

FALSE FRONT

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Columbus, Ohio

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For my children, who define love for me

and

For Richard, who puts no limits on what's possible



PROLOGUE

Two Years Ago ...

Emma Porter looked bored. No surprise there. It was her standard expression—her failsafe. She, with some effort, avoided the imposing lighted mirror in front of her and kept her gaze on the screen of her phone. Her violet eyes, masked by colored contacts that turned them an unremarkable blue, glazed. It didn't help that the stylist was working his way around her head in a hypnotic rhythm, pulling long strands of honey-colored hair through his enormous round brush. He would have put her to sleep but for the incessant chatter. *Sister, do you model? How has no one approached you before?* Oh, they'd approached her.

She gave her standard reply.

“Nope, just in school.”

She checked her phone again. A text.

We're good for Jane Hotel. I talked to my buddy. Bouncer's name is Fernand. See you at 9!

The exclamation point annoyed her. *You're a guy*, she thought. *Guys shouldn't use exclamation points when they text*. She'd probably end up dumping him over it. She'd done it for less.

“Big night tonight? It’s a crazy Thursday. Are you going to that thing at Tau?”

“No. Just meeting a friend for a drink.”

A friend? She guessed he was a friend. She’d met him twice—no, three times; he’d kissed her on 58th Street before she got into a cab three nights ago: hence the big date.

“A friend, huh? Sounds like a date.”

“Yeah,” Emma sighed, “it’s kind of a date.”

“So, no one special? No BF?”

“Nope. No boyfriend. Just a date.”

“Well, I imagine the boys are climbing through your window, gorgeous girl.”

She wanted to say *the last time a boy tried to climb in my window, security guards tackled him on the front lawn, as a leashed German shepherd bared his teeth at his neck while Teddy Prescott cried that he was in my seventh grade ceramics class, and he just wanted to ask me to a school dance.* Instead, she buttoned her lip and checked her phone. Again.

“No, not so much.”

“Well, my work here is done. What do you think?”

He ran his fingers up her scalp from her nape and pushed the mass of hair forward over her shoulders, admiring his handiwork. She managed as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

“Looks great. Thanks.”

She grabbed her bag, left the cash and a generous tip—partly for the blowout, mostly for enduring her mood—and headed out.



The walk home was a short-ish hike. While Broadway up ahead was always jam-packed, the little Tribeca side street was surprisingly desolate. Scaffolds stood sentry, and crumpled newspapers blew across the road like urban tumbleweeds. Emma's footsteps clacked on the pavement, and her shopping bags swished against her legs. In the waning daylight, the long shadows reached out. Emma moved with purpose but not haste, running through the plan for the evening in her head. Across the street, a pair of lurking teens stopped talking to watch her. The jarring slam of a Dumpster lid and the *beep, beep, beep* of a reversing trash truck echoed across the pavement. Near the end of the block, a homeless man in a recessed doorway muttered about a coming plague and God setting the world to rights. Emma forced herself to keep her pace even but couldn't stifle her sigh of relief as she rounded the corner and joined the hordes. A businessman let out a noise of irritation as Emma forced him to slow his pace when she merged into the foot traffic. Yes, this was better. She hurried up Broadway and headed for home.

Spring Street was insane. The stores ran the gamut from A-list designer shops to dive bars and bodegas. Beneath the display window of Alexander Woo, a ratty hipster strummed a guitar. In front of Balthazar, there was a hotdog vendor. The street was dotted with musicians and addicts and homeless and shoppers and tourists and construction crews and commuters and students. There was a French crêpe stand next to Emma's favorite Thai place that was next to an organic vegan café. It was like somebody took everything that made New York *New York*—the art, the diversity, the music, the food, the bustle, the noise— and jammed it all onto one street. The street Emma called home.

Outside her building, a group of guys from her Abnormal Psychology class was coming out of the corner bodega.

"Hey IQ, what's up tonight? Heading downtown?"

"Maybe."

“Martin’s parents’ brownstone is on Waverly. Party’s on!”

“Okay, I’ll try to stop by.”

“Cool.”

The guys in her class had started calling her “IQ” freshman year. She was flattered at first, thinking it bore some reference to her intellect. A few months in, she discovered it was short for “Ice Queen.” That was fine with her too. Whatever.

