

Seven

JUNE. FIVE MONTHS AGO. JUNE 3RD.

I'm standing outside a bar called Welcome to the Johnsons waiting for Sean Cassidy, hopefully my soon-to-be roommate, and soaking up the feeling of people watching me. I don't know what went wrong to make me like this. I guess I'm hoping if everyone is busy noticing how beautiful and full of light I am, then maybe they won't see my gaping dark holes.

Sean stumbles down the front steps, and I smile just enough to let him know he's the only one I have my eye on. He meets my gaze and I feel a zing straight through me, a shot of something cool and crisp that wakes me up: the sense that something exciting and good might happen at any moment. There's this memory I have of my dad holding my freckled hand as I stepped into a plastic baby pool. A gasp came from deep inside me when my leg slipped into the freezing hose water, and my God, I loved that feeling: the shock that gripped my shoulders and shook me back to life. I still need it: the zip over my skin, the thing that reminds me I'm alive. But I'm twenty-two now and I need more than cold water.

Sean hurries across the hot pavement to where I've been waiting for him next to a parking sign and a rusted bicycle with a basket holding bread. I wonder where this is going to go, and the wondering is such a lovely feeling.

"That guy was such a dick," Sean says to me. He's talking about the bartender.

“Yeah,” I say, though he wasn’t, not really. He was just thirty-something and aloof, probably because we’re barely old enough to be in a bar and still look like kids to him. “Let’s go,” I say, because Sean is just standing there on the sidewalk perusing the city like it’s a film set and he’s the director.

“Yeah,” he says, still standing there, “we should go.” We’re buzzed, but not drunk enough to make an easy decision that we won’t think twice about until tomorrow. Neither of us wants to suggest another drink, but going to Sean’s apartment means something else entirely, so we kind of just stand there and let New York swirl around us like a cloud of perfume.

A woman perched on top of a milk crate waves a sign with a politician’s face on it and yells at us to vote. Her purple acrylic nails are like wine stains against the white paperboard. Her tiny terrier looks miserable lying there next to a water bowl.

“Do you think she’s all right?” I whisper to Sean. I’ve only been in New York for a few weeks. My barometer for other people’s mental health isn’t fine-tuned yet, but I have the creeping suspicion that the longer I’m here, the better it’ll get.

Sean ignores my question. “It’s too muggy for eight o’clock,” he says with a scowl on his face. I don’t think he has any idea where this is going.

“We’re too drunk for eight o’clock,” I say with a laugh, and then I link my arm through his so he gets the right idea. But his scowl doesn’t budge. I’ve never really met anyone who gets so bothered by such small things. It makes me wonder what he’d do in a real crisis.

“*Sean*,” I say, the word drawn out like I’m trying to flirt, though that’s not quite it. It’s more like I’m trying to win him over, like there’s a prize to be had. I remember in high

school feeling like I had to win the whole thing, like I had to make the boys want me and the girls want to be me. It always surprises me when people call that kind of behavior shallow. To me it feels deeper than a pit of snakes.

“It’s only *June*,” Sean says, like this heat is a harbinger of worse things.

“My month,” I say with a smile as we start walking. I still love all thirty days of June just like I did when I was little. It’s always been my lucky month: the month good things happen to me. Even my mom was more affectionate than usual on the first few days of June, opening my bedroom door and letting in streams of golden light from the hallway. She’d say, *Happy June, my sweet Junebug*, and on the good mornings, she’d bend to kiss my cheek. On the mediocre ones she’d leave a glass of tea for me on my bedside table, always something decaf like chamomile or peppermint, and even now the scent makes me think of mornings on the cusp of dreams and tangled sheets. On bad mornings, when her demons were circling and she wanted to be anywhere else but in the house with Jed and me, she’d come in without even a whisper, opening my shades with the *screech* of metal rings against the curtain rod. Or she’d stay in bed, and my father would get us ready for school.

“Should we go somewhere else?” Sean asks me.

We stop at a traffic light. Swarms of New Yorkers cross the street from the other direction and traipse along the sidewalk, close enough that we can catch snippets of their conversations. Everyone is too close here, and I love it. No one can ignore you, because they’re right there in your space, sharing your sidewalk square, making eye contact to decide which person is going to slow down and crush themselves against a metal pole so the other person can pass first through a makeshift construction tunnel.

“Are you really up for another bar?” I ask, the way a parent would: like it’s not the best idea. I’m stalling, wanting to go back to Sean’s place but not wanting to be the one to say it.

