

Lucy Score
Story Of My Life

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Story
of my
Life

Story Lake Series #1

Forever

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English Edition by Forever

Forever ist ein Verlag der Ullstein Buchverlage GmbH, Berlin

1. Auflage März 2025

ISBN: 978-3-98978-016-3

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Published by arrangement with Bookcase Literary Agency

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Data Mining im Sinne von § 44b UrhG ausdrücklich vor.

Umschlaggestaltung: zero-media.net, München nach einer Vorlage

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Satz: © Sourcebooks

Druck und Bindearbeiten: ScandBook, Litauen

*To Flavia and Meire for being the best agents and
biggest cheerleaders. I'm so grateful for everything!*

STORY LAKE
LODGE



OLD HOSPITAL



ANGELO'S



PUSHING DAISIES



TOWN
SQUARE



LEVI'S

STORY
LAKE



FISH HOOK



DR. ACE



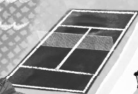
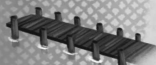
PLOWY
MCFUCK YOU



ERLEEN'S



GENERAL STORE



SPORT COURT BINGO

LAKE DRIVE



GAGE'S OFFICE



BOOKSTORE



HAZEL'S



LAURA'S



BOUTIQUE



FELICITY'S

END OF THE ROAD

GAGE'S



BISHOP
FARM



Vase wine and an ass-kicking.

Hazel

The harried trio of business-suited, triple-espressoed women at the window were enthusiastically plotting the demise of someone named Bernard in audits. Or maybe they were just going to report him to HR. It was hard to hear over the usual coffee shop din.

The two men on my right with matching wedding bands were having a passionate argument about closet space. In the rest of the world, most divorces centered around issues like money, children, and monogamy. In Manhattan, I was willing to bet money that closet space made the top five.

The barista looked like if she got any more bored as she took and filled orders, she'd lapse into a coma.

Coma? I wrote on the notebook page. Would a heroine waking up from a coma make a good meet-cute? I frowned and drummed my pen on the table. Not a long coma obviously. There'd be things like leg hair and dandruff and heinous bad breath to contend with.

Dammit. I covered my mouth with my hand and tried to

subtly sniff out whether I'd remembered to brush my teeth that morning. I hadn't. I also hadn't shaved my legs...or showered...or combed my hair...or remembered to buy new deodorant to apply.

Old Hazel had only wandered out of the apartment looking—and smelling—like this on deadlines. Current Hazel scurried around the shadows of the real world like an anti-hygiene mouse pretty much twenty-four seven.

“Ugh. Why is this so hard?” I muttered.

The couple with the closet issue shot me side-eye.

“Ha. That's what she said?” I offered.

The side-eyes turned into expressive raised eyebrows and an unspoken agreement to vacate the table next to the batty lady immediately.

“It's okay. I'm an author. I'm supposed to talk to myself in public,” I explained hastily as they gathered their coffees and made their way to the door, ducking out into the sweltering August humidity.

I groaned and clapped my hands to my cheeks, squishing them together to make a fish face. The gentleman in the Lenny Kravitz tank top who looked like he was running his own Genius Bar glanced up over his Ben Franklin glasses.

I released my face and offered what I hoped was a human smile. He went back to his two cell phones and iPad while I wiped my palms on my shorts. My skin was that gross, impossible combination of greasy and flaky at the same time. When was the last time I'd completed my full skin-care routine instead of just dunking my head under the faucet? Hell, when was the last time I'd completed anything?

Well, I'd absolutely murdered the pad thai takeout last night. That counted, right?

I scanned the café for some hint of the inspiration or motivation that had once made me a productive adult. But it was nowhere to be found. On a sigh, I scribbled out *coma* as well as *enemies-to-enemies* and *canoes*. That last one had been overheard from a spry retired Irish couple that looked as if they'd

just walked out of an REI store. They'd ordered matchas and gluten-free scones before marching out in their coordinating hiking boots.

The clock on the wall deemed it quitting time. I'd been here for three hours with nothing to show for it but an empty iced coffee with my name on it. I was eighty percent sure it had been my subconscious that made the barista sound like she had yelled, "Iced vanilla latte for Hasbeen."

On the kind of groan that past-their-prime people make when getting out of chairs at home, I stood up. I'd been festering in my apartment for too long if I couldn't remember the difference between "privacy of one's own home" and "in the presence of others" noises. I gathered my authority accessories—notebook, pen, laptop, and phone—and headed out into the heat.

I felt my hair double in size before I reached the end of the block and was reaching up to smash it back down when I was shoulder-checked by a five-foot-six, bespoke Ralph Lauren-wearing guy shouting a series of escalating threats into his phone.

Zoey would have labeled him a finance bro and tossed some insult at him. She was also the woman who was definitely going to murder me when she found out I still had nothing. No chapters, no outline, no ideas. I was living in some kind of horrible *Groundhog Day* scenario where every day was the same as before. Unlike Bill Murray, I'd yet to find a purpose.

I made it back to my apartment, but my neighbor whose name I didn't know must not have heard my plea to hold the elevator over the yapping of her two Yorkies. I managed to plod my way up the four flights to my apartment and let myself in.

The state of my home reflected the state of my head. More specifically, it was a disastrous jumble of trash. The once "charming" and "pristine" Upper East Side two-bedroom looked like a swamp person had just hosted the ribbon cutting for a garbage dump flea market.

"It's official. I'm one of those people who loses their mind and starts hoarding soy sauce packets and junk mail," I said to nobody.