Her elegant but inconspicuous building sat just down from Mother’s Ruin, her favorite pub, and next to a heavily graffitied retail space for rent. She waved to her doorman, who rushed to help her with her bags.

“Hey, Ms. Porter. Shopping, I see.”

“Hey, Jimmy. Yeah, just a few odds and ends.”

He glanced at the orange Hermes shopping bag and raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

“You want me to take these up?”

“Yes, please, Jimmy.” She handed over the bags and pushed through the heavy door to the stairs, while Jimmy summoned the elevator.

As she climbed the seven flights, Emma felt pretty calm. It was just a date. People had them all the time. *Normal people* had them all the time. She was normal. Well, she was getting there, and this outing tonight was proof of that. She had met a cute guy. She liked him well enough, and he was taking her out. She was excited about it; well, the *progress* more than the date. Another box to check on the list. She could crow about it to her therapist next week. The guy, Tom, seemed excited too, based on the aforementioned errant exclamation point. That, and the fact that she had actually heard him high-five a guy over the phone when she’d said yes.

Her bags were waiting by the door when she emerged from the seventh-floor landing. She fumbled with her key and pushed the door open with her butt as she scooped her purchases from the hallway floor. As she walked into the small but tasteful apartment—well, huge and elegant by college standards but certainly low key for Emma—she was greeted by a squeal and then the vaguely familiar strains of Rod Stewart’s classic, “Tonight’s the Night,” so off-key it was barely recognizable.

“Jeez, Caroline, could you take it down a notch?”

“Nope. Can’t. Sorry.”

Caroline Fitzhugh had been Emma’s best friend since before they were born. That wasn’t an exaggeration. Their mothers had grown up together, had married men who were themselves best friends, and were neighbors in Georgetown as newlyweds. The women were inseparable until Emma’s mother crossed the line separating “life of the party” from “addict.” Their pregnancies were well-timed. It gave the two women a chance to rekindle their friendship, and it gave Emma’s mother a fleeting chance at sobriety. Their moms spent their pregnancies together, nearly every day for the nine months leading up to the girls’ arrival. Well, seven months and three weeks—Caroline was always in a rush to get places. After that, Emma’s family moved to Connecticut, Caroline’s to Georgia, and the girls saw each other on holidays and trips. Caroline knew Emma *before*. Before what one of her shrinks had euphemistically referred to as “the event.” Before she was Emma Porter. Before she was from a small town near Atlanta. Before. Caroline was one of a handful of people with that knowledge. She knew Emma, and she protected her with a ferocity that rivaled Emma’s father. Tonight, however, was a different story. Tonight, Caroline was pushing her out of the nest. *It’s time*, she had said.

Caroline popped a bottle of Veuve Clicquot way too expensive for pre-gaming, declaring a dispensation on Emma’s father’s strict alcohol ban, and poured them each a glass.

“One glass, Em, to loosen up.”

Emma answered her with a sip.

“Go get dressed. The LBD awaits.”

The “little black dress” to which she referred was the Versace black crepe safety pin dress. It was the sexiest thing either of them had ever seen. The sleeveless dress hit Emma mid-thigh and was accented with mismatched gold safety pins at the waist and hip. Caroline had bought it for Emma on her credit card to avoid any questions from her father. He was generous to a fault, but anything remotely provocative was frowned upon. Emma garnered enough attention as it was, and a sexy dress only upped the ante. Now the dress was laying on her bed next to a pair of strappy sky-high heels and a small box holding a pair of diamond hoops. *The outfit for the virgin sacrifice*. She laughed to herself, then stopped abruptly, surprised by the term her thoughts had conjured: *virgin*. It was a word she never used because it had no meaning for her. She hated the word because the status of one’s virginity was inextricably linked to one’s past, and she couldn’t dwell on what she didn’t know. Therapists encouraged her to embrace a term that expressed her “emotional virginity,” but Emma never could think of one. Her shrink was not amused when she suggested “vaginal beginner” and “hymenal newbie,” so they let it slide. She could be an actual virgin after all. The point was that it shouldn’t matter, and if everything went according to plan, after tonight it wouldn’t. She could pop her emotional and/or physical cherry and move on. At this point, she just wanted to get the damn thing over with.

