

SEVEN AUTHORS. TWO FLIRTY FRIENDS.  
ONE CHANCE TO SOLVE A MURDER.

# Without a Clue

A Novel

MELISSA FERGUSON  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## WITHOUT A CLUE

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### THE PERFECT ROM-COM

“Ferguson’s (*How to Plot a Payback*) charming slow-burn rom-com is full of fun banter, lovable characters, community and family connections, and heart.”

—*Library Journal*

“Melissa Ferguson delivers yet another sparkling, laugh-out-loud romance! *The Perfect Rom-Com* is a heartwarming story about chasing your dreams, discovering your voice, and finding love where you least expect it. With unforgettable characters and delightful humor, this novel is perfect for anyone who believes in second chances—both in love and in life.”

—RaeAnne Thayne, *New York Times* bestselling author

“I loved this book! If you’re looking for a heroine you can root for, a mean girl to boo, and a unique hero to fall for, this is your book. Bryony Page will keep you reading as she writes her way to the perfect HEA.”

—Sheila Roberts, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *The Best Life Book Club*

“In *The Perfect Rom-Com*, a successful ghostwriter longs to see her beloved book published under her own name. But her agent, who holds the keys to publication also holds the

keys to her heart. Don't miss this fun romantic romp into the intriguing world of publishing!"

—Denise Hunter, bestselling author  
of *The Summer of You and Me*

"I can always count on Melissa Ferguson for sweet romances bursting with both wit and wisdom. Hilarious and heart-warming, *The Perfect Rom-Com* is comfy and cozy from first the page to the last."

—Bethany Turner, author of *Cole and Laila Are Just Friends*

"This clever and adorable romantic comedy is brimming with warm humor and a lot of heart. It kept me giggling and turning the pages to see what came next. What a delight!"

—Rachel Linden, bestselling author of  
*The Magic of Lemon Drop Pie*

"*The Perfect Rom-Com* contains two of my favorite tropes: friends-to-lovers and a road-trip romance. Melissa Ferguson handles both *perfectly!* I couldn't put this book down! And when main character Bryony finally clues into the fact that Jack is not *just* her best friend, it's the sweetest, swooniest of moments."

—Suzanne Allain, author of *Mr. Malcom's List*

## HOW TO PLOT A PAYBACK

"The perfect escape for lovers of dogs, second chances and swoon-worthy romance. Don't miss this one."

—Annabel Monaghan, bestselling author  
of *Same Time Next Summer*

“Super cute! Melissa Ferguson’s romcoms lean more on the com than the rom, and this book is no different, delivering chuckles and giggle with an effortless writing voice, witty dialogue, and a cast of lovable characters. I was totally on board as soon as I read the premise, especially since it’s a storyline I haven’t already read more than a dozen times (give me all the fresh plots please!). You could say this is a grump/sunshine (although he’s really not all that grumpy), enemies-to-lovers (although the hard feelings are only one-sided and misguided at that), slow burn, but I just call it a cute little romp of a book.”

—Sarah Monzon, author of *All’s Fair in Love and Christmas*

“It was so fun to sit in on the writer’s room of a successful sitcom in Melissa Ferguson’s delightfully charming and wonderfully quirky romance. There are so many sweet moments and wonderful characters sprinkled throughout, and I’m certain rom-com fans are going to fall in love!”

—Courtney Walsh, *New York Times* bestselling author

## FAMOUS FOR A LIVING

“*Famous for a Living* is a heartwarming and funny read with quirky characters and the occasional moose. It takes the reader on a virtual escape to the mountains and hot springs of Montana and the lofts and busy streets of New York City. Melissa Ferguson has given us a sparkling, sweet rom-com with a lot of heart.”

—Suzanne Allain, author of *Mr. Malcolm’s List*

“Calling all fans of slow burn, opposites attract romance! Melissa Ferguson brings another fresh, delightful romcom in *Famous for a Living*. Cat and Zaiyah are an imperfectly perfect match with swoony chemistry and plenty of back-and-forth banter. The gorgeous national park setting provides a lush backdrop for this fish-out-of-water story as influencer Cat hopes to escape a media fallout and finds much, much more. Readers who loved *The Cul-de-Sac Wars* and *Meet Me in the Margins* won’t be disappointed in Ferguson’s latest read!”

—Emma St. Clair, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

## MEET ME IN THE MARGINS

“*Meet Me in the Margins* is a delightfully charming jewel of a book that fans of romantic comedy won’t be able to put down—and will want to share with all their friends. Readers will lose themselves in Melissa Ferguson’s witty, warm tale of Savannah Cade and the perfectly drawn cast of characters that inhabits her world. This literary treat full of missed opportunities, second chances, and maybe even true love, should be at the top of your reading list!”