Mail and paperwork were stacked in haphazard piles on every visible flat surface. Books spilled off the heavy walnut shelves and onto the floor in disorganized mounds. The microscopic kitchen was barely recognizable under about eight layers of dirty dishes and old take-out containers. The walls with the busy wallpaper I'd once found so charming held nothing but framed accolades and memories of old lives long gone.

I perked up temporarily. "Maybe the heroine's a hoarder? Ugh. No. Not sexy and not even hygienic."

Old Hazel never would have let it get this bad. There were a lot of things the old me would have done differently. But she was dead and buried. RIP, me.

I headed into the bedroom to change out of my "leaving home" gym shorts and into my "how many holes in the crotch is too many" shorts. It was time to get back to work...or at least spend another chunk of time berating myself for becoming the saddest rom-com novelist in the world.

I groaned at the knock at my door. "What part of *contactless delivery* don't you get?" I muttered as I pried my butt off the couch. The toe of my slipper caught on the coffee table leg, sending a waterfall of unopened mail to the floor.

I reached for the tie of my bathrobe, only to find it missing. So I wrapped the lapels over my braless, T-shirt-clad boobs and opened the door.

"You look like absolute shit."

The curly-haired woman in the red power suit was wielding judgment, not my Chinese food.

I let my robe fall open and crossed my arms. "What are you doing here, Zoey? I'm very busy and important."

My uninvited guest brushed past me and strolled inside on fabulous four-inch heels, bringing with her a faint cloud of expensive perfume. Zoey Moody, fashion-obsessed literary agent and my best friend since the third grade, knew how to make an entrance.

I closed the door and sagged against it. Usually I met Zoey

at her place or in establishments that served alcohol, which left me free to live like Oscar the Grouch.

“Busy doing what? Rotting?” she asked, picking up a greasy pizza box that rested atop a carefully balanced mountain of unwashed plates.

I snatched it out of her hands and tried to cram it into the kitchen trash can only to have the overflowing contents reject the new addition. “I’m not rotting. I’m...plotting,” I lied.

“You’ve been plotting for a year.”

I gave up and tossed the box on the floor next to the trash. “You know who thinks writing a book is easy? People who have never written one.”

“I know. Authors are delicate flowers of creativity who need constant care and watering. Blah blah blah. Well, guess what? Agents need stuff too. Like I need my clients to answer their damn phones. Do you even know where yours is?”

“It’s over there.” I gestured vaguely at the entirety of my apartment.

Zoey pinned me with a frown and pursed red lips. “When’s the last time you went out to dinner? Or got some fresh air? Or, I don’t know, showered?” Her strawberry-blond curls trembled within the twist she’d fashioned.

I lifted an arm and sniffed. Damn it. I forgot to order the deodorant again. “I’m having flashbacks to my mother telling teenage me to put the books down and go outside and be social,” I complained. “That was between husbands two and three, in case you were keeping count.”

“I’m not your mother. I’m your agent and sometimes your friend. And as both, I gotta tell you, you’ve officially sunk to depressed-bachelor standards.”

“Wouldn’t that be spinster standards?”

She held up a discarded sock stained with soy sauce. “How many spinsters do you know who live like they’re in a boys’ high school locker room?”

“Point taken. Look. It’s not like I’d *decided* it would be fun to spiral into some depressed, antisocial writer’s block,” I reminded her.

Zoey opened the refrigerator and then immediately regretted her decision. "There are things growing in here."

"I've been meaning to tell you. I took up urban farming in my spare time." I slammed the fridge shut.

"Well, you're about to have a lot more spare time if you don't get your shit together," she said ominously.

I squeezed past her and bent to wedge an arm into the cabinet of the tiny butcher-block island. It took a few seconds and a strained neck muscle, but I finally found a bottle of wine inside and pulled it free.

"Wine?"

"I'm not consuming anything in this apartment. I don't have time for a staph infection. Tell me you're at least writing something."

"Oh yeah. Chapters are just flying out of my ass."

"We should be so lucky," she muttered.

"Cut to the chase. Why are you here at noon on a Thursday, Zo?"

My agent and best friend stomped over to the living room windows and dramatically yanked open the heavy curtains. She gestured at the lights on the building next door. "It's seven p.m. on a Monday."

I feigned shock and added a dramatic gasp just for fun.

She rolled her eyes, realizing she'd been had. "You're such a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, but I'm *your* pain in the ass. But I'd like to point out that I'm also thirty-five years old. I don't need you clucking over me like some mother hen." We'd known each other for longer than either of us cared to remember. From braces and prom dresses to book tours and bestseller lists...and the aftermath.

"You're thirty-six."

I blinked, then started my calculations.

"Remember your birthday? You said you had plans to write in an Airbnb in Connecticut for the weekend, and instead I broke in here to leave flowers and cake and found you in month-old

sweats, knee-deep in a *Golden Girls* marathon, so I dragged you out for wine and more cake?”

Great. Now I was forgetting entire birthdays.

“Speaking of wine.” I opened the cabinet next to the fridge and found it void of any glassware. I rummaged half-heartedly through the dishes in and around the sink. *What was that blue stuff growing up the sides of that bowl?*

Spying a short, squat, and—more importantly—clean flower vase, I unscrewed the cap and poured the wine.

“You’re wearing a bathrobe with marinara stains on it in a dark, dirty apartment and drinking screw-top wine out of a vase,” Zoey said.

“A good editor would say that’s telling, not showing.” I took an exaggerated slurp of wine.

“I’m not your editor. I’m your agent, and I need you to get your shit together.”

This was a more aggressive version of the message Zoey had been delivering for the past several months. I roused myself into suspicion. “What’s the problem now?”

“I just came from a meeting.”

“Hence the ‘don’t fuck with me’ suit.”