They had hours before she had to meet Tom. JT, her driver and bodyguard, usually accompanied her out in the evening, but Caroline told him they were heading to a study group at a friend’s in the same building, so he had the night off. She was on her own, and she was thrilled.

Caroline pulled up the zipper on the dress and bounced around to Katy Perry, while Emma sipped tentatively on the same glass of bubbly.

“Oh Jeez, Em, just drink it. One glass won’t have you cross-eyed. It’ll calm your nerves.”

She was right. Emma was nervous. For obvious reasons.



Emma left Caroline at Mother's, their local bar, with some friends and ordered an Uber to head to the Jane Hotel. As Tom had said, the bouncer, Fernand, was expecting her. Not that she would have had any trouble getting in anyway—she never did—but that dress was like a VIP pass. The group of people waiting gave a resigned sigh almost collectively as Emma deftly moved past them and entered the elegant bar. Tom had a table he was guarding with his life, and she made a beeline for him. When a guy at the bar grabbed her arm as she passed, not hard, just enough to stop her, Emma paused, stared at the hand on her bicep, and then slowly looked up at him with a perfected impassive glare. Ice Queen indeed. He released her without a word, and she dropped into the seat across from Tom.

“Hey, Gorgeous. You look amazing.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn't know what you like, so I ordered you a white wine.”

She rarely drank. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She drank in one of her self-defense classes. Jay, her instructor, had insisted that she know how to do some of the moves “impaired,” as he put it, so he'd fed her three beers and then had her train on the mat. She'd thrown up all over him.

The wine did relax her, and they chatted effortlessly. It took Emma nearly an hour to polish off the drink, and when she returned from the ladies' room with a fresh coat of lip gloss, a second glass sat waiting. What the hell. It was a big night.

It took her exactly four sips and ten minutes to realize what was happening.

Emma wasn't normal. Her father, in an extreme effort to get control of their world, made sure of that, and at this moment she was thankful for it. Most girls would think the subtle blur of vision and the slight wave of nausea were due to nerves or too many drinks. But she knew exactly what was happening. She reached into her purse and texted her panic word, "lighthouse," to JT, but he was off duty. It could take him hours. She took a calming breath, keeping her heart rate as low as she could in her panic.

"I'll be right back. I think I left my lip gloss in the bathroom."

"I'll go with you. You look pale."

"No, no, I'm fine. Just dizzy from the wine, I guess. I'm a lightweight."

She forced a giggle. That appeased him. He didn't know she knew.

"Okay, I'll be waiting."

"Be right back," she repeated.

Emma took deliberate steps. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw Tom throw some cash on the table and pull a key card from his breast pocket. She needed to focus on making her way down the hall. She couldn't get help in the bar; a stumbling, slurring girl in a bar would only bolster Tom's ruse. There was an elevator at the end, but as she made her way toward it, she stumbled and realized that it was exactly where Tom wanted her. She needed help or a hiding place, and she needed it fast. Whatever he had slipped in her drink was strong. The symptoms were hitting her fast. She moved down to a janitor's closet. Locked. She started moving frantically hand over hand, keeping her balance on the wall, avoiding looking at the nauseating pattern of the wallpaper as it started to blur. Tom's footsteps were heavy behind her as he closed in. She got to another door, pushed it open, and stumbled into the room. A group of surprised suits looked up as she blinked at them with terrified eyes. The man at the head of the table stood.

"Jesus, are you all right?"

“No. Help.”

She heard the man closest to her mutter, “she’s wasted.” The man at the head of the table moved like a flash. He was coming toward her, and she was losing her ability to discern whether she had put herself in more danger by stumbling into this room. He seemed to float toward her, and Emma started to shake.

“Not drunk. Drunk,” she slurred. “Drugged,” she amended. “Help.”

“Jesus.” He put his hands on her shoulders, and she instantly calmed. Emma tried to shake the fog out of her head, but it only got worse. When she looked up, she saw three of him. So, she looked straight ahead at his tie. A cornflower blue tie that hung between the open sides of his dark suit jacket. She grabbed it with both hands, crunching it in her fists. She tried to remember her training, but all that came out was a plea.

