She always had to pretend that her own assholery somehow hurt her too. “I can’t help you if it’s not your ad. If the order is under her name, she’s the one who’s going to have to contact me.”

“She’s been trying. For a week. She’s talked to every person here but you, and they’ve all told her that you’re the person she needs to get in touch with. Except, apparently, you don’t answer your calls.”

“I’m busy.”

“Busy answering other complaints? Busy calling me when I don’t want to talk to you?”

Paige bit her tongue. Literally. Lara watched the teeth clamp down like a cheetah suffocating its prey.

“I’m not helping you,” Paige said.

“Because I’m me?”

“Because you’re not the client.”

“The client sent me.”

“Are you family?” Paige asked. “Lovers?”

“No.”

“Then, no, I won’t let you manage her accounts.”

Lara scoffed. “Good thing you stick to arbitrary rules of conduct. If only you stuck to your deadlines too.” It felt good to be crass, but Lara was bluffing. If insulting Paige didn’t get her anywhere, then it was nothing but selfishly cathartic. She’d promised April she could do this. She’d promised herself she could do this. “Look, you owe me this.”

Paige raised an eyebrow. “Owe you? I’ve already told you: I don’t owe you anything.”

“After running that article on me, yes, you do.”

“That wasn’t personal, Lara, and it has nothing to do with this ad.”

“Yeah, right,” Lara taunted. “It was so not personal that you weren’t even brave enough to put your own name on the article. You threw some intern under the bus.”

“Lorraine’s name is on the piece because she’s the one who found the story, and she wrote most of the local content. I gave her credit where credit was due, and she was happy to take the lead.”

“Then why were you the one to call me?”

Paige rocked back in her chair ever so slightly. “I figured you’d rather hear from me than a stranger.”

“I would have preferred the intern.”

Paige took a deep breath. Her nostrils puffed out like a dragon disturbed from its slumber, but her chest fell and her face relaxed before the fire could burst forth from her mouth. The papers in her hand wavered. Her mouth opened as if to speak, but as quickly as she faltered, her jaw clenched shut again. Paige slapped the file flat against the mess of the desk and slid it back to Lara. A few of her own papers scattered with it. Paige didn’t seem to care.

“I think you should leave.”

Lara’s heart stopped. She’d blown it. “So this was all a waste of time?”

“Looks like it.”

Of course this was a waste of time, just like thinking she could do something nice for April in the first place, just like thinking Paige would actually help her after what had happened between them. Lara shut her eyes and tried not to have a brain aneurysm on the spot. She settled for accepting the migraine pounding at her temples as punishment for her defeat.

Lara picked up the folder and put her brain power toward thinking up an excuse for April rather than thinking up another way to convince Paige to do something that she clearly wasn’t willing to do. “Fine. I’ll see myself out. Not like you’d even exert yourself to show me the door.”

As Lara got up, she heard the scratch of the other chair sliding across the wooden floor. Paige opened the door before Lara could get it for herself. It was simultaneously the most gentlewomanly and the rudest Paige had ever been.

Well, maybe not *the* rudest, but she sure didn't seem sad to see Lara go.

"Sorry we couldn't come to an agreement." She was all business again. Too calm, too formal. Paige never did let herself feel. She had never operated like a normal human being with emotions. She hadn't been able to give Lara the love she'd felt four years ago, and she couldn't give Lara whatever she was feeling now.

Lara scoffed at the formality. An agreement. She hadn't wanted a business contract. She'd wanted Paige to not let her down just one time. She was stupid for ever thinking there was a chance of that happening.

Paige went back to her desk, and Lara lingered just outside her open doorway, fuming and disappointed. Being back in the main part of the building only made her feel worse. Everything was so organized and productive. It was the exact opposite of how Lara felt.

Lara was so out of it that she didn't realize just how much her loitering was offsetting the scheduled balance. A young woman with a flowing scarf and springing curls of red hair barreled down the hall with green eyes locked on her phone. By the time Lara noticed that she was in the way, it was too late. The redhead collided with her, shaking them both up and causing the girl to drop her mobile. The shrill inhale of a gasp and the shattering crack of broken glass pierced Lara's ears before she had time to stabilize herself from the impact. The redhead crouched to retrieve her phone as Lara struggled to regain her balance.