“Very different from the ‘please fuck me’ dress. It was a meeting with your editor, Mikayla at Royal Press, who expressed some rather concerning concerns,” she said, reaching under the kitchen sink and producing a fresh trash bag. She opened it with a violent snap.

“Can I just say that it’s a good thing I’m the writer instead of you? Also, who the hell is Mikayla? My editor is Jennifer.”

Zoey stuffed a half-empty container of old fried rice into the bag. “They cut Jennifer and half of the editorial staff six months ago. Mikayla was younger and therefore cheaper.”

“Does she even read romance?”

“She prefers domestic fiction and psychological thrillers.”

“Oh, then she’ll *totally* get me and my small-town rom-coms.”

“She might if you actually turn in a manuscript,” Zoey shot back.

“Excuse me. What happened to the ‘take your time; you’ve gone through something traumatic’ phase?”

“That phase ended about six months ago and you’ve been on borrowed time ever since. Bottom line, Urban Old MacDonald. If you miss your next deadline, Royal Press is canceling your contract.”

I scoffed and began to shovel to-go bags into another trash bag. “Nice try. They can’t do that.”

“They can and they will. They quoted your contract to me, which means they’ve already had their legal team look into it. You missed your extended deadline. Again.”

“I’m just getting back on my feet. They can’t expect me to just—”

“Hazel, you signed on the dotted line twelve months ago,” she said softly. “Your publisher graciously pushed your deadlines back *three* times. This time you didn’t even bother telling them any reassuring lies. You just didn’t turn anything in. And you know what that looks like to all of us on the publishing side?”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“It looks like you’re done. Another burned-out author who couldn’t cut it anymore. One of those people who talks about how they used to write books.”

“You’re so dramatic. What are they going to do? Cut me loose? Readers will hate them for kicking me when I’m down.”

Zoey stuffed an entire plastic bag of plastic bags into the trash. “What readers, Haze?”

“*My* readers.” I gave the bag a resounding shake.

“The readers you’ve ignored? The readers you haven’t bothered responding to? The readers who’ve moved on to reading authors who still publish?”

I snatched the full bag out of her unnecessarily dramatic hands and tied a knot in it. “Seriously, what climbed up your Pelotoned ass today?”

She leveled a stare at me. “Hazel, you used to be one of the best-selling rom-com authors out there.”

“Used to be? You’re mean in that suit.”

“And then you let someone in your head and now look at you.”

I didn’t particularly want to look at me.

“Haze, if you miss this one, you’re out,” Zoey said.

I stuffed a stack of take-out menus I’d used to mop up a spill into the bag while pretending my intestines hadn’t just gone ice-cold.

“They can’t. They wouldn’t. I wrote nine books for them. Seven of them bestsellers. I went on tours for them. Readers still write me emails asking for more books.” At least, they did when I last checked my business email.

“Yeah, well, your publisher is asking for the same thing. The Spring Gate book that you are contractually obligated to write. You know as well as I do that, to a publisher, an author is only as valuable as their next book. And you don’t have one.” She produced another garbage bag, opened the fridge again, and held her breath as she scooped rotten salad mixes and expired condiments into the bag.

I didn’t know how to tell Zoey that Spring Gate was dead to me. That the idea of returning to the series that I’d loved, that had launched my career, made me feel queasy.

Ooh! Maybe my heroine could be a professional cleaner hired by the hero to clean out a dead relative’s farmhouse? It was less disgusting if the slob was someone else, right? Plus then I could weave a whole house makeover into the story to reinforce character growth. I could see her hauling things to a dumpster in an adorable bandana and with smudges of dirt on her cheeks.

“I can’t control the creative process, okay?” I said, reaching for the closest notebook.

Cleaner. Dumpster. Dirt face. This book was practically writing itself.

Zoey peered over the fridge door at me. “If that’s true and you really aren’t going to hit this deadline, then you need to start thinking plan B.”

“And what exactly would plan B be?” I demanded.

“You might want to start working on your résumé.”

I spread my arms wide, daring Zoey to take in my holey shorts, mismatched socks, and rabid bunny slippers. “Do I *look* employable to you?”

“Not even a little.”

I fisted my hands at my sides. “Fine. I’ll write. Okay?”

She shut the refrigerator. Her forest-green eyes pinned me with a look. “I haven’t heard you laugh in months. Do you even remember how to be funny anymore?”

“I’m fucking hilarious. Just today I got my bathrobe stuck in the elevator door and gave Mrs. Horowitz an eyeful.” Technically it had been over a week ago because it was the last time I’d taken out the trash. But being funny wasn’t about accuracy. It was about timing.

“Are these important?” Zoey held up a fat stack of legal papers with a coffee ring on the top page.

I snatched them out of her hands. “No,” I lied, setting them on top of the refrigerator.

“I’m also hearing murmurs around my office,” she said, changing the subject.

“Maybe it’s haunted?”

Ooh! What about a small-town rom-com with a little bit of paranormal thrown in? Maybe the hero sees ghosts? Or maybe the heroine house cleaner discovers a zombie? Wait. That wasn’t paranormal.

“They’re worried about relevancy.” That dragged me out of my head.

I feigned a good dry heave. “You know I hate that word.”

“Yeah, well, you better start making it your mantra because I don’t want them to make me cut you loose.”

“You want to drop me? Zoey! After everything we’ve been through? After Zack Black asked us both to the junior high dance? After the stomach flu in Vancouver? After we missed our flight to Brussels and ended up hitching a ride on the tour bus of an Amsterdam punk band and then they wrote a song about us?”

She threw a hand in the air. “I don’t want to drop you! I want

to be your agent and make lots of money with you, but you're not making that easy right now!"

