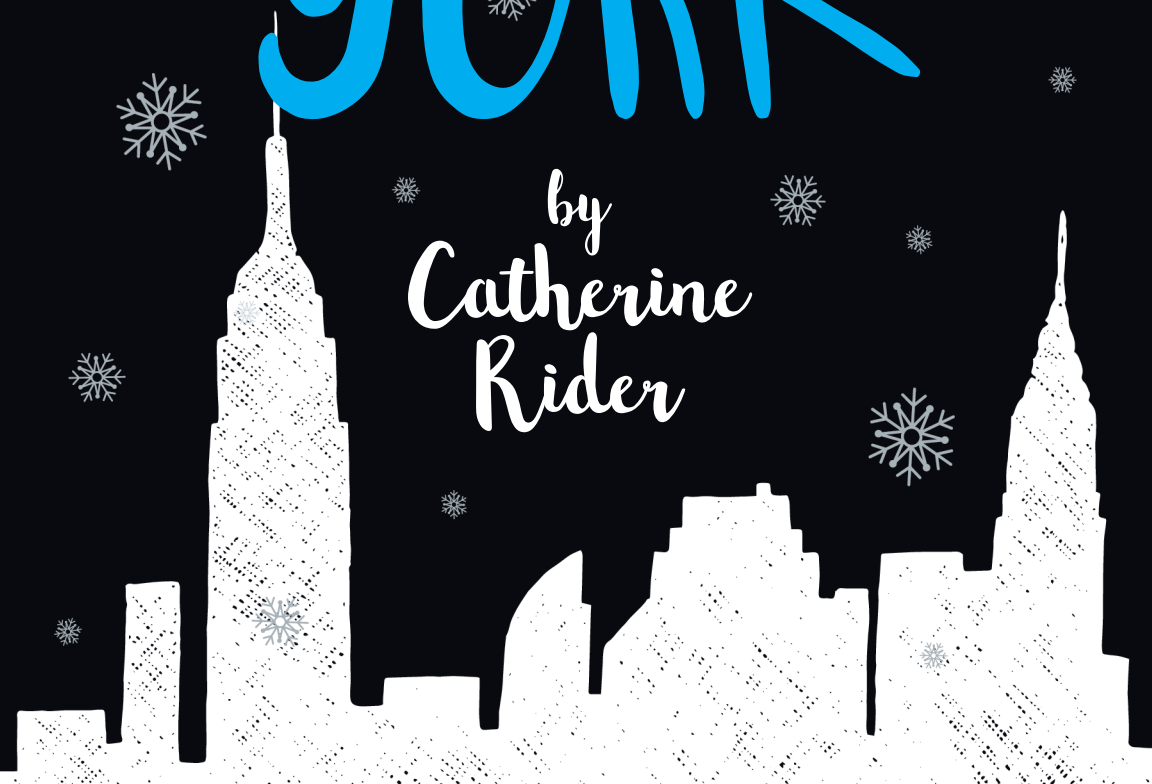


Can the city's magic mend
two broken hearts?

Kiss Me
in
NEW
YORK

by
Catherine
Rider



1 Christmas Eve
2 broken hearts
10 easy steps
24 hours

No one wants to be stuck at the airport during a blizzard on Christmas Eve. For Charlotte and Anthony, it's a disaster.

She's heading home to England after a horrible breakup ended the worst semester of her life. He's just been dumped in the middle of JFK by the girlfriend he came to surprise.

On the spur of the moment, the two set out into the city together with a self-help book to guide them: *Get Over Your Ex in Ten Easy Steps!*

This romantic adventure is for anyone who sees the possibilities in a swirl of snowflakes at the top of the Empire State Building, and anyone who's ever wondered if true love was waiting just at the other end of a ticket counter.

KISS ME IN
NEW YORK

KISS ME IN
NEW YORK

~ BY ~

CATHERINE RIDER



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To Julia, for all the New York stories

~ CHAPTER ONE ~

CHARLOTTE

CHRISTMAS EVE 2:00 P.M.

A broken heart changes a lot of things. For example: I'm not *usually* the type of person who scowls when a smiling lady at JFK Airport wishes me "Happy holidays!" as she checks me in for my flight.

But right now, I can't help it. It's Christmas Eve, and I just want to get out of New York as fast as possible. I want to never look back. I want to forget I ever came here in the first place — forget that I ever thought I could find some kind of New Me in this city.

When I first got here, New York was all bright lights and excitement. But two weeks ago, that changed. I began seeing what Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence, my host family in Yonkers, always complained about whenever I brought up "the city" and how much I liked it. Like all the rude people — *so many* of them — and they always seem to be *in the way*. The rats. The fact that the entire city often smells like it's standing underneath a giant umbrella made of rancid pizza.

The lady's smile is morphing into a frown. I realize I must look totally weird standing here, scowling and staring into nothing. I try to

cover up by saying, “Oh, yes ... you, too!” I tell her that I am catching the 6:45 p.m. flight to London Heathrow.

She looks at her computer, her brow creasing. “Wow, you’re here with almost five hours to spare. You Brits like to be punctual, huh?”

What I would like to say, if it were socially acceptable and would not make me seem like a crazy person: “It’s nothing to do with punctuality, Ronda.” (That’s the name on her badge.) “Up until two weeks ago, I was *so* not looking forward to going home. I was having the absolute best study abroad semester at Sacred Heart High, and I was starting to get ridiculously excited about coming back here for college in September. I’d been accepted — early admission — into Columbia’s journalism program, and I was over the moon about that. Because I was going to be moving to a place where I could *live* stories. New York was going to give me so many things to write about. And I could become New Charlotte. Who’s New Charlotte? Oh, New Charlotte is basically me — I mean, we look identical, because there’s nothing I can do about that — but New Charlotte is impulsive and outgoing, where Old Charlotte was a bit more indoorsy. New Charlotte takes chances; Old Charlotte would never do that. And then, I actually came here and discovered, New Charlotte was bloody awesome! Lots of people liked her ... especially this boy in my English class, Colin.

