

CHAPTER ONE

Mo

Maureen Denton flicked a half-eaten tortilla chip out of her hair, then looked accusingly at her roommates. “Which one of you threw this?”

“Listen, you’re lucky there was no queso on that one, Mo. Next time, no promises.” Sloan handed her a napkin and narrowed her brown eyes. It was almost six on the first warmish day in April, and the patio was full of New Yorkers out enjoying the lingering daylight.

Mo was trying to enjoy, and trying to listen to, her friends, but it was hard while waiting for the most important phone call of her life. “I’m sorry. She said she would call by five and it’s seven and—”

“It’s barely six,” Sloan corrected. “I was giving my ratport, and you were a million miles away.”

“And the weekly ratport is a sacred roommate tradition and you need to take it seriously.” Mackenzie rapped her spoon on the table lightly. Mackenzie had been Mo’s first and

closest friend since she moved to the city. Today she wore a bright-orange-and-red dress that accentuated her ample bust and hips, a good example of what she declared “fat Ms. Frizzle flair.” Mackenzie had majored in theater before getting her master’s in library science and now put her talents into reading stories for the eager repeats at her morning story hours. As a librarian, she was very good at reading books and too good at reading people. “You’re worried it’s bad news.”

Mo scoffed unconvincingly. “I’m just worried we settled too fast on the name *ratport*. We should have called it a rodent roundup.”

“*Rodent roundup* sounds like a cowboy kids’ TV show from the 1950s,” Mackenzie said. “Ratports are serious rat journalism. Tom Brokaw levels of rat investigation.”

Sloan nodded. “Exactly. So, to *repeat* my Emmy-worthy report: When I was leaving work today, there was a group of people in Times Square all circling this rat, who was standing up on its hind legs staring at the billboards. Little-rat-in-the-big-city vibes. Honestly, reminded me of your ex-boyfriend, Aaron.”

Maureen threw the chip back at Sloan. Sloan ducked. It was unfair, really. Sloan’s reflexes were impeccable from years of playing lacrosse.

Mackenzie shook her head. “Doesn’t beat my rats-holding-hands entry from last week.”

“Paws,” Mo said, finally reentering the conversation. She kept getting phantom vibrations in her pocket. Her roommates were angels for trying to distract her, but they failed.

That wasn’t a phantom vibration this time. Mo pointed at her phone.

“Go! We’ll pay and see you back at the apartment,” Sloan said.

“Good luck!” Mackenzie called after her.

* * *

The phone vibrated in Maureen’s hand, a detonation device. It might as well have been one. All her dreams could go up in smoke. She took a deep breath before accepting the call.

“Hi, Yuri.” Maureen tried to keep her voice level. Her agent had received the manuscript a month ago. Email was the most emotionally undermining invention. A letter was something you could kiss and send off or clutch to your chest before you opened it. An email? Nothing so glamorous. Her email, and the attached project, sat somewhere in the (digitally) towering stack of manuscripts for Yuri to examine, and she hoped it would succeed where her last one had failed.

A sigh across the line and a single word. “Mo.”

That one word from Yuri’s mouth chilled Maureen’s spine. Holding the phone between her ear and shoulder freed Mo’s hands to tie her long, blonde hair back with the omnipresent hair band on her wrist. “Oh no,” she said, “What’s wrong?”

Yuri Eikura was a senior partner at Eikura, Schier & Gurnett Literary, famous for having an eye for literary fiction. Four years ago, Mo had snagged Yuri’s interest with her first project, a novel about a waitress slowly dissociating from reality while she worked at her local barbecue restaurant. Unfortunately, though it hooked her fantastic agent, the book never found a publisher. *The quiet novel*, editors kept saying in their rejections. Why was quiet bad? Anyway, it was, and she had written something else. But second projects, ones written after you had already secured an agent, felt tenuous. What would happen if Yuri hated it? It felt like Yuri telling Mo she hated her literary DNA. Even though Mo’s first novel had been

barely obscured autofiction, this novel, the one that had been sitting in Yuri's inbox for a month, was the book she had wanted to write since she was thirteen years old.

"You hate it," Mo said.

Yuri exhaled so loud that Mo could swear she felt the air move against her cheek. "Oh, I love it, that's not the problem."

The first half of the sentence didn't compensate for the second. "What problem?"

"Can I tell you for one little second about how good the book is before I dive into the bad news, or do you want me to thwomp you right now?"

Mo bit her lip. "Praise first." She took a few steps farther down the street and leaned against a building for support.

"It's genius. Honestly, one of the best things I've read in years. Eliza's character is so fresh, so funny, so real. I bought every second of the dialogue, and the reinvention of the West-erly estate as an early-aughts McMansion? The ending? My God, the ending, Maureen. It's a beautiful adaptation of Morgan. Wharton meets Fitzgerald swirled around with Occupy Wall Street. I'm making that little pinched gesture right now with my finger and thumb. Can you picture me making that gesture? I'm doing a chef's kiss right now, so picture that."