"I know," I said pitifully.

"Look, Haze. Not to be an assface or anything, but your sales are at their lowest since you were a baby author. Readers haven't seen your face in forever. You haven't sent out a newsletter in over a year. Your last social media activity was when your account got hacked and Fake Hazel started DM-ing your followers for 'monetary aid for a luxury high-end kidney transplant.'"

"Are you this mean to all your clients?"

"You don't respond to gentle hand-holding. You respond to hard truths. Or at least you used to."

"Oh my God. You're so dramatic. Okay. Fine. I'll do the thing."

Zoey stacked the full trash bag on top of the other full trash bag on top of the full garbage can. "What thing?"

I waved my vase of wine. "The signing thing I said no to."

She drummed her glossy red nails on the butcher block and studied me. "It's a start, but I'll tell you now, it's not enough."

She reached into her sleek briefcase and pulled out two fat folders, dropping them on the nearly cleared counter space with a *thwack*. "Read these."

I sighed. "If the ass-kicking is over, would you like a vase of wine?"

"I wouldn't ingest anything in this apartment if Pedro Pascal appeared and offered to spoon-feed it to me."

Great ass pants.

Hazel

Pens?”
“Check,” Zoey said, patting her rolling suitcase as we speed-walked toward the Haight Hotel’s Ballroom B. My disastrous attempt at a DIY hairstyle had made us both late. I hated being late, especially when I was already nervous. This was my first-ever multiauthor event, and I was worried my digestive system was going to rebel.

We dodged a clump of excited lanyard-wearing women in homemade T-shirts professing their love for various book boy-friends. None of them looked up as we scooted past.

“Wait. Pen pens or my *special* pens?” I asked.

“One time. *One time* I showed up with a pack of Sharpies and you never let me live it down.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes. I brought your special pens, you writing utensil snob,” Zoey assured me.

“Uh...okay. How many attendees are expected?” I asked, wracking my brain for signing-related information.

“Six hundred.”

I came to a screeching halt, my emergency ponytail bobbing. “Six *hundred*? As in one hundred more than five hundred?” I’d once signed for two hundred and fifty readers, but that was the Spring Gate four release, which had turned out to be the height of my career...and my self-confidence. It was a shame the universe didn’t tell you when you were in the middle of the best years of your life.

Zoey grabbed my arm and dragged me forward. “Look at those math skills. You’re so sexy when you calculate. Relax. They’re not all here to see you. This place is chock-full of young, relevant authors who are actually publishing books.”

“Oh, good. I see you wore your mean pants again today.”

“Actually, they’re my great ass pants.” She turned around and pointed to her butt.

She was not wrong.

“Well, your great ass pants make you mean,” I informed her. “We have books, right?”

“The publisher delivered them this morning.”

“How many?”

She hesitated for a half second too long. When you knew each other as well as we did, a half second was all it took. I jumped in front of her, and she ran right into me. “Ow! How many, Zoey?”

“Fifty.”

I could feel my eyebrows taking flight. Shit. My eyebrows. I should have taken the tweezers to them, but it was too late now. “Fifty as in five-zero?”

Zoey shook her head, and her curls bounced in irritation. “I knew you were going to freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I insisted in a high-pitched Muppet voice of panic.

She stepped around me and kept walking. I kicked it into a jog to keep up and found myself winded in ten feet. Damn. When was the last time I’d gone to the gym?

“Need I remind you that your RSVP was last minute?” she said over her shoulder.

“Yeah, but there are six hundred people here! What if we sell out in the first hour?”

“Then you can sign body parts and small children.” She used her great ass to open a door that said EMPLOYEES ONLY.

“I just don’t want to disappoint any readers.” I also didn’t want to think about what it meant that the publisher could only scrounge up fifty copies for me.

Zoey shot me a baleful look.

“Fine. I don’t want to disappoint readers any more than I already have.”

“That’s the spirit.”

The signing was in Ballroom C, a standard hotel ballroom with gold fleur-de-lis carpet and movable panel walls. Author tables ringed the perimeter of the room and ran down the center in two straight lines.

“Wow. This is huge,” I said, scanning the space as I followed Zoey.

We threaded through the crowd of authors and assistants putting the finishing touches on their tables. Everyone seemed to be dressed to the nines, which made me feel even frumpier in my jeans, sneakers, and loose sweater than I had in the mirror this morning. There were walls of balloons and streamers and roll-up banners with candy-colored phrases like ENTHRALLING ALPHA HEROES and MELT-YOUR-FACE-OFF STEAM.

“When did everyone get so good at marketing?” I wondered out loud.

“There’s a good mix of indie authors here. They’re damn good at branding. And you can thank social media for the rest. Scroll Life revolutionized the way books are sold,” Zoey said, waving to one of the booksellers as we rolled past their booth.

“What the hell is Scroll Life?”

She sighed. “Sometimes I just don’t know what to do with you.”

I felt like Rip Van Winkle just cracking open my eyes after a long hibernation. I scanned the ballroom for familiar faces but didn’t spot any. Everyone looked so...young. So energetic. Was I the only tired, cranky OG author here?

“What’s with all the shirtless guys?” I asked as we passed a booth with not one but two six-packed men.

“Cover models,” Zoey explained as she pulled her suitcase to a halt in front of a table crammed in between a dark, gothic romance novelist with awesome Elvira hair and a young rom-com author dressed as a squirrel. The squirrel waved. I waved back.

“Wow. I can’t believe I’ve been missing out on this for all these years.”

“Another thing we can blame on Jim,” she said, positioning the suitcase in front of our empty table.