—Kristy Woodson Harvey, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Under the Southern Sky*

“Ferguson has penned a lively romance for every bookworm who once longed to step through the wardrobe or sleep under the stairs. *Meet Me in the Margins* brims with crisp prose and crinkling pages as Savannah Cade, lowly editor at a highbrow publisher, secretly reworks her commercial fiction manuscript with the help of a mystery reader—and revises

her entire life. You'll want to find your own hideaway to get lost in this delightful, whip-smart love story."

—Asher Fogle Paul, author of *Without a Hitch*

"Ferguson (*The Cul-de-Sac War*) enchants with this whimsical tale set against the evergreen culture war between literary and commercial fiction . . . An idealistic, competent heroine, a swoon-worthy hero, and delightfully quirky supporting characters bolster this often hilarious send up of the publishing industry, which doubles as a love letter to the power of stories. This is sure to win Ferguson some new fans."

—*Publishers Weekly*

## THE CUL-DE-SAC WAR

"Ferguson offers an entertaining enemies-to-lovers story for readers who prefer a chaste romance. Imagine one of Sophie Kinsella's rom-coms made into a Hallmark movie."

—Booklist

"*The Cul-de-Sac War* by Melissa Ferguson is a humorous and lighthearted story about neighbors who are at war with each other . . . If you are looking for a fun, clean, lighthearted romance, then I do recommend this one."

—LifeIsStory.com

"Two neighboring houses, a big, slobbering dog without boundaries and one unwelcome attraction add up to a mad-cap romance in *The Cul-de-Sac War* . . . This kisses-only inspirational romance is a sweet treat with a soft center."

—*BookPage*

“Melissa delivered a book that is filled with both humor and heart!”

—Debbie Macomber, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Melissa Ferguson delights with a grand sense of humor and a captivating story to boot! With vivid detail that brings the story roaring to life, *The Cul-de-Sac War* brings us closer to the truth of love, family, and home. Bree’s and Chip’s pranks and adventures turn into something they never expected, as Melissa Ferguson delivers another heartwarming, hilarious, and deeply felt story.”

—Patti Callahan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*

“Melissa Ferguson’s *The Cul-de-Sac War* is sweet, zany, and surprisingly tender. Bree and Chip will have you laughing and rooting for them until the very end.”

—Denise Hunter, bestselling author of *Carolina Breeze*

“With her sophomore novel, Melissa Ferguson delivers hilarity and heart in equal measure. *The Cul-de-Sac War*’s Bree Leake and Chip McBride prove that sometimes it isn’t the first impression you have to worry about—it’s the second one that gets you. What follows is a delightful deluge of pranks, sabotage, and witty repartee tied together by heartstrings that connect to turn a house into a home worth fighting for. I was thoroughly charmed from beginning to end.”

—Bethany Turner, award-winning author of *The Secret Life of Sarah Hollenbeck*

“Witty, wise, and with just the right amount of wacky, Melissa’s second novel is as charming as her debut. Competition and chemistry battle to win the day in this hilarious

rom-com about two people who can't stand to be near each other—or too far apart.”

—Betsy St. Amant, author of *The Key to Love*

## THE DATING CHARADE

“Part zany rom-com. Part family drama . . . a heartening read.”

—*Library Journal*

“Ferguson’s delightful debut follows a first date that turns quickly into a childcare quagmire . . . Ferguson’s humorous and chaotic tale will please rom-com fans.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“*The Dating Charade* will keep you smiling the entire read. Ferguson not only delights us with new love, with all its attendant mishaps and misunderstandings, but she takes us deeper in the hearts and minds of vulnerable children as Cassie and Jett work out their families—then their dating lives. An absolute treat!”

—Katherine Reay, bestselling author  
of *The Printed Letter Bookshop*

“*The Dating Charade* is hilarious and heartwarming with characters you truly care about, super fun plot twists and turns, snappy prose, and a sweet romance you’re rooting for. Anyone who has children in their lives will particularly relate to Ferguson’s laugh-out-loud take on the wild ride that is parenting. I thoroughly enjoyed this story!”

—Rachel Linden, bestselling author  
of *The Enlightenment of Bees*

“A heartwarming charmer.”

—Sheila Roberts, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of the Moonlight Harbor series, on *The Dating Charade*

“Melissa Ferguson is a sparkling new voice in contemporary rom-com. Though her novel tackles meaningful struggles—social work, child abandonment, adoption—it’s also fresh, flirty, and laugh-out-loud funny. Ferguson is going to win fans with this one!”

—Lauren Denton, bestselling author of *The Hideaway* and *Glory Road*, on *The Dating Charade*

“A jolt of energy featuring one of the most unique romantic hooks I have ever read. Personality and zest shine through Ferguson’s evident enjoyment at crafting high jinks and misadventures as two people slowly make way for love in the midst of major life upheaval. A marvelous treat on unexpected grace and its life-changing chaos, Cassie and Jett find beautiful vulnerability in redefining what it means to live happily-ever-after.”