“But *then* Colin went and broke my heart. The minute that happened, I stopped being all impulsive and free, which gave me time to focus on the things that kind of suck about New York — like how your subway cars are about as comfortable to ride as shopping trolleys. And how you allow really, really dumb things to happen, like letting cars *turn into* crowds of crossing pedestrians! And how cold it gets here in December. Seriously, that’s got to be some kind of human rights violation.”

What I actually say: “I’m just eager to get home, I guess.”

Which is no less true. Just a more direct way of saying what I *want*

to say. Maybe that's why things didn't work with Colin. Maybe if I'd just come out with it, asked him if he was unhappy ... If I'd been more direct, would we still be together?

Come on, Charlotte. Being more direct would not have made Colin any less of a bell-end.

I can't fault my own logic there, just like I have no response to my brain's cruel taunt — *This is what I get for trying to be impulsive.*

When my tote bag knocks over a Statue of Liberty model, which clips a toy taxi and sends it crashing down onto an Empire State Building statue below, I realize two things: one, my tote bag is as unnecessarily big as my mum has always said it is, and two, I must have checked in, checked my suitcase, walked away from the desk, through the airport and into a gift shop, without my brain recording the memories of doing any of these things.

But, yep, I have a full boarding pass tucked into my passport and am, for some reason, standing in a gift shop. What the hell am I doing here? I do *not* want reminders of my semester abroad — I want to leave everything behind. New York is welcome to everything it touched, everything it spoiled — everything it turned rotten.

I was not lying to Ronda. Right now, I just want to go home. Go home and settle back into being Old Me ... No, not *old*. Original Me. The Real Me I apparently have no choice about being. Let's call her English Charlotte.

The sharp, hot prickles behind my eyes tell me it's time to get out of here — not even English Charlotte weeps in public — and so I weave my way through displays of soft statues and plastic skyscrapers, marching back out into the main airport building. I duck my head to avoid catching a glimpse of the giant posters of the New York City skyline — today, now that I'm in a bad (sad) mood, I don't see the bright lights of a city that never sleeps. I see tall, glass and steel monstrosities glaring at the sky as if challenging it to a fight.

Come on, New York — what did the sky ever do to you?

God, coming to the airport so early might have been a mistake — now I have four hours to sit around and mope. I stare at my mobile, checking Instagram every few minutes: first my timeline, then my comments and new follows, then my friends' activities to see who liked whose photos (refresh-refresh-refresh). My battery will be totally drained, and I won't even be able to spend the remaining time listening to music. But that might be a good thing — there's pretty much nothing left on my playlists except miserable songs.

I've actually started to really, really like The Smiths — and that's probably not a good thing in my state!

I need to be super attracted to the girl I'm with. I need to feel — I don't know, passion — I guess. And ... I just don't.

That's how he broke up with me.

I decide that distraction is what I need, so I march into the Hudson bookstore — no, no, book *shop* (no more American English for me!) — and come to a dead stop when I realize I'm not sure what I'm looking for. The bestseller chart is all chick lit, which I usually like — but, right now, all the hearts I'm seeing make me want to vomit. Then my eyes fall on a trio of trashy, pulpy, violent thrillers — now there's an idea. A book that's all plot, violence and *no feelings*. That seems like exactly what I need right now. I spend about five minutes making a choice, trying to predict how distracting each book will be, but it's hard to tell from the almost identical covers — silhouetted men posing mid-stride beneath one-word titles. I wonder, what is the difference between *Vengeance*, *Retaliation* and *Payback*, really?

Payback's tagline is, literally, “DONNY HAS IT COMING ...”

I don't know who Donny is or why he “HAS IT COMING,” but I pick up the book and head to the counter, turning around and side-stepping a figure who's risking a dislocated shoulder to reach a hard-back on a high shelf. One of the biggest bestsellers. I hear him grunt,

then swear, as a different book falls from the shelf — I just about register that it's a small paperback before it bonks me on the head. I instinctively thrust out my arms, catching and cradling it.

“Oh, dude, I'm so sorry.”

I look up into the deep brown eyes of a tall guy, who I guess is a couple of years older than me. His hair is long and shaggy and looks like it's been flattened by the beanie I can just tell he's been wearing for much of the day. I've been in New York long enough to recognize guys like him as Williamsburg Wankers — a nickname (okay, an insult) I coined myself and which the girls at Sacred Heart thought was just The Best and Most British translation of “hipster” they'd ever heard.

This guy might be a Williamsburg Wanker, but he's pulling off the scruffy and rough yet hygienic look quite well. Brooklyn hipsters don't have the same ... *crusty* look that I see on hipsters back home. Even in my bad mood, I recognize hotness.

If I had a heart that hadn't just been used as a punching bag by another hipster with good cheekbones, it would probably be fluttering a little right now.

He's holding out his free hand. The other is holding whatever book he's here to buy and a bag from the same gift shop that I just left. “Want me to put that back for you?”

I look down at the two books I'm holding. The book I rescued from a painful death is covered with cartoon drawings of wineglasses, musical instruments, hearts with bandages over them — and, weirdly, a puppy. Swirling red letters scream at me:

Get Over Your Ex in Ten Easy Steps!

“Maybe try accepting that he's an asshole.”

I look back up at Hipster Hottie, who's smirking as he glances from me to the self-help book. Then he points at *Payback*. “Though it looks like you're researching more violent ideas.”

I nod. “I'll just daydream about paying him back.”

“You should let me get that. After all, I almost gave you a concussion just now.”

I hand him the book. “Thank you. You have earned yourself immunity from my Payback List.”

Um, what’s going on here? Am I flirting — with a stranger? This isn’t exactly “like” me, but I guess since he’s a cute guy I’m never going to run into again, there’s no harm in flirting a little?

Even English Charlotte does that sometimes. And just because I’ve been reset to English Charlotte doesn’t mean I can’t add to and improve her. Hipster Hottie doesn’t know that I was just totally dumped by my boyfriend for not being super attractive; doesn’t know that I’ve been crying hourly for the past two weeks; doesn’t know that my Autumn Mission to become a Daring Free Spirit resulted in that spirit getting arrested and thrown into an emotional dungeon.

The original New York mission is still active: for a few hours more, I *don’t* have to be the shy, timid English girl.

I can be her when I get home.