I froze, the air locking up in my lungs. She winced.

“Sorry. I forgot. He Who Shall Not Be Named.”

I shook my head even as my mouth went dry and my throat closed up. Could you be allergic to the sound of someone’s name? “It’s fine. Let’s get to work.” I would feign the energy and enthusiasm that I didn’t feel.

Within minutes we had the book and swag display dialed in, the pen supply organized, the roll-up banner of a younger, less jaded me unfurled, and our coffee and Wild Cherry Pepsi guzzled.

“Five minutes until the doors open,” a disembodied voice trilled over the loudspeaker.

The panic was instantaneous. “Oh, God. I don’t know if I can do this. He always said these events were like human stampedes,” I said, gripping the table with both hands.

“Yeah, well, he also said romance novels were ‘cheap smut pandering to the basest’—ow! Shit,” Zoey yelled, dropping the packing knife. She clutched her left hand by the wrist as blood welled up from a shallow cut in her middle finger.

“You are the most accident-prone agent in the history of agents,” I complained. I dug into my purse and pulled out the small first aid kit I always carried for when Zoey went all Zoey and started bleeding.

“Ouch,” she whined, as I swiped an alcohol pad over the cut.

“Don’t be such a baby,” I said fondly as I bandaged her up.

“At least we got the first bloodshed out of the way before we had a line of readers. Remember in Beaver Creek when you bled all over that box of preorders?”

“I’m choosing to ignore that memory in favor of reminding you that even though you may not feel like it, you are Hazel Hart. You’ve written nine books that were beloved by readers—”

“That’s optimistic.” My last three releases hadn’t exactly burned up the bestseller lists.

“Shut up. You’re not seeing what I’m seeing.”

I sighed. “What are you seeing?”

“I’m seeing the heroine of her own story. Sure, you’re at rock bottom right now. But that just means you’re one chapter away from pluckily pulling yourself up. You can do this, Haze. You’re primed for a comeback.”

I did love a plucky, down-on-her-luck heroine. I just didn’t feel like one.

I grunted. “Yeah. Right. Whatever.”

It wasn’t that long ago that I’d been the one giving Zoey the pep talks. After fights with her parents and forgotten electric bills and messy breakups. Now the tables were turned, and I was the only one needing constant validation that I was still a functioning adult.

“Not quite the spirit I was going for, but it’ll have to do. Now, sit your ass down and I’ll tape you up so you don’t destroy your patellar tendons while signing fifty books and dozens of children’s foreheads,” she said brightly.

“Your lack of anatomical knowledge concerns me.”

“Good thing I’m an agent, not a hand doctor.” She used her teeth to tear off a strip of blue tape.

“Just in case this ever comes up on a date or a game show, your patella is your knee bone.”

“Good to know.” She efficiently finished wrapping my right wrist.

The loudspeaker came on again. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen. Gird your loins. The doors are open in three, two, one!”

I popped my customary ibuprofen tablets, rolled my shoulders, and wiped my damp palms on my jeans as nerves fluttered to life in my intestines.

“Prepare for the chaos,” Zoey said, standing up and fixing a smile on her face.

“Want to play tic-tac-toe again?” Zoey offered.

“I’m too busy cleaning my glasses,” I grumbled as I aggressively wiped the lenses on my sweater.

There had been no stampede. No need for the protein bar stash. In fact, I’d had more than the allotted hour for lunch after the morning session had petered out early. I’d signed thirteen books. Three of them had gone to a trio of young, good-hearted readers who had taken pity on my linelessness and come over to introduce themselves.

The squirrel had a dozen readers waiting for a chance to shake her paw. The gothic author on the other side had velvet ropes in place to control her lengthy line.

I felt exposed and invisible at the same time.

“If you clean your glasses any harder, you’re going to rub right through the lenses,” Zoey said.

“Go ahead and say it. I know it’s burning a hole in your tongue.”

“First of all, that’s gross and reminds me of the time I burned my taste buds on pizza cheese at that sleepover.”

“I told you to let it cool off first,” I reminded her.

“Secondly, I’m not going to kick a client when she’s down by saying, ‘I told you so.’”

I dropped my glasses on the table. “It hasn’t been that long. How could I go from *New York Times* bestseller to this in a year? Cece McCombie releases one book every eighteen months and readers still show up for her.”

Zoey leaned into my personal space. I pushed her back with a firm hand to the forehead. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to see if you want the truth or placation.”

I groaned. “Ugh. Fine. Let me have it.”

“First of all, it hasn’t been a year. It’s been *two* since you published a book.”

I scoffed. “That can’t be right.”

“You signed the papers a year ago. But you were fighting it out in court for a year before that.”

I blinked. Had I really just “misplaced” two entire years of my life?

“Cece McCombie has an actual online presence. She sends a newsletter every month. She talks to her readers every day on social media. She isn’t snobby about the events she does between releases.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

“That hip little indie bookstore in Wisconsin loved your series so much they did a book club weekend for it, and you refused to say yes to a Zoom call with them even though they gave you eight months’ notice.”

“I did no such thing!” I said indignantly. Bookstores and libraries had been my safe space growing up. I loved returning that support. At least I *had*.

“Jim told me you said absolutely not and that you wouldn’t entertain participating in any event with less than...” Zoey trailed off as the truth hit us both.

“Jim told you,” I repeated, congratulating myself on not choking on his name.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Haze. I should have known—”

“No. It’s fine. *I* should have known,” I countered, trying to shove all those messy emotions back in the box. I knew how to handle singular emotions. But when they tangled together in a mega-knot like strings of Christmas lights, I didn’t know what to do.