“Please.”

He put his arm around her protectively and calmly spoke.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

And with that soothing notion, she passed out in his arms, still clutching his cornflower blue tie.



Emma woke up nineteen hours later in a hospital room that looked like a suite at the Ritz. JT was standing at the side of the bed like a royal guard, a pissed off royal guard. He felt responsible for her indiscretion; she could feel his anger and guilt. Her father dozed, ashen, in an upholstered leather armchair. The night was a bit of a blur, and she ran through a timeline in her head to catch up. She had as much of it recalled as she probably ever would. Other than the mother of all

headaches, she was otherwise uninjured. When she lifted her arm, the one without the IV, to move an itchy strand of hair from her face, the final few moments before she blacked out came flooding back. There, in her hand, was the cornflower blue tie, still knotted, with the length of it dangling down her forearm. It was wrapped around her palm and knuckles. JT informed her with a perplexed smirk that the nurses gave up trying to pry it from her, and the man, who had not given anyone his name, had ended up pulling it over his head and wrapping it around her hand as they wheeled her away on a gurney.

Completely unconscious, she had refused to let the thing go.



CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

The Harlem Sentry had begun as a conspiracy blog. A crazy bastard named Farrell Whitaker had started it to expose GMOs and lead levels in city water and Hudson River polluters and sleeper cells and anything else that occurred to him. He wasn't even taken seriously enough for anyone to refute his claims—the occasional alien abduction story that peppered the pages did nothing to help. Then one day about five years ago, he thought he saw a congressman sneaking out of a certain out-of-the-way club. A certain out-of-the-way gay club. A certain out-of-the-way S & M leather bar gay club. A certain married, staunchly conservative congressman, in town for a UN event, sneaking out of a certain out-of-the-way gay club with, *eh hem*, a companion. And just like that, Farrell Whitaker had suddenly become the highly respected journalist who headed up the most reliable online investigative news source in New York.

Emma had been working there a month, which was almost enough time to prove to her colleagues that she was an ardent, intelligent NYU grad and not some ditz Farrell wanted to fuck. Almost. So, when he called her into his office that day and gave her the good news, she knew the other writers would give her a collective WTF, and she didn't give one shit. Zero shits given.

Farrell's office looked like one of those basement rooms in a police procedural where a stalker has established his base of operation. Only, rather than one object of fixation, Farrell's obsessions ranged from political corruption to environmental toxins to animal abuse to secret government programs. A whiteboard in the corner had the ominous headline: "White Hat/Black Ops" scrawled across the top and pictures of kidnapped executives and young girls taped haphazardly beneath. Another had what looked to be a pharmaceutical pricing flowchart. Farrell could be the poster child for an ADD/OCD combo.

The charming, if neglected, arched, leaded-glass windows overlooked elevated train tracks where the subways emerged from Manhattan tunnels. His office, despite a huge cash infusion from one of the largest news media organizations in the country, had a gritty feel that Emma was sure Farrell loved. His desk was piled high with magazines, newspapers, and political pamphlets. Farrell, in his paranoia, felt that "lo-fi" was a safer way to research—Big Brother was watching online. A wall in the corner was tacked full of photos of congressmen, movie stars, news anchors, and athletes. There was a burial ground of outdated technology: fax machines, old laptops, and disk drives, some of which he still used. Farrell loved the looks on people's faces when he showed up to an interview with a handheld analog recorder and asked if he could "tape" the meeting. Amid the chaos and the junk, Farrell sat behind his desk, black Adidas propped up dangerously close to a triple espresso, with a cutting-edge tablet nestled in his lap. His frizzy dark blond hair was pulled into a ponytail. He looked like a retired BMX racer. He glanced up with a warm smile, the eye of his office hurricane, and didn't waste a second jumping in.

"Emma, take a seat. You may think you're getting canned, but you're not getting canned. No canning today. Just good news. Very, very good news." Emma glanced over at his sideboard and spotted the nearly empty pot of coffee resting on the burner.

She often wondered if Farrell had a more serious undiagnosed mental disorder beyond his fixations. He rambled like a lunatic, but he said he had good news, so she just looked at him with a raised brow.