“Hey,” he says, tucking all the books under one arm, “can I get your opinion on something?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer. From the gift shop bag, he pulls out a pink teddy bear with a black T-shirt that has what looks like a child’s drawing of the Manhattan skyline on it. In big, pink letters are the words “I HEART NEW YORK.”

No heart symbol — the word “heart” is actually spelled out.

“I got this for my girl. She’s coming home after a semester away in Cali ... How cheesy do you think this is, scale of one to ten?”

“Seventeen.”

He laughs. Too much. I wonder if his laugh would be quite this annoying if it didn’t come right after his mention of the g-word put the brakes on my optimism.

Learn your lesson, English Charlotte, I tell myself as I numbly follow

Hipster Hottie to the counter. *Operation New Charlotte was a humiliating failure.*

He pays for my book, and I tune out whatever he's babbling about. I'm sure his "girl" is lovely and everything, but it's not like I want to hear all about how much she'll "dig" the irony of the cheesy T-shirt. Once he's paid, he hands me the bag with my book, and we walk out together, coming to a stop just outside the store. We've walked into a human blizzard, Christmas travelers hustling in every direction.

"Thanks for the book," I tell him, stuffing it into my tote bag.

He's about to respond, when we both start at the sound of a guy's voice — a high-pitched yelp that cuts right through the hubbub of airport noise.

"You want to break up? Are you serious?!"

Hipster Hottie turns around — I have to sidestep to see past him — and we both stare. A young couple stands face-to-face just outside Arrivals. The girl is a tanned blonde with annoyingly perfect curly hair, wearing a pretty fabulous white walker coat. She looks like she's not much older than me. The pale blue suitcase behind her tells me she's the one who has arrived. The guy is also around my age and wearing a light-brown field coat that's clashing horribly with the yellow-and-cream plaid shirt I can see underneath. Over one shoulder is a red backpack, but I don't see any airport tags. This isn't a young couple returning from somewhere; this is a young couple *reuniting* at the airport.

Well, they *were* a couple. And "reuniting" might be a stretch.

The girl has her hands clasped together, held tight to her chest. The universal gesture for *I'm so sorry*. The guy has let the hand holding a dozen red roses drop to his side as his eyes dart left and right, as though he's just been asked to figure out the square root of 23,213.

I think I wore the exact same look when Colin broke up with me.

I offer Hipster Hottie a grimace — the universal expression for

Awkward. But he's not looking at me — he's looking at the floor, shaking his head and saying, "She told him she'd see him after the holidays."

Bloody hell, *that's* the girl he's here to meet?

He looks at me, his expression similar to the one Mr. Lawrence got the day a plumber told him he would be calling "sometime between ten a.m. and four p.m." A look that says, *Can you believe this BS that I have to deal with?*

"She was going to take care of it then. But here he is, showing up to 'surprise' her and putting her in this awful situation. What a jerk, huh?"

He doesn't even say goodbye; he just walks over to the splitting couple, taking out the stupid stuffed bear and putting it on the girl's shoulder. She starts in surprise, turns around, gasps in delight. Then she grins and pulls him into a long, deep kiss, while poor Rose-Bearing Boy looks no closer to solving his maths problem.

I turn away from the bizarre scene and make my way toward Security, remembering something that Hipster Hottie said to me.

I have no problem accepting that *he's* an asshole.

*

2:55 P.M.

"Sir, I understand you're upset, but I am not responsible for the weather. If you want to take it up with someone, try God."

I've heard the lady at the gate say versions of this same line to four different passengers now, and I'm still hoping that my brain has just decided to mess with me by imagining a nightmare where reports of a possible blizzard have thrown JFK Airport into chaos.

When I get to the front of the line, I put my palm on the desk as if

I need it to prop me up, tell the lady my flight number and desperately hope my plane has special wheels with alien-tech tires that give it enough grip to charge down the runway no matter how deep the snow, taking me far, far away from here.

Taking me home.

Gate Lady looks at her computer. “Well, honey, the good news is that your plane is here at JFK. The bad news is it won’t actually be leaving, due to ...”

Then she launches into some sort of explanation, but I’m not listening because my head feels like it’s been dunked under water, my ears full of this weird rushing noise that makes everything feel suddenly distant. The black peacoat I’m wearing, which Mrs. Lawrence bought me when the weather turned, feels like it’s come to life and is strangling my whole body.

My flight home has been canceled.

I’m stuck here.

“What about the next flight out? Can’t I be transferred? I mean, it’s a red eye, right? It makes no difference to me if I land at eight in the morning, instead of six — I’m not going to sleep anyway. I never sleep on planes. I get too excited by traveling.” I can sense that I’m rambling, and I know why I am — as long as I’m talking, I’m not crying.

I can’t be stuck here. I just can’t! I need to get home. My parents are waiting for me. In fact, my dad is probably checking the status of my flight right about now, and when he sees that it’s delayed, he’s going to freak out.

“Miss, I’m so sorry,” says Gate Lady, making a face like it’s breaking her heart to be the bearer of bad news to a stranger. I’ve seen her make the same face twice already. “But with the weather conditions, all our other flights to London have long waiting lists already ... There’s very little chance you’ll get on a flight tonight. I’m so sorry.”

She directs me to an enquiries desk, where another too-smiley lady

stares at a computer screen for what I swear is five whole minutes, before telling me that the next flight she can get me on does not depart until 9:30 ... a.m.

I will not be home with my family on Christmas morning. Instead, I will be here in New York — the city I love but just want to leave.

*

I have another one of those Lost Moments. It's who-knows-how-many minutes later, and I'm wandering back out into the main terminal. I've left my suitcase with the airline, and over my left shoulder I have my tote bag, which holds nothing except the thriller that Hipster Hottie bought for me, as well as a voucher given to me by the airline. It's for the Ramada Hotel, where I guess I'm going to hole up and spend Christmas Eve ... *by myself*. I've never stayed in a hotel by myself before, and all of a sudden I feel very out of my depth. What if the hotel won't let me in without an adult? What if I end up *totally* stranded, caught between a hotel that won't take me in and an airport that won't let me leave?

This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me.

"You'll be fine, love. You always are."