"Sorry!" The girl's voice was youthful and high pitched. Lara could tell the apology was some combination of actual guilt and grief over her broken phone.

Lara was in the middle of opening her mouth to say that accidents happen and she was sorry about the phone, but when the girl rose to her feet, her eyes bulged out at the sight of Lara. It scared Lara enough to silence her.

"Oh my god, you're Lara Spellmeyer! You're actually here!"

The girl reached for Lara's hand and practically yanked her arm out of her socket with her handshake. "I'm Lorraine Bauer, the one who covered you in *The Daily Page*. I'm a huge fan!"

"If you're a fan, why would you want to publish anything about that *Trend Bender* article?"

"You made national news! That's awesome!"

Had she read the article? "I made bad national news."

Lorraine shrugged. “All press is good press.”

“Tell that to my sales,” Lara said. “I had almost ten people call and cancel orders this week. Two of them were from Perry.”

Lorraine pouted, but she didn’t look as guilty as Lara was trying to make her feel. “I’m sure things will turn around soon. You have over one-hundred thousand followers! BuzzFeed wrote an article about you! People love you!”

They used to. They wouldn’t for much longer if people like Roger and Lorraine had anything to say about it.

Lara heard footsteps and braced herself for another impact. She was prepared for a collision, but she was not prepared to see Paige emerge next to her.

“You have a following of that many people?” Paige asked. “I didn’t realize it had become that successful.” Her voice was laced with disbelief, but also astonishment.

Lara shrugged, feigning humility. “They’re mostly there for the cat pics. Customers send me pictures of their cats wearing the sweaters, and I post them. I don’t think anyone is actually there because of *me*.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Paige said. Her voice was soft. It had lost all of the bark she’d used in her office. She spoke to Lara like Lorraine wasn’t even there. Their conversation became more personal than it had been the entire time they were shut alone in a room together.

“I haven’t seen you in four years,” Lara said. “Why would I tell you anything?”

Paige tried to stutter out a response but came up short. Lorraine broke the tension, blissfully unaware of anything but her own excitement.

“How could you not know?” As annoying as the girl was, Lara enjoyed watching Paige wince, clearly just as annoyed by Lorraine’s shrill voice as she was. “Didn’t you see the BuzzFeed video on Facebook?”

“I run a newspaper,” Paige said. “I prefer to get my news from sources other than the people I went to high school with and my racist parents.”

Lara didn’t know why she was surprised. Paige had always acted like that, haughty, holier than thou, better than everyone else because she thought she was so much smarter. She wasn’t. Not really. She and Lara had both gotten into the same college, had both started their own businesses, had both ended up in Perry after graduation. The only difference was that Lara hadn’t stayed stuck here.

Lorraine, defeated by Paige’s lack of enthusiasm, slapped her phone against her thigh, as if wiping the screen of dirt would also wipe away the cracks. The curls of her hair seemed to lose their springiness as she whipped her head around to face Lara.

“It was great to meet you.” The hand that wasn’t holding her phone stretched out, and Lara shook it with as much of a smile as she could muster after such a shitty morning.

“It was nice to meet you, too.” It wasn’t, but Lara didn’t need to tell her that.

Lorraine looked back at Paige, wiped the smile off her face, and continued on to wherever she had been heading when she’d bumped into Lara. Part of Lara was happy to see her go, but part of her was sad that the girl had left her alone with Paige. Again.

“Sorry,” Paige said, apologizing for Lorraine’s rude behavior far more easily than she ever apologized for her own. “Interns.” Paige rolled her eyes and grumbled in a way she clearly expected Lara to understand.

Lara didn’t. “I can show myself out.” She started towards the door.

“Wait!”

Lara’s feet stalled, despite her brain’s insistence that they shouldn’t. Paige fished into the pocket of her pant leg and extracted a small stock paper card. She handed it to Lara. “Call me later.”

In her palm, the image of Paige’s gapped-tooth smile looked up at her.

Her business card. Paige had actually given her a business card. This was the most impersonal thing she could think of, and it took every ounce of willpower not to rip the paper in Paige’s face. Wordlessly, Lara slipped the card into her pocket, left the office, and stepped out onto the empty downtown sidewalk.

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# TIGHT KNIT

BY SHAYA CRABTREE

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