I could point the finger in several directions when it came to the career blame game, but deep down, I knew ultimately it was my fault.

“She also has a movie deal,” Zoey said finally.

“Who?”

“McCombie.”

“*What?*”

Several pairs of eyes landed on us.

“*A great signing!*” I shouted with fake jubilation as if I’d always intended it to be a complete sentence. Zoey and I smiled maniacally until everyone returned to their business.

“A movie deal? Like green-lighted and cast or just optioned?” I hissed.

“The hot guy from that cop show you like is starring in it.”

“I love that for her,” I lied through my teeth.

“Yeah, I can tell,” Zoey said.

My competition with the blockbuster author, who really was one of the nicest people on the planet, was one-sided and had once fueled me with motivation to make every book better. Now I just felt like crawling under the table and becoming one with the ballroom carpet.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so happy you’re still here!” A middle-aged woman and—judging from the shared bouncy curls and adorable underbites—her teenage daughter jogged up to the table, cheeks flushed, smiles radiant. They had one of those crates on wheels that I’d noticed the more experienced attendees possessed. It was full of new books.

“We were in Maryanne Norton’s line, and then I had to get a picture with Reva McDowell’s super gorgeous cover model, and Mom was worried she was going to miss you,” the daughter announced.

“I’m your biggest fan. Of course, I’m sure you get that all the time,” the mother said, unloading a dozen books by other authors on the table.

“You’d be surprised,” I said with what felt like a grotesque facsimile of a smile.

“Aha! Here they are.” She triumphantly unearthed two well-worn paperbacks written by yours truly. “Your Spring Gate books got me through a year of caregiving and the death of my mother. When she was on hospice, we read the entire series together. Even the steamy parts. It was exactly the kind of escape

we both needed and led to some of the most meaningful conversations we'd had as mother and daughter."

"That's...amazing. Thank you," I managed. Relief. Gratitude. Empathy. Hope. They were all in a wrestling match in my throat.

"It meant a lot to me," she said.

"When Mom found out I was into romance, she made me read all of your books," the daughter said, a nose stud winking under the rims of her glasses. "Not gonna lie, I was kind of surprised to find out the books she curled up with every weekend had so much dick in them."

"Well, I do like to write the dick," I said awkwardly. I really needed to work on my small talk.

Zoey elbowed me and gracefully intervened. "I'm Zoey, Hazel's agent. It's so nice to meet you two. Would you like these books personalized?"

The mom beamed. "That would be amazing! Could you make it out to Andrea?"

The daughter's jaw dropped. "Mom. Those are your books."

"But they're what made trips like this possible. I'm just so happy to be able to share this with you."

Mom put her hand on the books as I uncapped my pen. "Can you sign them to Andrea and Jenny?" she asked. "Then they'll be our books."

"Of course," I said.

Mother and daughter crowded the table to watch me sign.

"So when is your next book coming out?" Andrea asked.

"You've been quiet for a while. You must be working on something big," Jenny added, looking giddy. "Is it going to be another Spring Gate book? Or are you writing something completely different?"

"And how do you write small-town romance when you live in a city?" Andrea demanded.

"Uh, well...I do research."

"Is Spring Gate based on a real town?" Jenny wondered.

“Because if it is, we’re definitely road-tripping it before Andrea heads off to college next year.”

“Hey, let’s get a picture of you two with Hazel,” Zoey announced.

“Great idea,” I said desperately.

Vacate the premises.

Hazel

Zoey's phone rang incessantly, but since she couldn't find it—again—we focused on packing up. The signing was officially over, though there were still three or four authors with long lines of eager readers.

"I've never felt more like a has-been than I did today."

Zoey nodded briskly. "Good."

"Good?"

She blew a curl out of her face. "Yeah, because I know you, Hazel Freaking Hart. I've known you since the third grade. You're always one 'you can't do that' away from a full-blown 'hold my beer' training montage."

My smile was on the pathetic side, but it was there. "You're such a weirdo."

"That's why you love me. Now, listen carefully. All it takes is one good book to turn all those beautiful readers into Jennys and Andreas. You're a kick-ass author with amazing stories to tell. And who knows, you might just find your own happily ever after."

I blew out a breath through my teeth. That was the thing. I'd had my shot at HEA, and it had blown up in my face. If there was one thing I knew for sure, you weren't given unlimited chances in love. That's why they called it "the one."

Zoey unzipped the front pocket of the suitcase and shoved my barely used pen collection inside. "Aha! There you are, you sneaky little electronic turd," she said, fishing her phone out of the pocket.

I shook my head. "You're a walking disaster."

"But I'm *your* walking disaster. Now let's go get a drink."

"How about several?" I countered.

"Even better."

We headed for the door, excusing ourselves as we cut through one of the long lines. I glanced up and caught the look of panic on the author's pretty face as she scanned the sheer number of bodies.

Zoey's phone rang again. "Ugh. It's my boss. I need to take this."

"Give me the bag or you'll wander off and leave it somewhere," I said, taking the suitcase from her.

"One time. Okay fine, four times."

I shooed her away.

"Lawrence, to what do I owe the honor on a Saturday?" Zoey said into the phone as she strode toward the door.

I paused again and looked back at the author. She still had fifty people in line, and she looked exhausted. I debated for almost a full minute before rummaging through the suitcase until I found what I was looking for. I made my way up to the table, where an overwhelmed line attendant held up her palms. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait your turn with all the other many, many other readers."

"I'm an author, and I have something for"—I glanced at the signage—"Stormi Garza."

"Make it quick. We're already going to be here through happy hour unless my menopause takes me down with a hot flash," she said, swiping her forearm over her brow.