I'm on my mobile, speaking to Mum. I want her to be totally freaking out, like I am, but Mum's always lovely and calm. She's actually known for it. Everyone calls her "Mellownie" — I've always thought that was the lamest play on Melanie there could possibly be, but now, at this moment, it feels like one of the funniest things I've ever heard in my life.

I plonk myself down on a bench, putting my face in my free hand. It doesn't do much to make me feel better, but the airport feels further away for a bit — less like it's closing in on me.

Mum starts to say something, but her voice is drowned out by Emma's, and I imagine my five-year-old sister fighting tooth and

nail for the house phone. “Mummy, Mummy, I want to talk to Lot! Pleeeeease!”

When she was a baby, Emma could never get her mouth around “Charlotte,” so “Lot” was what she settled on. Every other day of my life, I’ve found it annoying — but not today.

“Not right now, Em,” Mum says. Then, to me: “Can’t you go back to the Lawrences’?”

“No,” I tell Mum. “They’re spending Christmas with relatives in Vermont. They were driving there from the airport, after dropping me off.”

“You’ll be fine, love,” she repeats. “You can go to your hotel and at least be warm and safe, right? What more can you ask for?”

I wipe my eyes and turn my mouth from the mobile so she can’t hear me sniffle. There is a *lot* more that I could ask for than a warm hotel room — like, a flight out of this city of misery. *How about that for “more”?* God, why has my life decided to not just knock me down but also spit in my face and then run away laughing?

Mum tells me that we can all do Christmas on Boxing Day and that the whole family loves me and — for some reason — this chokes me up. We’ve never really been the most affectionate of families, and it’s the fact that Mum feels the need to *say* something that underlines for me that, yep, this is a shitty situation I’m in today. I tell her I love her, too, painfully aware that my throat is strangling my vowels, and, before we click off, Mum tells me, “I want you to listen to me, okay, Char? You listening?”

“Yeah.”

“I know this feels horrible, and I understand, but I don’t want you wallowing or sitting around and getting upset. Yes, this is unfortunate, but it’s not the worst day you could be having, all things considered. Right? There’s always someone who’s worse off than you are, love.”

I tell her I understand — and I do, but I also know it will be a while

before I can actually agree with her. We end the call, and I stuff my mobile in my tote bag. I know that most of the weight I can feel on my leg is from the thriller that Hipster Hottie bought for me, but the thing I feel most aware of is the voucher, for a hotel room I'm a little nervous about staying in alone. Mum was very mellow about that, too, insisting that if I can fly to America by myself, I can survive a night in a hotel room.

She's right — even English Charlotte should be able to get through that.

But I know that the room itself will be bland and basic — and probably beige. I'm getting depressed just thinking about it, and I know that the only thing I will do in that room is sit and think about Colin, the horrible thing he said to me and the look on his face when he said it — as if explaining why he was dumping me was a huge inconvenience to him or something. I'm going to think about how big an arsehole he is and feel like a total loser for wishing I *had* made him feel passion, or whatever it is that makes him super into the girl he's with. He's not worth the tears he has made me cry, and yet I'm starting to think that calling him and asking if we could have a time-out on this whole breakup, just for half a day, so I don't have to sit in a hotel room and think about him, actually seems like it *isn't* the craziest and most desperate thing I've ever considered doing.

And this is where I find myself on Christmas Eve, after my failed semester in New York — alone in an airport, with no way of getting home until tomorrow, the only thing to my name a pulpy thriller about some guy called Donny who, for reasons I'm caring less and less about, “HAS IT COMING.” I reach into the bag for the hotel voucher, to double-check the address, and when I move it aside, I see not the cover for *Payback*, but instead ...

Get Over Your Ex in Ten Easy Steps!

The bloody self-help book! Hipster Hottie must not have been

paying attention at the counter. Seeing it right after I had the fleeting thought that I could call Colin to come to my aid makes my blood boil, and I reach in and grab the book, tossing it aside.

It's only as I toss it that I notice I'm not alone on the bench. There's someone strangely familiar sitting next to me. A boy, about my age, kind of tall, with close-cropped dark hair, wearing a brown field coat over a yellow-and-cream plaid shirt — not a fashion disaster, but they kind of don't go together. He's slumped, a dozen red roses in his lap, a red backpack between his feet, and so distracted that he doesn't notice my accidental Christmas present — paid for by the guy his girlfriend literally just ran away with — bounce off his scuffed hiker boots.

But I apologize anyway, as I lurch forward to pick it up. I should throw it in the nearest rubbish bin — but, for some reason, I hold it close to my chest.

His reaction is delayed, like my voice wasn't traveling at the speed of sound or something. He turns and looks at me with vacant eyes, and all of a sudden I get what Mum was talking about. Someone worse off is sitting right next to me. Okay, so he might be worse off *at the moment* only because his dumping happened almost literally just now, but still. I'd have felt a book hit my foot.

I think.

He turns away from me and stares into space again. I'm doing a brilliant job of helping the worse-off person, aren't I?

"I'm Charlotte," I tell him, picking up his hand and shaking it. "And *you've* had a lucky escape."

The poor sod just looks down at our hands, as if this is his first-ever handshake, then up at me, confused. *Good one, Charlotte* — while he was getting dumped earlier, he would hardly have noticed the nosy British girl nearby (who happened to be standing next to the guy who was about to make off — and out — with his ex, right in front of him).

I explain myself. "I, um, saw you before ... with your girlfriend."

He looks down at the roses. “Yeah ... Shoulda figured our little show would attract an audience.”

He’s talking, at least, and I almost laugh when I realize that I honestly have no idea what my plan is here — he’s the worse-off person, but I’m hardly going to heal his heart today, am I? Plus, my own heart might not be gushing blood right now, but that’s probably because it’s got no blood left to bleed after what Colin did to me.

“What’s your name?”

He talks to the roses. “Anthony.”

“Hello, Anthony. Trust me — you had a lucky escape. She’s ... bad news.”

“You don’t know her.”

“I know enough to know that you don’t want to waste your time on a girl who would actually dump you on Christmas Eve for the first handsome guy who came along.”