We linger in the warm air. A dogwood tree arcs, catching fading orange sunlight between its white flowers. Different languages prick my ears and a woman laughs. Spring in New York is as magical as everyone says it is. It doesn’t really matter that I’m sleeping on a pullout couch, or that my roommate is so concerned I’m bringing germs inside that she makes me leave my shoes outside the door and wash my hands with hospital-grade antibacterial soap before I even say hello. *Rules of the house!* she always says, but not in that appealing, self-deprecating way some people have about their flaws. She’s my brother Jed’s friend from college, and she rents the couch to me for two hundred bucks per week on the unspoken promise that I’ll be out of there as soon as possible. I think she was once in love with Jed, so I guess now I’m the beneficiary of that love, even if it maybe makes her a little sick to have me there. *You look just like him*, she said when I arrived with my mom’s old flowered suitcase. And then she doused me with hand sanitizer and showed me the couch and told me to keep my things in a slim closet by the door. She’s doing me and my brother a favor, but I need to find a real place to live, stat.

“Let’s go to your place,” I finally say to Sean with a burst of bravery. “I wanna see it.”

Sean looks dubious. I can’t figure him out, sexuality wise. I think he’s straight, mostly because we met on Bumble, but he doesn’t seem that interested in hooking up with me—we haven’t even kissed. I know he has an extra bedroom, because he mentioned it last week when we were surrounded by Bengal tigers at the Bronx Zoo. One was sleeping in a tree,

looking like he was about to fall out, when Sean said, “Sometimes I sleepwalk. It makes me worried about having a roommate, but I do need to get one at some point.”

And then I wondered for the rest of the Bronx Zoo tour if he was considering me as a potential person to room with. I’ve been out with him three times total (this night makes four) and I feel like I could do it—I could live with him. So now I need to figure out the best course of action: Do I hook up with him (if he even wants that) or do I steer us toward something platonic and hope he wants a roommate who chips in with rent?

I can’t mess this up.

We head down Attorney Street and I feel the flutter of excitement again, wanting his apartment to be glamorous, but also wanting it to be crummy enough that I could see myself living there. I haven’t even found a job—I’m working off savings I earned waitressing second semester senior year while living with my parents—and as of this morning my savings account has eight hundred dollars in it.

“That’s my building on the right,” Sean says.

It’s gray brick and kind of dull, but who cares? “It’s a cool vibe here,” I say as we get closer, and I can see him puff up with pride. “Is that an elementary school?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. Rainbow-colored cones are set up in a circle on the basketball court. Near the free throw line is forgotten chalk in a heap next to a Ziploc bag and a duffel.

Sean puts his key into the first door, and then the second. We’re in. And there’s no doorman, which usually makes apartments way more affordable. My heart picks up speed. This could work; I could maybe pay for something like this. And I need a roommate—I’d be way too scared to live alone—and Sean is the only person I know living in the city,

because barely anyone from my college came here. And most importantly, Sean seems to get nicer the more I get to know him.

I swallow down the feeling that I don't know him well enough—it's what my dad would say if he knew I was trying to live with someone I barely knew, and he'd be right: I don't even know the basics about where he grew up. But people have sex with people they just met, and is this really that much worse? Don't you just have to go with your gut sometimes? I know some things, like how Sean went to Georgia Tech and knows a brother of one of my friends from high school (so he isn't making the whole thing up, because I checked); I know he's smart and that he does something with computers from home. He doesn't even go to an office or get out of his workout clothes, which he says is the best part about being a freelancer.

The lobby floor is grimy, and the building itself a little decrepit, but not too bad so far. We pass silver mailboxes and a man in navy pants and a matching shirt that I think is a uniform. "Hey, Paulie," Sean says, and the man smiles at us both. Sean doesn't introduce me.

"I'm on the fourth floor," Sean says as we get on the elevator. We ride in silence, and it's kind of awkward. Sean is a terrific conversationalist when he wants to be, when he's on a topic he cares about. But good luck guessing what that might be, and if you don't get it right, he acts half-bored. Or maybe I'm boring him, but I don't think so. When people complain about me, it's not usually because I'm dull.

"This way," Sean says in a singsong voice when the elevator doors open. It looks like there are only four apartments per floor, which gives it a homey vibe. The apartment across

from Sean has a pair of beat-up Nikes outside, but Sean's welcome mat is clean. He opens the door to 4D and we step inside.