“Here’s a little something for you.” I handed the woman a protein bar and a sports drink.

“Ugh! You’re a damn angel,” she whispered, then tore the bar wrapper open with desperate violence.

I apologized to the readers at the front of the line and slid in behind the table.

“Hi. I’m Hazel,” I said to Stormi. “I thought you might need a rehydration break.” I handed over another bottle of sports drink and set it on the table in front of her.

Stormi looked at it like she might cry. She was pretty, curvy, and oh so young with a cloud of wavy black hair. “Thank you,” she rasped.

“Drink up,” I ordered. “You’re doing great. You’re almost done, and everyone is so happy to see you.”

“My face hurts from smiling, and I think my hand is going to fall off,” she admitted.

“I’ve got something for that too,” I said, sliding the small zippered cooler over the pretty purple tablecloth emblazoned with her logo.

“Is it alcohol? Please tell me it’s alcohol,” Stormi begged.

“Even better,” I promised. “It’s an ice glove for after the signing. You just slide your signing hand into it, and it helps with the inflammation. Plus, it’ll keep your drink cold while you hold it.”

“You’re my hero,” she said.

I waved awkwardly and ducked out from behind the table, carting the suitcase.

It felt like a symbolic passing of the torch. The old creaky athlete turning over the captain armband to someone with younger, fresher muscles. I was glad to help. But there was a part of me that I barely recognized. One that didn’t feel ready to just gracefully give up.

I found Zoey in the atrium, leaning against the glass rail and staring down at the fountain in the lobby below, her phone still clutched in her hand.

“I need a drink. How about you?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically hoarse.

“What’s wrong? Did a pigeon get in here?” Zoey’s fear of birds was an endless source of entertainment for me.

She looked up at me finally, her green eyes watery. “No. I just got fired.”

“So apparently today was the day I volunteered to babysit Earl Wiggins,” Zoey said, staring morosely into her drink. She’d asked the bartender for whatever drink contained the most amount of alcohol, and he’d delivered what constituted a vat of Long Island iced tea.

“The vaguely misogynistic horror writer who always puts his foot in his mouth during live interviews?” I prompted, stirring my vodka soda with the lime wedge.

“That’s the one. He’s one of the agency’s biggest clients. He had an interview scheduled with the *New Yorker*, but his agent is at a book fair in Germany. I thought it was next weekend. I put it in my calendar wrong.”

“Oh, Zo.” The woman’s failures with calendars were legendary.

“So he went to the interview alone and said something stupid,” she continued.

“They can’t fire you for something someone else’s author did,” I said, indignant.

Zoey folded her arms on the bar and rested her chin on them. “They can and they did. Lawrence said it was the last straw.”

I reached over and affectionately ruffled her curls. “What are you going to do?”

“Drink. A lot,” she said to the bar.

“Allow me to support you in your time of need.” I signaled the bartender for another round.

“I work so damn hard, but I just keep screwing up. Every other adult on the planet can use a calendar app. Not me. Now the agency is doing damage control and—oh my God! I have a noncompetee,” she wailed. “I can’t take any of my clients with me, even if they were willing to overlook my gross negligence.”

Well, hell.

I'd known she'd taken some heat from work during the divorce. But I'd been mired in my own lengthy pity party and hadn't thought much about anyone else. Zoey was the only one who had been pulling for me and pushing me. Now she'd lost her job because she'd shown up for me when I needed her.

I took her hand. "I know this doesn't mean anything right now, but you have me. And just because I haven't written a book in forever doesn't mean I'm ready to be put out to pasture or whatever they do with old horses."

"Glue factory."

"Gross. I'm not going to the glue factory without a fight. Neither are you. We'll get through this together. And then we're going to rub our success in their stupid, smug faces."

Zoey gave me a watery smile that wasn't even remotely convincing. She didn't believe me. Hell, I couldn't blame her. I wasn't sure *I* believed me.

"Thanks, Haze. I appreciate you," she said before finding her straw with her mouth and guzzling until the ice rattled in the glass.

I slumped against the wall of my building's elevator. It wasn't the four vodka sodas careening through my system that had robbed me of the will to stand up. It was reality.

It was barely 6 p.m. on a Saturday, and I was ready to crawl into bed for the next twenty hours. My limbs felt heavy, my head fuzzy. Why did life have to be so hard, require so much energy?

I stabbed the button for my floor and pulled out my phone, needing a numbing distraction from the spectacular defeat that was my career and the guilt I felt over Zoey's blowing up.

Where were the videos of middle-aged men being surprised by puppies when you needed them?

The red notifications of missed calls and messages drew my

attention, and I blew a duck-lipped raspberry of a sigh. It wasn't like my day could get any worse.

I pushed play on the latest message.

"Ms. Hart, this is Rachel Larson, attorney at Brown and Hardwick. I'm reaching out to discuss the terms of your divorce settlement. Specifically your agreement to vacate my client's apartment. My records indicate you were served papers last month. I must speak with you—"

The very proper voice of Rachel Larson, attorney-at-law, cut off abruptly as I paused the message, not sure I could survive the rest of her sentence.

The elevator doors opened to my floor, and I stepped out in a fog into the once bougie, now mostly dated hallway. I vaguely recalled accepting some kind of package that I had to sign for. But it had been one bottle of wine into a binge-watch of *Cougar Town*.

Music and laughter came from two doors down. I couldn't remember their names, but it was a couple in their fifties who hosted a monthly dinner party. I'd lived here three years before I realized their guests were other neighbors on the floor. We had never been invited.

Jim said it was because they were plebeian sports fans who wouldn't know an aged cabernet if it punched them in their palate.

I'd hazarded a guess that it was sentiments like that that had kept us on the uninvited list.