Anthony half turns to face me, his wide eyes indicating his seriousness. “You don’t understand what happened between us, okay? Maya’s not some shallow bimbo who runs off with the first hot guy to come along and turn her head.” He sounds convinced. But, from where I was standing, the second half of that sentence is dead wrong.

“She just ... she just ... probably hasn’t been dealing all that well with the long-distance thing. She’s been away for the whole semester, you know? She’s only just started at college, it’s all new to her — of *course* that’s going to mess with her head.”

He sounds convinced. But I spent time with the guy she made off with — he seemed like a real Williamsburg Wanker, which means he’s from Williamsburg (or that general area), which means she was about as far away from him as she was from Anthony.

But I don’t say anything. I don’t have to, because Anthony puts his face in his hands and leans back in his chair. He clenches his fists and lets them fall into the unwanted roses.

“No, you’re right,” he says, finally. For a moment, I wonder if he’s going to cry, but he takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “She did a shitty thing. And what’s crazy is, if I hadn’t shown up to surprise her, I wouldn’t have known what was going on.”

I feel an urge to reach across and squeeze his forearm. But I don’t do that — I just tell him, “You should go home. Watch some dumb movies with your family, whatever’s going to keep your mind off it. Whatever normal Christmas you were thinking of having tonight, have it.”

“I can’t go home,” he tells the roses. “I told my family I was spending Christmas with Maya and her family — I thought, if I surprised her, she’d ...” He jumps from that thought to another. “If I go home now ...” He shakes his head. “Forget it. I just ... don’t want to go home tonight.” He notices me frowning at him. “What?”

I realize what my face must look like — the face of someone thinking, *Poor you*. “Nothing,” I tell Anthony. “Just ... I know a little of how you feel. I had a breakup — about a fortnight ago. That means, two wee —”

“I know what a fortnight is,” he tells me.

“Sorry. Anyway, whatever the problem is with your family, get over it. It’s Christmas, and you get to be with them. It could be worse — you could be looking at Christmas Eve at the Ramada.”

He makes a sympathetic face, then frowns down at my lap. For a second, I think he’s leering at me, and I’m about to make a disgusted noise — getting dumped does not make that okay — when I realize that he’s just looking at the book I’m still holding. “If I were you, I’d dump that in the trash on the way out of here.”

“It was on the bestseller chart,” I tell him. “It must be working for *some* people.”

“*Ten Easy Steps*? If it was *one* step, I might trust it. Ten steps sounds like some kind of scam to me.”

I look down at the book, turning it over in my hands. There's a small portrait of the author — Dr. Susannah Lynch — in the bottom-right corner. A middle-aged woman, with a style that's stranded between hippie and sensible/classy, and a pleasant, open face that seems to insist that she just wants to help every single person who buys this book.

"Yeah," I say, "I guess ten steps would take a while ..."

I look up from the book to Anthony. The two of us have been dumped. He doesn't want to go home, and I couldn't go home even if I wanted to. And I *really* don't want to go to the Ramada: that will only end in me curling up in a ball, crying, looking at my mobile every two minutes to check Colin's Instagram, because I somehow *need* to know what he's doing. What he's doing without me. His pretentious selfies in front of bus stops and subway stations — Colin's theme was his "journey" — used to make me cringe, but I'm suddenly much more interested in "where he's going."

I kind of hate that.

Before I can ask myself if it's a good idea, I'm asking Anthony how well he knows New York City.

He just looks back at me like I've asked him if he takes showers in cold custard. "I've lived here my whole life. What are you thinking?"

"I've got, like, seventeen hours until my flight. I refuse to spend all of them in a poky hotel room, staring at the walls. They're probably *beige!* I need to take my mind off my troubles — and going into the city on Christmas Eve will be great for that, don't you think? You don't know this, but I came here to live some stories, and I didn't really do that. But how many people get to write about being stranded three thousand miles from home on Christmas Eve?"

He's still looking at me, unblinking. "Probably none, because don't most of those people get mugged?"

"That's probably because they're by themselves." I don't know if

this is English Charlotte or New Charlotte — but whoever it is, she has a plan.

Anthony's shaking his head. "No, no, no ..."

"You *did* say you didn't want to go home," I point out. He starts to say something, then stops. He's got no answer.

Just a question. "You really think that wandering around New York is going to fix everything?"

Of course I don't, I want to say. I don't expect that wandering around Manhattan at night is going to fill in the cracks in my heart; it probably won't even paper over them. But I'm hurting, and I want it to stop. And I'm lonelier than I thought could be possible, and I don't want Anthony to go. I guess this is because he is the only person in New York City right now that I know (even if I only kind of, sort of know him). And if I at least come out of this trip with a Story, a unique experience — that I could have only in New York — then, maybe, just maybe, when I'm an old lady, I won't be kicking myself at how I wasted three months of my life on both a boy and a city that didn't love me back.

After all, old ladies probably get seriously injured kicking themselves. Arthritis and stuff.

"Come on," I say instead. "Come with me! It'll be fun. You look like you could use fun. I know *I* could."

But he's just shaking his head. "Kid, if you think getting over love is that simple, then ..."

He trails off, shaking his head again. Smirking.

For some reason, this makes me want to hit him with his own unwanted roses. I think it's because he called me *kid*. "Then what?"

"Nothing."

"No, tell me — then what?"

He shrugs, shakes his head again. Picks up his roses and his backpack and stands up. "Then I guess you don't understand love."

He walks away, leaving me alone on the bench.



Ten minutes later, I'm standing at the back of a queue for taxis outside the airport. It's a *long* queue — the fallout from all the canceled flights. I am getting *snowed on*. I wonder if I'm some sort of idiot for ignoring the warm hotel room I've been given for free so that I can spend all night outdoors in winter.

But I'm determined that English Charlotte will go home with a great Story. A great memory.

My mobile, tucked away in my jeans pocket, buzzes against my leg. WhatsApp messages from friends back home, telling me they've heard I got stranded. The first two — from my best friends, Heather and Amelia, saying they're jealous I get to spend Christmas in New York — make me smile. But Jessica, the older of my two little sisters, has sent me a giant cryface emoji, which gives me legit sadface, and I stop checking the messages. I'll save them for later.

