

CHAPTER 2

Friday, 21st April 2017

The party

Soft jazz drifts over the fence of 17 Canary Street in Richmond when we arrive at 5:30 pm—half an hour late, courtesy of Dad misplacing the car keys. Once we enter the Wilsons' home, Mr Dennis cheerfully hangs our coats in the cloakroom and leads us into the foyer, all adorned with vivid paintings of dragonflies, hummingbirds and jellyfish.

Mum stops at a cute painting of a polar bear with a cub. 'These are beautiful! Michael's so talented.'

'That one was for Mother's Day,' says Mr Dennis, peering over his wire-rimmed glasses at the painting. 'He was so embarrassed when Ems insisted on framing it.'

Mum turns a blinding smile on me. 'Darling, why don't you paint something? We can hang it in our kitchen!'

A painting by me. 'What's the poor kitchen done to deserve that?' I say.

Her schoolkids had drawn their Mother's Day cards last week. I started buying cards after turning ten so maybe she's missing the hand-crafted touch. Shouldn't be a loss, given my art skills.

'Penguins shouldn't be too hard to draw.' Clasping her fingers together, Mum stares at me with hopeful eyes. 'I'll let you pick Monday's movie?'

I can't help but laugh at her attempt at a bribe. It's her turn to pick the film for Monday Movie Night; between us, we've unearthed an eclectic range from indie to blockbuster, foreign to formulaic, and I still prefer her choices.

A banner saying *Smiling is Surviving - 10th Anniversary* stretches over the open patio doors, and conversation sweeps through the twenty-or-so guests in black tie and dresses who have spilled into the back garden. They lounge on rattan chairs, cluster under the wooden gazebo, and perch on the blanket-covered stone wall by the bird bath, nursing flutes of champagne.

Mum's already complimenting the tulips and daffodils. Flames dance in the fire pit, tempering the chill, and even moths flutter around fairy lights to top off that fairy-tale feel.

Ducking out under the banner, Mr Dennis turns to the cherry blossom tree in the corner, which has carpeted the patio in pink petals. Mrs Emmeline's standing under the tree with another guest. 'Ems! Look who finally turned up.'

Mrs Emmeline excuses herself and jogs over to fling her arms around Mum. 'I've been waiting to give my speech.'

Squeezing back, Mum frowns at Dad, who shuffles guiltily. 'Someone left the car keys on the microwave.'

'Honestly, David.' Mrs Emmeline smacks his chest but melts into a smile as he hugs her.

'So proud of you, Emmy,' he says.

'Ten years, what a way you've come, Em,' says Mum. 'And a beautiful dress to celebrate the occasion!'

Mrs Emmeline's green dress has a lustrous sheen right down to her ankles. 'Oh, this? Special little gift,' she says, prompting a laugh from Mum. 'And look at you, Zach!'

When Mrs Emmeline hugs me, I get a face-full of long, wavy brown hair and strawberry scented shampoo. 'Bet the world feels bigger now, hm?'

Now I'm sixteen, I can apply for my own passport, change my name, open a savings account, work full-time...have sex.

'Yeah, it does. Congratulations, Mrs Emmeline. And thanks again for the present.'

'My pleasure, honey. Still can't believe how tall you've got!' With a hand pressed by the tiny starfish pendant below her neck, she looks me up and down. 'Picture of David back in college, Charly.'

Suppose I've got the same sharp jawline and—according to Mum—*hooded eyes*. Whatever that means. I'm still half a foot shorter and years from growing facial hair I can shave into stubble. And I haven't, of course, built up a repertoire of dad jokes.

Got the freckles from Mum though, who's covered hers tonight under make-up.

'He's got Di Caprio's Romeo look going on,' says Mrs Emmeline as Mr Dennis fetches glasses from the dining table that's set out in the garden. 'Works well with dark hair, doesn't

it?' I'd let Mum comb gel through my hair because some classmates rocked up to school with gel before Easter break, and it didn't look bad. Plucking an open bottle of champagne off the table, Mrs Emmeline fills the glasses and passes them around.