Mo did. "But."

"But—and honestly this is a big but—the copyright hasn't expired yet on *The Proud and the Lost*. You know that, don't you?"

Mo stared at her shoes, the ghosts of a dozen passersby's shoes crossing in and out of her peripheral. "I saw that some other books from around that era had splashy contemporary adaptations recently. I assumed it would be okay."

“E. J. Morgan’s estate has kept up the copyright past its usual expiration. The original novel was written in 1929, which typically would have put us in a safe position, but the estate has been maintained by Morgan’s daughter, Estelle. She hasn’t allowed for any derivative works. None. Not even a new film adaptation, and you know people have been angling for that since the eighties.”

Mo, like every other high schooler in America, had been treated to the 1950s movie version of *The Proud and the Lost* after completing the book. It was grainy and overacted, and several students slept through it.

Mo had a movie poster of it on her wall. “So it’s a no?”
“It’s tricky.”

“Tricky impossible or tricky possible?” Yuri could work miracles—not miracles that had involved Mo’s first book selling, however. Mo didn’t want to press her. She was lucky to have an agent at all, let alone one who had sold several critical darlings and even more best-selling novels. Yuri was in her late fifties—middle aged, middle height, and with the most intense eye contact of anyone Mo had ever met. She had been the daughter of two lawyers and originally had gone into contract law before swerving to start a boutique literary agency with her first husband at age twenty-six. She’d dumped the husband but had kept, and grown, the career.

“I’ll tell you what,” Yuri said after a short pause. “I know the agent who represents Morgan’s estate. We can get in contact with him, but he might not be inclined to do favors.”

Mo wished she had time for industry gossip. Once a year Yuri took her out for drinks, and she luxuriated in it. Feeling like an insider when Mo had started as a nothing—still was a nothing—made her feel powerful. What else was writing

except imagining other people's secrets? And the writing world often held some good ones of its own.

Mo knew she should have emailed Yuri the idea while drafting it. She'd contemplated it, but there was something so big and all-consuming about reimagining a book that had meant so much to you. The process was like the *Lord of the Rings* fanfic Mo had written in high school. She'd put those stories up on the internet, enjoying the simple act of sharing her work with the world. Could she publish her *Proud and the Lost* manuscript on some site anonymously as Morgan fanfic and avoid getting sued? Probably, but that wasn't how she pictured this book existing in the world. The fact that its original source was a novel published more than ninety years ago made Mo want to scream. She could do this project justice, and if she had a chance to talk to someone at the Morgan estate about it, she was positive she could prove that. "Could you make that connection? I don't want to give up without having tried."

An incoming text dinged, interrupting her thoughts. Keyed so deeply into the conversation, she had almost wandered all the way back to her apartment without realizing, weaving through the evening commuters. Her favorite flower stand on the corner had closed for the day. She paused near it as she listened to Yuri's closing words. "Long shot" was the most frequent phrase, but all of publishing was that. Mo had to at least try. Yuri said she'd contact the estate's agent and let Mo know the next steps.

After hanging up, Mo checked her missed text. It was from her boss, Amy, checking in for an event they were doing tomorrow. Complete cliché that she was, Mo had moved to New York from Iowa to pursue her writing career. Working in catering allowed her to live with two roommates in a place with

no bedbugs. Good enough. She had a place to live, her health, a job, and a foot in the door—it was just that that door wasn't likely to ever open for her, at least not for this book.

She wished the flower stand were still open. She'd buy herself a bouquet of cheer-up daisies, something her dad used to do for her when she was a grumpy teenager. There was something, though, on the sidewalk.

A single-stemmed red rose. It peeked out between a trash can and an old box holding leaflets. She hadn't gotten roses since she'd broken up with Aaron a year ago. The sight made her mouth quirk at the edges. The city was giving her a gift at the end of a long day. As she leaned over to pick up the rose from the sidewalk, she noticed something else between the trash can and the newspaper box.

A rat held the long green stem, chewing tentatively on the end of it.

All her life she'd trained herself to be one thing, and that was unflappable. Don't let them see you're shaken and you win, even if you look like you lost. Don't scream. Don't freak out.

She lifted herself back to standing, stepped back, and ran directly into an elderly man carrying an armful of groceries.

An hour later, after buying a fresh dozen eggs for Barry Studebaker, who happened to live two floors below her, she finally made it back to her apartment. Mackenzie and Sloan were thrilled to hear Mo's ratport.

They didn't ask about the phone call, as if they sensed she couldn't handle rehashing it yet.

She didn't expect a big break. She didn't expect to become a literary darling, but she had needed to write this book. And now, book written, was it too much to hope that it would get read?