The sky is a gloomy gray, and snow is falling onto the stranded passengers in the long line. Shoving matches are happening up ahead, and a harassed-looking lady in a heavy coat starts patrolling the line, saying that they are going to get as many passengers into cabs as possible. She has a clipboard in one hand and is asking people their destinations, directing them to this cab or that cab. When it's my turn to answer, I realize I've not thought about where I'm actually *going*, but I'm remembering a neighborhood that the Lawrences took me to, where we had coffee so delicious I forgot that I missed good old English tea.

“Greenwich Village.”

She looks at her clipboard, then points me to one of the cabs. She moves on to the next person in line, and I make my way. I open the cab's rear door, see who's sitting inside and groan.

“Oh, come *on*.”

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

ANTHONY

3:40 P.M.

“You are such a douchebag.”

“Oh, I’m a douchebag? Well, you’re a passive-aggressive bitch.”

The couple in the bench seat in front of us have been sniping at each other all the way from the airport to the Midtown Tunnel — but the words “douchebag” and “passive-aggressive bitch” seem to get them horny as hell. Now I have to listen to them try to choke each other with their tongues.

Me and Charlotte, the fuming Brit, share the rear seat, both of us staring at the roof. I wonder if her neck is hurting as much as mine is. We’re sitting as far away from each other as possible, my unwanted roses between us. I don’t know why I haven’t thrown the damned things out the window already.

I’m not sorry for calling her out on her naïve attitude, but Charlotte was sweet enough to me in the airport that I *guess* I sort of feel bad for snapping and walking away from her like I did. I mean, that had nothing to do with her — it had everything to do with Maya.

Maya ...

I must be a total idiot for not seeing it coming. Of course, couples can grow apart when one half is away at college on the other side of the country. But Maya didn't dump me for some Californian. She dumped me for what looked like a total DUMBO Douchebag — a guy also from Brooklyn, just a more *pretentious* Brooklyn. She was cheating on our long-distance relationship by having a long-distance *affair*.

She had to have known that guy before she left. And since she did know him, that means she's been cheating on me for a while. And if she's been cheating on me for a while, that means I *am* better off without her. I know that all of this is true ...

So, why do I feel like I've swallowed a mouthful of broken glass?

The cab takes us into the city, and when we pass some dive hotel on Thirty-Ninth, the horny couple suddenly yells at the driver to stop. I guess they both must have roommates, or maybe they live with their parents. They give Charlotte and me apologetic looks, then throw a third of the fare at the cabbie, get out of the cab and wrap their arms around each other as they walk toward the hotel, giggling.

But one of them must say something wrong during the fifteen-foot walk from the curb to the hotel, because they start fighting again. I hear the word "ex-boyfriend" as the cab pulls away, and my chest clenches. That's what I am now.

Maya's ex.

The cab stays on Thirty-Ninth, heading west toward Hell's Kitchen, where I told the cabbie to take me. I wasn't planning on hitting Manhattan at all, but right before I got in the cab, I made the mistake of checking Snapchat and saw a post from Maya, at a coffee shop in Bushwick, announcing that she and this new guy, Ash, had "finally" agreed that they'd now be exclusive. From the angle of the video, and the way the frame wobbled continuously, I could tell it was shot on a selfie stick. *A goddamned selfie stick.*

For the briefest of seconds, I actually felt a little less shitty about getting dumped.

I decided that if Maya was hanging out in Brooklyn, I was going to take cover in another borough and hit up Ice Bar, on Fortieth Street in Manhattan. It's a total shithole, but my fake ID has never been questioned there — and Maya's not going to unexpectedly show up. She'd *never* set foot in Ice Bar. For one thing, its low lighting and drab color scheme make taking a decent selfie an impossible task.

Charlotte's going to the village — I guess she's hoping there's a Story there.

I'm rubbing the kink out of my sore neck. "That was kind of excruciating, huh?"

I don't know why I'm bothering to talk to her. The look she gives me suggests she doesn't really want me to.

"But I guess you Brits are so polite that, even if it got all Cinemax in here, you wouldn't say anything." I'm about to explain what Cinemax is, but she looks away from me. It's on me to keep the conversation going, I guess. "So ... how come the village?"

"Why do you care?"

"Well, I mean ..." What *do* I mean? Why did I ask that question? What does it matter to me where she goes? "I know you're supposed to be on a flight home right now. The village can't have been in your plans, and I know you're looking for a Story. What do you think you'll find there?"

"None of your business."

"Look, I'm sorry, all right?" Now she looks at me. "I was out of line, talking to you like that at the airport." I point to the damned roses, as if they're a replay of my humiliating breakup. "My head was kind of all over the place."

"Sounds like it still is."

"Maybe. I guess I'm bugging you a little because I'm worried. I don't like the idea of a young girl walking around the city alone at night."

She looks at me, her gaze softening, for a second. Then her eyes narrow and she turns away. “I can look after myself, thank you.”

“I’m sure you can. Just ... it’s cold and dark. And if you’re not from here, New York can be like ... I don’t know, some sort of monster. It might eat you alive, you know? Especially with that *Downton Abbey* accent you’ve got.”

She makes an indignant noise, as though I’ve seriously insulted her. “I do *not* sound like —”

We both jump at the sound of a car horn blaring, because it comes from our cab, our driver. He mumbles a curse as he changes lanes, shaking his head at what I guess is the subpar driving of the cab just in front of us.

Before she can finish her protest, I raise my hands in apology. “I just meant, for anybody, it’s not the smartest idea to be wandering around the city at night, waiting for something to happen. Because most likely, whatever happens is going to be something bad. Trust me, I have cops in my family. At least think about what you want to do — that way, you know, you ... stay out of trouble.”

Charlotte sighs and reflexively tucks a lock of her wavy dark hair behind her ears. The rhythmic, slowly sweeping glow of the streetlights we pass illuminates her face — I can tell her pale complexion is a year-round look, not just a winter one. She takes out the self-help book. She turns it over in her hands.

“Yeah,” she says. “You’re probably right. I admit, I haven’t thought too much about *what* I was going to do. I just wanted to keep my mind off ...” She doesn’t finish, and I guess she’s trying not to think about the guy who dumped her. “I’ve just never been away from home at Christmas before, and if I’m going to be spending it alone, half the world away from my family, I may as well make a Story out of it.”