When she tilts the bottle over the last glass for me, I say, 'I'm happy to pass.' I tried some champagne once from Mum's glass. Way too sour.

'Shall I fix you a cocktail?' offers Mrs Emmeline. 'A daiquiri? Margarita? Passionfruit martini?' I'm not even sure what they taste like, except maybe the martini. 'Perhaps a soda?' she adds, but there's now an inch of champagne in the glass and I don't want to inconvenience her.

'Nah, champagne's fine. Haven't had the pink type before.'

Mr Dennis raises his glass. 'Go on, it won't poison you.' The fizzing champagne is the same shade as the birthmark splashed over his nose and mouth. Interesting clash with his ginger hair. 'It's a Rosé, very different from the white.'

So I accept the glass and resign myself to finishing it by the end of the night.

'Help yourselves to the food,' says Mrs Emmeline, ushering us towards the dining table. 'There's plenty more in the kitchen.'

The labelled canapés look amazing—scallops wrapped in pancetta, grilled pineapple and brisket, tomato bruschetta, aubergine skewers, Cajun shrimp, vegetable gyoza and smoked salmon croquettes.

'Zach!' says Shani, heading towards me from the other end of the patio. We exchange a one-armed hug and she gives me a thumbs-up. 'Nice suit.'

I thumbs-up back. 'Nice dress.' Even got a purse to match. Ninety percent of the time we've seen each other, we've both worn jeans so it's fun we're fancier.

She's upgraded to the same style of black glasses as Mr Ravi, who snorts and says, somewhat fondly, 'Let me guess. Your dad lost the car keys?' But he's all dimples as I hug him too.

'Soon, we might have more inexperienced drivers on the road to worry about,' jokes Mrs Emmeline. 'Michael's asking for lessons.'

‘Oh, Nishani already has loads of driving experience,’ says Mr Ravi. ‘Driven me crazy for sixteen years.’ The adults snicker and Mr Ravi squeezes Shani’s shoulder. ‘Nah, she’s a good kid. Just secured an internship at Imperial.’

‘Seriously?’ I say as Shani adjusts her glasses to try and disguise the flush of pride. It’s tough to secure spots for medicine. ‘That’s *awesome*.’

‘Solid stuff, Shani!’ says Dad. ‘Some other teens, I tell you—nothing better to do than graffiti on people’s cars.’ Last week, half the vehicles on our street had been vandalised. Not a typical situation in our neighbourhood; police even enquired at our house for information.

‘Like when Simon from Chemistry spray-painted his love confession on my Ford Escort?’ says Mrs Emmeline.

Mrs Emmeline, Dad, Mum and Mr Ravi all went to the same university in London, but after Mrs Emmeline went to the States to pursue a research grad, she met Mr Dennis.

Dad scoffs and crosses his arms. ‘Can you *believe* he thought that was a good way to confess?’

‘And what’s your idea of a good confession?’ says Mr Ravi, eyes twinkling. ‘A drunken love letter?’

I snicker. ‘You wrote Mum a love letter?’ Cute, actually, but it’s fun to see Dad flush.

Mum looks embarrassed too but someone calls out, ‘Speech, Emmeline!’ and the sentiment echoes around the garden.

‘Yes! The speech,’ says Mrs Emmeline with a clap of her hands. ‘Denny, can you—’

‘Record it for Michael, yep,’ says Mr Dennis.

Unfortunately, Michael’s in America right now.

Mum sighs, all trace of embarrassment gone. ‘What a shame your dad booked Michael’s return flight for the wrong date, Em.’

‘His memory’s going,’ says Mrs Emmeline. When Mr Dennis wraps an arm around her, she pulls away and strides towards the patio doors to stand by the grand piano.

‘How’s Michael?’ I ask Mr Dennis as we all cluster around the patio.

‘Disappointed he couldn’t be here.’ He holds up his phone and frames Mrs Emmeline on camera. She’s too tiny on the screen and not bright enough.

‘You might want to adjust the exposure,’ I say, and he fiddles with the settings. ‘Shall I record it for you?’

‘Thanks, Zach. You’d certainly have a better eye for this.’