After wrestling my keys from my bag, I shouldered my apartment door open and hurried inside. I dumped my things on the living room floor and performed a quick, messy search of the paperwork on the coffee table. I found the envelope with the Brown and Hardwick logo on it and ripped it open.

"Shit." I skimmed the top page of the fat legal document. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

It wasn't that I'd forgotten that in the ultimate act of conflict avoidance, I'd promised to move out twelve months after the ink dried on the divorce decree. It was more that I'd chosen to

ignore that fact, temporarily confident that I'd pull myself out of the downward spiral in plenty of time to deal with the mess before it was too late.

...must vacate the premises by August 15.

"August fifteenth? As in *five* days from now? No, no, no. This can't be happening!"

I pounced on my bag and dug out my phone again, hitting the Call button. "Yes, sorry to bother you on a weekend, but I need to speak with Rachel...somebody. This is Hazel Hart," I said, doing my best not to spew my panic and frustration all over the weekend answering service.

"I've got instructions here to forward you straight to Ms. Larson. Also, my mother is a huge fan, Ms. Hart. She used to read your books all the time," he said chirpily, as if his firm weren't actively trying to make me homeless.

"Thanks," I said dryly.

I paced and nibbled on my thumbnail to the jazzy hold music.

"Ms. Hart, so good of you to return my calls." It sounded like Rachel "The Home Stealer" Larson was in the middle of some kind of indoor athletic event.

"Do you get paid extra for sarcasm?" I demanded.

"Ms. Hart," she said with an "I deal with weirdos like you with my infinite well of expensive patience" tone. "I understand that these are trying times for you, but my client and my firm have given you ample time to make arrangements."

"Arrangements for what? You booting me out of my home?"

"Technically it's your ex-husband's home."

I shook my head violently. "No. No! He put my name on the deed when we got married."

"Once again, Ms. Hart, according to our paperwork, he put your name on the mortgage, not the deed."

"What difference does that make?" I demanded, tripping over a stack of overdue library books.

“It gives you half ownership of the debt instead of the asset.”

“Why? Why? I mean, *why* would someone who claims to love someone do that?”

“It’s not my job to question client motives.” There were a distinct whistle on her end of the call and the groan of a crowd.

“I’ve watched *Suits* three times the whole way through, and they make it seem like motive is kind of important,” I argued.

“Ms. Hart, the time to fight this is over. You are welcome to discuss this with your attorney, but at this point, you’re going to have to do that from a different apartment.”

“For the love of my last iota of sanity, call me Hazel. What if I buy it?”

“Hazel,” she said, “that’s certainly one possible option, though I’m not familiar with your financial situation. I’d advise you to consult your own attorney. But even if this is the path you choose, you still need to vacate the apartment by end of day Thursday.”

“And go where?” I squeaked.

“I’m sure you have friends or relatives who would be happy to host you until you decide on a course of action. Or maybe now is the time for a fresh start somewhere else,” Rachel said with just a whiff of the condescension a very important person with very important things to do could deliver.

My scoff could have leveled one of the houses of the three little pigs.

A fresh start? Was that supposed to be some kind of joke? I was a New Yorker, born and bred. I’d never lived anywhere else. Not even Long Island. I was the Manhattanite who rolled her eyes whenever a peer announced they were moving out of the city for a house with a yard. Who wanted to mow grass when you could walk a block in either direction and enjoy high-end shopping or Michelin-starred Ethiopian food?

New York was my home. The only one I’d ever known. I was born here, and up until seven minutes ago, I’d kind of assumed I’d die here.

“I’m glad we were finally able to connect. I look forward to

a peaceful resolution. Please don't hesitate to call the office if you have any more questions concerning your settlement," Rachel said before disconnecting the call.

"Hello? Hello?" I demanded dramatically to the dead line.

I tossed the phone down on top of the paperwork and began to pace. I had a contract lawyer. But her area of expertise was more publishing deals and less cleaning up personal life messes. And my divorce lawyer had been so appalled at my pathological desire to give up, I doubted she would willingly speak to me again. I should have listened to her. I should have fought harder. What had I been thinking? Always the nice girl. Always afraid to make waves. At the very least, I should have swallowed my pride, called my mother, and begged for her expertise. Instead I'd rolled over and played dead, and it had cost me dearly.

"You were supposed to be the one," I muttered out loud in case the spirit of ex-husbands past was lurking around. Scrubbing my hands over my face, I continued to pace. None of my heroes would have ever done this to my heroines. But Jim was no hero, and I was no plucky heroine. I was a depressed, divorced, middle-aged mess, and I needed a solution.

It had been a long time since I'd had to brainstorm any creative solutions to a problem—fictional or otherwise. I felt like I was mentally wading through Elmer's glue.

Oh, God. Was Elmer's made from old horses? Was the first horse they turned to glue named Elmer?

I shook the thought out of my head. "Focus, Hazel. Think. What solves all problems?"

Wine? No. Family? Definitely not. My feet stopped in their tracks. "Money."

I unearthed my laptop and took it to the kitchen counter, too keyed up to sit down. It took me three tries, but I finally remembered the password to my brokerage account and logged in.

"Okay. Not awful, but not 'purchase an apartment in Manhattan,'" I noted, eyeing the balance. Thanks to automatic bill pay, irregular paychecks, and my complex bout of grief,

shame, and lethargy, I'd been lax about everything...including checking in on my financial situation. There hadn't been any new book advances thanks to me blowing fart noises at my deadlines. And from the looks of things, royalties were down. Way down.

Good thing I had experience raising fictional characters from rock bottom. I just needed to think like a heroine.