She keeps saying that. I’m starting to wonder if she actually means it, or if she’s just trying to convince herself.

I point to the book. “What’s Step One?” She squints at me, like, *What does that have to do with anything?* I explain: “There are ten steps in that thing, right? So, I’m guessing, there are instructions, suggestions: they might *give* you something to help get you started. Maybe ...”

Charlotte opens the book and turns to the first chapter. She lifts the book really close to her face, because it’s dark inside the cab, which is starting to finally pick up some pace. She reads aloud: “Do something you stopped doing because your ex didn’t like it.” She flips through that section, skimming whatever else it says, then closes the book and shakes her head. “I was only with him for a term — a semester. I might need time to think on that one ...”

I can feel the smile on my face as I think to myself that, maybe, I can help her with that. Because I don’t need long to remember that there was something *I* stopped doing because Maya insisted that it was nonnegotiable.

I don’t give myself any time to question whether this is a good idea or a bad one. “You hungry?”

I. DO SOMETHING YOU STOPPED DOING BECAUSE YOUR EX DIDN’T LIKE IT.

We all “tweak” or “modify” our personalities a little when starting a new relationship. That’s just natural. But before you know it, you’ve totally and utterly given up on a hobby or stopped eating a favorite food. While you’re loved up, you can make your peace with this because you’re doing it for your partner, to make them happy.

But now, that partner is an ex ...

*

4:05 P.M.

I redirect the cab to Bleecker, and we get out at John's — which, I tell Charlotte, serves the best pizza in Manhattan. I start to walk toward the entrance — then realize there's a question I should have asked before I told the cabbie to stop here.

“You like pizza, right?”

She nods, makes a face, like, *Are you serious right now? Of course I like pizza. Who doesn't like pizza?*

We take a step toward John's, and then *she* stops. “Your roses.”

I turn and see the cab's taillights disappearing down Bleecker. I shrug. “Maybe his next fare will be a guy in need of an emergency Christmas gift.”

Ten minutes later, we're two bites into our shared pizza, and I'm regretting playing it safe and ordering a medium.

“This isn't bad,” she says, between chews, unaware of the stringy strand of mozzarella hanging from her bottom lip. I gesture to her chin, and she wipes her mouth with a napkin, muttering thanks and grinning.

I don't think Maya would have found that funny. Thinking about it, she'd have gotten mad — and probably found a way to blame me. But then, she'd never eat pizza, so this scenario would never happen — so I should *not* be thinking about it.

Charlotte takes another bite, this time much more carefully. She looks at the wood-paneled walls, where hundreds, maybe thousands, of New Yorkers have scratched graffiti over graffiti. Names, shout-outs to certain neighborhoods. One diner even left a phone number.

“I wonder,” she says, in between chews, “who was the first customer to think, ‘You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to etch something on the wall.’ And what did they write?”

I shake my head, still reviewing the graffiti. More names, letters

dug deep into the wood like open scars, are around one of the framed photos hanging on the panel: a black-and-white shot of a young couple, walking hand in hand down some street downtown. Just above it, some asshole had scratched the word *LOVE*.

I look away, back to Charlotte. “No way to know now, I guess. People have probably been scratching at the walls here since FDR was president. Maybe before.”

“I guess that’s one thing that never changes.”

“What is?”

She raises a finger at me, signaling that I should sit tight and wait for her answer, because she’s literally bitten off more of her slice than she can chew. After about ten seconds, she’s still nowhere near finishing, and she rolls her eyes and shakes her head. I get the feeling that she’d smile if she were capable of doing so with a mouthful of pizza.

“What never changes,” she says at last, “is people reaching out to other people.” She gestures at the wall. “I mean, the thing that all of this ... graffiti ... has in common is that each one was made by someone who wanted someone else to listen to them. Doesn’t matter if it’s someone in particular” — she reaches up high and taps a fingernail against one of the etchings, the name *Robyn* carved deep into the panel, then her hand falls to just above the table, to a random phone number — “or potentially the whole neighborhood. Everyone who wrote something on this wall probably just wanted *someone* to listen to them.”

I decide not to reply to that, because I can think of only one thing to ask: Is that how she feels? The guy who dumped her, broke her heart — was that his problem, that he didn’t listen? Didn’t *hear* her?

Charlotte puts down the remains of her slice, wipes her hands on a napkin. “So, your girlfriend made you give up pizza? That’s rough.”

“Not just pizza,” I tell her, picking up my second slice and kind of

hoping she doesn't want more than two. *Total* fail ordering a medium.

"Meat, dairy and eggs."

"Are you serious?"

"She's vegan. Well, she has been since she went to college. Insisted that I support her."

"What a load of bollocks." I have no idea what "bollocks" means, but it makes me laugh and wince at the same time. British curses are so freaking cute, the way they sound PG and R-rated all at once. "How was she going to police that, if she was all the way in California?" She picks up another slice, takes a big bite.

"When we'd be on the phone, she'd say she could hear the meat in my voice."

Aaaand now we have a choking situation. But just as I'm making to stand up and ask if anyone in John's knows the Heimlich, Charlotte waves a hand at me to sit down.

"I'm fine," she says, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. "I'm fine. Just ..."

"What a load of bollocks?" I venture. She's laughing again, and I hold up my hands in apology for putting her at risk a second time. Then I think, *Wait*. "Did I say California?"

She pauses, mid-chew, face frozen. Her voice is muffled by a mouthful of pizza. "You must have done. Either that, or I made a lucky guess."

I nod, finish my second slice and decide that now's the time she starts writing this Story of hers. Either that, or I just really, really want to change the subject. "Come on, then, English. You must have thought of a Step One by now."

She ponders this, shrugs. "The only thing I can think of is biking. Back home, I'd ride my bike everywhere, but when I got here, I was a little uncertain. You know, what with you lot driving on the wrong side of the road and everything. And I've never been that coordinated anyway, so I was nervous at first. But I was going to at

least give it a try, because I loved it — and I hate the subway — but Colin was like, ‘Hell, no, it’s too dangerous. New York drivers don’t give a ...’” She grimaces and shakes her head. “Never mind. Yeah, cycling would be the thing. If I take up my spot at Columbia, I’d like to be comfortable riding around Manhattan.”