‘No problem.’ I correct the lighting, back up beneath the cherry blossom tree for a better angle, and hit record.

‘Are we all here now?’ says Mrs Emmeline. ‘No one else missing? Nobody still stuck at home searching for car keys?’

When the laughter settles, Mrs Emmeline gestures up at the *Smiling is Surviving* banner. ‘I wouldn’t have begun this project ten years ago if I...’ She bites her lip.

By the dining table, Mum hugs Dad’s arm.

As Mrs Emmeline takes a deep breath, I zoom in. ‘If I hadn’t fallen into depression myself. If I hadn’t worried about how low my mind could go. How scared I felt that my kid—*our* kids—could feel the same depth of helplessness. We’re passing on this world to a new generation who are more open to confronting their mental health, but when a mental disorder is so common it becomes invisible—’

A pink petal drifts into my eye.

I jerk back, look over my shoulder. The bark’s split down the trunk and black growths have sprouted around the branches.

Fairy lights twine down ropes to the wooden plank hanging from the branch. Mr Dennis helped Michael and me build the swing when we were eight. The ropes still seem sturdy but the weathered seat looks smaller and closer to the ground than I remember.

My phone buzzes in my pocket with a message alert.

Got to be Koben, who might even decide to call me. Keeping Mr Dennis’ phone trained on Mrs Emmeline, I tug out mine to silence it.

Koben 6:07pm

How’s the party? Is she still hot ;D

It's easy to picture his wiggling eyebrows. I glance over at Shani, who's listening to the speech with rapt attention. Koben's never met her or seen pictures of her. And I've never talked about Shani like that, so I have no idea who he's—

A burst of applause ripples out.

'Safe. Effective. Available,' says Mrs Emmeline.

Oh. *That's* who.

'If these antidepressants are successful, we can help a lot of people. So thank you, everyone for being here tonight.' She raises her glass. 'And let's make each other smile!'

I pocket my phone as cheers erupt and glasses raise.

Mr Dennis walks over and I end the recording. 'Manage to get that?'

'Yep,' I say, giving his phone back. Despite the distraction, I got it all on camera.

'Go fill your plate! You still haven't eaten anything.'

So I make sure to pile up the Cajun shrimp, which looks really good, and head over with Shani to the stone wall.

'Great speech, wasn't it?' she says as we settle on top of the ledge.

For a moment, I consider telling her my attention slipped. 'Definitely. Today's an amazing milestone.' Wish I'd served myself more shrimp. It's damn tasty.

Shani hums. 'Auntie Emmeline let me come here to a couple of the quarterly meetings when they were working on their pre-clinical dosing and toxicity assessments. Seeing her work inspired me to apply for the internship. Still interested in studying film?'

Perhaps venturing into film means job instability but, after hesitating, I admit, 'I might go for it.'

'Why not? Movies are powerful ways to...' She gestures vaguely and smiles like she can't find the words to acknowledge how profound they can be. 'You'll find plenty to be excited about.'

My anxiety eases away. Storyboarding, lighting, composition, colour-grading, music...So much work goes into a film and I'd like to be part of that effort. Before long, we're deep in discussion about upcoming school exams and I've finally finished my champagne, the sourness fizzing on my tongue.

When clumsy piano notes twang through the garden, I look towards the living room and groan; Dad's trying to play Chopsticks.

Wiser guests have retreated a safer distance into the garden but those who've ventured over to watch him butcher one of the easiest tunes possible cover their ears. Shani and I approach the piano, wincing as Dad bangs out F-sharps which have no business being there.

'Dad. That's *not* how it goes.'

'I've almost got it,' he insists, jabbing the wrong keys.

Mrs Emmeline fights Dad for the stool, nearly sitting on his lap before he relents and lets her have the seat. She executes a flawless rendition of Chopsticks in one go and smirks across the grand piano at Dad, who huffs. The jazz instrumental playing in the background ends and the rest of the guests, deeming the piano zone safe, crowd around.

'Oh, do some R&B,' begs Mum.

But Mrs Emmeline shakes her head. 'I've gone rusty since I stopped playing.'