I suck in a breath—and, okay, so it's not glamorous. Sean said it was a two bedroom, but it's clearly a one bedroom with a makeshift wall sectioning off half of the living room. Not that I'm complaining—I'm not fancy, I just need somewhere to live.

"I love it," I say, because I do. And it's obvious so does he. He looks around the place like it's heaven. "It's awesome, right?" he says. "But I really want to get a dog."

"I love dogs," I say, and never have I been so grateful to not be allergic.

"You do?" he asks, beaming.

I can't see any windows because of the wall that's been put up. It gives me a claustrophobic feeling, like I'm in a closet and can't breathe. New York is so open out on the streets, but then everyone has these tiny apartments.

"Do you have one?" Sean asks.

A window? I almost say. "A dog?" I ask, trying to focus on him and not the apartment. Quickly, I add, "I don't have one now, but we had a chocolate lab growing up."

"Is he dead?" Sean asks, and the wording is so off-putting it breaks up my smile.

"Um, yeah," I say. "He died right before I went to college."

Sean takes a step into a small kitchen that was probably remodeled in the eighties. (It's only inches away from the entry door, so we're pretty much already standing in it.) On the counter is a red microwave and porcelain Hello Kittys that I think might be salt and pepper dispensers. Sean opens a white fridge and retrieves two beers, cracks off their tops, and passes me one. "Thanks," I say. He must set his fridge really cold, because the glass is icy against my fingers.

“To great apartments,” Sean says, and I smile even wider, because I wonder if he’s thinking what I am. I’m nervous, so I try to remind myself that he’s the one who mentioned he was looking for a roommate.

“To great apartments,” I say as we clink bottles, and I think about how perfect this place is. There are no nice things around, but there’s no mess, either.

“I like things neat,” Sean says as if he read my mind.

“Me too,” I say. And then I almost utter the words—they’re right there in my throat, climbing higher . . .

Are you looking for a roommate?

But I’m too nervous—I don’t want Sean to reject me. Instead I move toward him. Somehow, in some way, it just feels easier. It’s a rejection I could handle if it happened, though I don’t expect it to, because when I comb my memory I can’t come up with a single instance a guy has stopped me from making the first move. I press against him and drop my beer to my hip. My other hand goes to his shoulder, and for a quick breath it feels like we’re slow dancing. “Sean,” I say softly. I’m five eight and he’s five ten or so, but I’m wearing wedge sandals so we’re looking dead into each other’s eyes. “Do you want this?” I ask, because even though I can already feel him pressing up against me like he does, there’s something else there, too: a hesitation, or a tiny kernel of doubt.

His breath is coming faster now. “I do,” he says, but his voice catches.

“You’re sure?” I ask. “Something’s not wrong? Is it me?”

“It’s most certainly not you,” he says, and then he bends to put his beer on the coffee table. The living room is so small it feels like we can reach out and touch every surface. I put my beer down next to his, and I stand there, my toes scrunching against my sandals. I

like Sean enough to kiss him, but I'm not sure how much else I really want to do with him. Maybe that should be a warning, but if it is I'm too tipsy to heed it.

Sean closes the space between us. His hand goes behind my back and pulls me close and I revel in it—the moment right before the kiss happens, my favorite moment, the one I would live inside if I could. Those precious seconds before any kiss I've ever had are always better than the actual kiss that follows. Maybe that's how I'll know when I've found my person: when the kiss itself trumps all.

This one doesn't.

We're only kissing for a second when I know for sure that this isn't going to work. His kiss is too hard, too much all at once, and I can feel myself shrinking back; I feel every possibility of something between him and me slipping away like low tide. "I'm so sorry," I say, and Sean lets go of me right away. "I shouldn't be kissing you," I say, my heart racing, needing to find the words that will work, the ones that will hold us together just enough to not lose everything I want and need from him. "I need a friend right now," I say, because that's truer than anything. "Not this. I'm so sorry." And then I add more partial truths. "I'm really mixed up. Lost, really. And trust me, these are all my issues, it's not you." Sean's wide hazel eyes narrow with hurt. He's backing away from me slowly. "I hope, I mean, what I really need right now is someone I can trust. Someone who has my back. A friend, you know, to do this with, to live in the city with, to go places. Back to the tigers, maybe," I say, forcing a smile.

Sometimes I'm not sure how much of what I say is real. In moments like this it's like reading a script—I know exactly how to make my face look; I know exactly how much waver to add to my voice.

I'm not sure whether that makes me a good actress or a good liar.