There are three slices of pizza still on the plate between us, but, suddenly, I’m not all that hungry anymore. I reach under the table for my backpack, heavy from the spare clothes I brought with me, because I was expecting to spend the holidays with my girlfriend and her family.

“Come with me.”

*

4:35 P.M.

I’m leading Charlotte down Blecker, which is more deserted than I’ve ever seen it. The bare tree branches are dusted white with snow, which is falling heavier now, so the storefront awnings shield nobody. All the un-dumped people are heading back to girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, husbands, I guess. Taking partners home to meet the parents, seeking approval, making things official. That’s what I was supposed to be going through tonight. I was supposed to be among the people *not* on Blecker right now. I should probably get out of the cold, go home and hang out with my family, but I just can’t face them, because I know that my dad will go out of his way to hold up this incident as proof of the thing that he’s always saying to me.

You just ain’t got Luke’s street smarts, Anthony.

He never says this to belittle me or anything — my dad has just always thought of me as a little too imaginative — too soft — for the big, bad world. But the worst thing? Tonight, he would be right. I *have*

to be a moron not to have seen that Maya was bad news. So, no, I'm not going home just yet, and if this Stranded Brit wants to run around trying to write herself a great Story to help her get through a breakup, I have no problem with that.

Maybe it'll help me get through mine.

"Where are we going?" Charlotte asks.

"You'll see."

I stop at Bleecker and Mercer, pointing to the Citi Bike station, which is full, twenty or so blue bikes. Christmas Eve.

"Are you winding me up?" Charlotte raises her eyebrows at me. I notice that she actually *has* eyebrows — Maya's were so thin they sometimes looked like a trick of the light.

"Why not? It was something you stopped doing, right?"

"Munching on a meat feast and risking death on a Boris Bike are not the same thing."

"Who's Boris?"

"Doesn't matter. The point is" — she pivots to gesture to the traffic, which is kind of stop-start right now, bumper to bumper — "it looks a bit dangerous."

"So, we'll wheel them up to the bike path by the Hudson. The only traffic you have to worry about will be other bike riders. Come on, what do you say?"

She looks from me to the row of bikes, then down at the sidewalk. She's frowning, so I hit her with the thing we — kind of, sort of — have in common.

"You want to kill time, right?"

She nods. No frown — she's thinking about it.

I cock a thumb in the direction of the bikes.

"So, come on, then ... Let's ride this out."

She rolls her eyes, groans, leans her head back — but she's grinning, snowflakes nestling in her cheek dimples.

“That was so bad,” she says with a laugh. “But all right, why not?”

I rent the bikes, and we walk them along the cobblestoned streets to the West Side Highway, which we could *not* do on a normal day, because we’d be a hazard to pedestrians. But on Christmas Eve, it feels like we have the downtown area mostly to ourselves. At the bike path, I stop, get on, look to Charlotte.

“You ready?”

She hooks her tote bag over one of the handlebars, then swings her leg over the saddle. She looks a little ... not nervous but uncertain. I can tell it’s been a while.

“I suppose so,” she says. “But you’d better take the lead, at least at first.”

And so I set off, guiding her along the path. Every six or seven pedals, I can’t help looking over my shoulder, to check that she’s still with me, that she hasn’t wiped out.

“Getting the hang of it?” I call, after we’ve ridden about six blocks.

“Yeah!” she calls back. “It’s just like riding a bike.”

I slow to let her draw level. “We’re tied at one for lame jokes.”

She winks at me. “Where are we heading?”

“I dunno,” I admit. “I was just riding. Wasn’t thinking too much about where.”

“Didn’t you say earlier that wandering around aimlessly was a way to get in trouble?”

“Yeah, for you,” I tell her, “because you don’t know the city. But me, I can wander just fine —”

“On your left!”

The voice is almost simultaneous with the bike that appears from nowhere, flying past Charlotte — on her left. It startles her, and she swerves right, wrestling for control, but I can tell that she’s going to topple over. I reach for her with my left hand, taking a handful of her sleeve to help her stand while our bikes collapse beneath us.

It all happens in probably less than two seconds, and I'm now very aware of how tight I'm holding her, how close we're standing, how heavily we're both breathing. She's looking up at me, her face frozen, startled, and the fact that I have no idea what to say makes this whole thing even more awkward than it probably should be, so I take a big step back from her ...

... and trip on my fallen bike, landing right on my ass. I curse, then I laugh. What the hell just *happened*?

Charlotte's laughing, too, and reaching down to help me up. "What was that you were saying?"

"Okay, never mind." I stand up, shake off. Stare down the path, but the speed demon that caused this mess is long gone. "The city's dangerous for everyone. Hope that didn't scare you off."

She shakes her head. "Definitely not. I'm just getting the hang of it. But maybe we should actually decide where we're going?"

I look down at Charlotte's tote bag, beneath the fallen Citi Bike. "What's Step Two?"

Charlotte follows my gaze, then shakes her head. "You don't have to —"

"Come on. You want to kill time, I want to ... All right, not kill time, but I've got no place to be. Why not?"

She looks at me for a long moment, and even though her face seems to say, *You're a bit weird*, I feel like she understands. She's been dumped, too. She gets it.

She crouches and digs the bag free. Takes out the book, finds the right page. Smiles, screws her eyes shut and gives me a look, like, *You're not going to like this*.

"Macy's is on ...?"

"Thirty-Fourth Street," I answer.

Charlotte stuffs the book back into the bag, then picks up her bike. "Well, that's where we're headed."

“Why?”

She rehooks the bag and swings her leg over the saddle. “Makeovers, of course. Race you there!”

And now she’s pedaling away, and I’m watching her go, snowflakes dancing around her. A stranded British girl, riding a bike to Macy’s on Christmas Eve, for a makeover a book is telling her is a good idea if she wants to get over her ex. Could this night get any more random?

But I’m leaning down to pick up my bike.

For some reason, I’m kind of curious to find out.

~~I. DO SOMETHING YOU STOPPED DOING
BECAUSE YOUR EX DIDN'T LIKE IT.~~



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