Still, *anyone* would do better than Dad, who crosses his arms on the piano and gives a slanted smile. Mum's told me I smile like that too. 'I'm sure you've still got the touch.'

Mrs Emmeline, who'd risen from the stool, gazes up at Dad and sits again, moving her seat closer to the foot pedals. Her eyes drift shut and she inhales, trailing her fingertips over the black and white canvas.

No one's asked me to film this, but I pull out my phone, start recording.

We all wait quietly as Mrs Emmeline tests out notes, deciding which keys to settle on before she skims out a delicate opening chord of Alicia Key's debut single *Fallin'*.

Then she's off, hands gliding across the piano as she strums the riffs, beautifully capturing the song's sentiment of struggling love. The chandelier drapes her in a hushed glow, caressing her wavy brown hair and slipping down her green dress right to her feet.

Her fingertips straddle the keys and the breeze ripples the sheer curtains. The rhythm smoulders, rolling into a breathless dance as it surges towards the climax. As the curtains billow with the swell of the crescendo, cherry blossom petals skitter across the top of the piano.

Goosebumps ripple along my skin. It's a cinematic moment and, at some point, I'd lowered my phone to watch her properly, instead of through a screen.

She's amazing.

* * *

I roll over in bed, shove away my laptop with its stupid spam email.

Did I ruin your little cam session?

Where the hell had that question come from if Koben only saw the webpage? There was no reason for him to think... I yank open my laptop, stare at the webcam. The indicator light is on. After I blink, it's off.

The women on the webpage had specifically been older with brown hair like Mrs Emmeline. Maybe it wasn't just malicious spam. My heart thuds faster, insisting I tell Cameron. Doesn't matter he's an online friend and that's not his real name—we're close enough.

I log into my account on the film forum. After the Wilsons died, after Mum and Dad split, the first message I posted was *I miss my parents*. Missed them even when the three of us still lived together, drifting apart.

Cameron's first message on the forum—a reply to mine—is pinned at the top of my inbox above months' worth of conversations. *I miss mine too*. He'd moved out after telling his parents he was gay; connecting with someone over something so raw made me feel less alone.

I'd only given him the cropped version:

My mum's best friend and her husband died. My parents split because Mum thought Dad cheated with the best friend. And I somehow caused this.

Before I can type out a panicked message, the chat pings.

Cameron: Here's a surprise for you—I arrived in London 3 nights ago! Your film symposium finishes at 5pm right? We could meet after?

My fingers freeze over the keyboard. It shouldn't be a shock; Cameron mentioned he wasn't sure what to study yet and decided to leave Wisconsin to travel a few months. But now he's in London. He's *actually* here. I can finally see him in person, not just as words on a screen. My hands tremble while typing.

Zach.C: Cameron, I think my webcam got hacked after I clicked a link in an anonymous email. The webcam light blinked.

Cameron: Sounds like a glitch? But be careful what you click on!

Zach.C: Yeah. I'm sure it was nothing.

Cameron: Shall we meet tmrrw in front of the National Gallery at 6pm since it's not far from the college?

Zach.C: That would be amazing.

Cameron: See you tomorrow then :) Let's exchange numbers.

I take my laptop downstairs, stopping halfway to peer over the banister at the voices from the sofa.

'I mess with him all the time, Shani, and it's never set him off before so—'

'What was on the screen?' Shani's stroking Panda, who's laying on her lap.

Koben huffs. 'Nothing more explicit than what you'd find in a fifteen-rated film.'

'It's too soon to tease him.'

'Figured by now he would've...I just miss how he used to be, you know?'

I bite down on my lip so I don't break down on the spot; I miss that too.

Shani's silent, but her face must say it all because Koben sighs as he swings on his jacket. 'He shouldn't skip the symposium because I was an idiot.'

But he doesn't need to come to my room apologise; the creak of the last step catches their attention and Shani's hand pauses over Panda.

Koben gets to his feet. 'Zacker, listen. I shouldn't have—'

‘I’ll go to the symposium, but there’s something I need to tell you both.’ I turn away from Panda’s unblinking hazel eyes. ‘Before I do, can you take her out of the room?’