“Nathan Hamilton Bishop. Not Nathaniel, not Nate—Nathan. Born—Greenwich, Connecticut; age—twenty-eight; height—six-two; weight—185; hair—brown...”

She listened to Farrell rattle off Nathan’s stats and thought how incomplete the description sounded. He failed to mention that Nathan’s eyes were a captivating emerald green or that his eyelashes were so long that as a boy he had trimmed them. Farrell omitted that Nathan’s hair curled at the ends when he wore it long and that his crooked smile revealed a barely perceptible chipped incisor that he had never had repaired.

“Chestnut,” she murmured.

“Pardon?”

“His hair. Never mind.”

“Andover, Dartmouth, HBS. Current president, soon-to-be CEO of Knightsgrrove-Bishop, arms dealer to the stars . . .”

“Defense contractor.”

“Tomato, tom-ah-to,” he continued as though she hadn’t chimed in. “Fuck buddy to the rich and famous, charlatan, bon vivant, womanizer . . .”

“I know who he is,” she snapped. Boy, did she know.

“Well then, grab a jacket because hell has frozen over.”

Emma waited.

“After routinely requesting an interview every month since he took office . . .”

“He’s the president of a company, not a country,” she corrected.

“My sweet, naive girl!” He smiled kindly and looked at her as though she had asked if Santa Claus were real. Emma mused that he would have patted her head if she hadn’t been sitting across the desk.

“Where was I? Ah, the interview.” Are you sitting down?”

“Sitting.”

“Seatbelt buckled?”

“Farrell.”

“Sorry. Nathan Bishop has agreed to not one, but a series of interviews, a six-week series on himself and the love of his life.”

She thought she might throw up for a second.

“Who?” she choked meekly, not wanting to know the answer.

“Nathan Bishop. Emma, are you even listening to me?”

“No, I mean the ‘love of his life’ part.”

“Oh, isn’t it obvious? The company. Not sure Bishop is capable of meaningful human interaction.”

She was too relieved to respond.

“He requested you.”

“He what?”

“He requested you. You’re doing the interview. I didn’t even question it. When an ungettable guy agrees to something like this after nearly two years of trying, I don’t care if he wants the Ghost of Christmas Past doing the interview.

No. Fucking. Way.

Her mind was going in a million different directions, so she kept it simple.

“Why?”

“I think it’s obvious.”

The color left her face. Normally, she was the first person to think her looks were the reason for something, but this was Nathan Bishop. The most recent photo on his image search was of him with the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* cover model. This wasn’t about Emma’s looks, but it couldn’t be . . . She huffed a breath and sat back in the unsteady chair.

“Why?” she repeated, feeling ridiculous.

“Um, because he has eyes in his head. And if this were still just a nickel-and-dime blog, I would add ‘and a dick in his pants.’ But we aren’t, so I can’t.”

“So, no illusions that I’m a talented upstart,” she replied blandly. In a strange irony, sometimes her looks were a blow to her ego, something Caroline deftly referred to as “the problems of the pretty.” She usually added a dramatic *boohoo* to emphasize her point.

“You are talented, but I doubt Nathan Bishop read your piece on arsenic levels in Sheepshead Bay.”

Emma shrugged her acknowledgment.

“Look, everybody has a way of getting their foot in the door. Me? I’m willing to risk a restraining order. You? Well . . .” he trailed off.

“So, take advantage of the fact that I’m attractive and go get the story of the summer?”

“Attractive isn’t even close to the word I’d use, but yes, take advantage of . . . this.” He gestured to her from head-to-toe and turned to his tablet. “And if you want to sue me, I’ll add your lawsuit to the pile. He wants you at,” he paused as he scrolled through the email, “noon tomorrow. Lunch in his office. If tomorrow is like every Friday, he will just be back from his weekly squash game—no doubt sweating out a hangover and sabotaging some unwitting political campaign.”

“I’ll be there.” She ignored the rest of Farrell’s comments, not because they bothered her, or even because she thought they were absurd, but because the first thing he said was ringing in her ears so sweetly that she didn’t want to let the sound go: *he wants you*.

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