—Rachel McMillan, author of the Three Quarter Time series, on *The Dating Charade*

“Ferguson delivers a stellar debut. *The Dating Charade* is a fun, romantic albeit challenging look at just what it takes to fall in love and be a family. You’ll think of these characters long after the final page.”

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Wedding Dress*

ALSO BY MELISSA FERGUSON

Novels

*How to Plot a Payback*

*Snowy Serendipity: Two Christmas Stories*

*Famous for a Living*

*Meet Me in the Margins*

*The Cul-de-Sac War*

*The Dating Charade*



# Without a Clue

A NOVEL

MELISSA

FERGUSON



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Without a Clue*

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## CHAPTER 1

DID YOU KNOW THAT JAILBREAKING YOUR PENT-UP city toes from their Chelsea boots and surrendering your feet to the white-hot sand of Miami in February is good for you? That standing right where the crest of bubbly waves gently hugs your ankles before receding back into the blue-green ocean does wonders for your mental health?

But of course you do.

Just as *you* know, like everyone else on God's green earth, that the torturous act of waking up in an obscure conference center in San Diego at 3 a.m., missing your flight, rerouting your flying experience an extra ten hours through two more *extremely stressful* layovers (I don't have time for details, but I'm now missing one shoelace and definitely have a welt blooming on my hip as we speak), and becoming the ball in the great pinball machine of the United States is all worth it just to get to *this* moment?

But of course you do.

The beach is a miracle worker.

Any sane human knows that.

There are no words in the English language to properly describe the moment when you gulp in your first lungful of sea-salt air after months of particular grief and do precisely . . . nothing.

Nothing but stare out at the endless sea, listen as seagulls greet you gaily overhead, and feel the waves crash heedlessly all around.

No phones.

No agendas.

No mind-spinning movement.

Nothing but letting the senses take over.

It's worth it because of the ocean's intangible *something*, that mysteriously magical *something* that beckons you and heals you and envelops your heart in a warm blanket embroidered with the word *peace* and makes everything you've suffered to get here—everything you've suffered the past six weeks—absolutely worth it because of *this moment*.

Where the sea coos, "I know you were a splinter away from breaking down into total madness, but shhh, child, you are here now. Rest and find peace in my salty arms."

That is what I came for. (Well, that and the small fact I'm paid to for work.)

This is what I'm supposed to be feeling right now.

Peace.

And in fact, until twenty minutes ago, that was precisely what I *was* feeling.

And then *he* showed up.

With that *THING*.

And I'm not entirely sure of how it's come to this point, how precisely point A led to point Z, but now here I stand, sensible twenty-seven-year-old Penelope Mae Dupont, with no criminal record or even so much as a speeding ticket, holding this stranger's portable boombox high over my head

in knee-deep water and waves tossing all around—all while threatening to hurl his precious music box into the sea.

I've gone, as it turns out, completely mad.

Which both is and isn't surprising, given, as I said, I was only a splinter away before he came and ruined everything.

"Are you *insane*?" the man cries out, gesturing widely with his overtanned hands.

Then he utters some choice words.

And some more.

All of which I ignore.

A crowd is gathering.

But I, again in complete dissonance to my normal nature, don't care.

"I definitely think you've got me there," I cry back as the waves crash over my backside and send my green linen skirt twisting and choking around my legs like I'm a seaweed-laden mermaid. "Or who knows?" I toss out. "Maybe I've *been* insane all along. Maybe I've been insane all these years giving myself over to absolute delusions of who I was and who *he* was and what in life I was really bargaining for and maybe now, *right now*, I'm finally waking up. Who *really*, I wonder, has the authority to determine what makes us sane?"

My philosophical question clearly sails above the man's head.

After another cacophony of insults and a dozen commands, all of which I ignore, the man with the robust belly overtaking his pineapple swim trunks finally has had enough.

He drops his beer can in the sand.

The beach chair quakes as he pulls himself to standing.

I am fairly certain I've never seen a person more directly angry with me in my life.

I waver for a moment, then hold the boombox higher.

To be clear, I did not wake up today with intentions to

take on this one drunk man at two o'clock in the afternoon as representative of all that's wrong with society. I truly didn't. I'm not one of those people who ambles around New York with a water bottle sticker declaring *She Woke Up and Chose Violence*.

My stickers revolve solely around literary puns, the saving of trees, and cats wearing funny hats.

But he was here.

Dropping his slew of items *directly* behind me with a whole stretch of Miami beach around us, just to make painfully loud and alluding comments about "the view."

How beautifully green "the view" (a.k.a. my backside) was.

How perfectly round "the view" (a.k.a. my backside) was.

And I was fine at that point. I was still a reputable woman in society, capable of ignoring his idiocy.

I was still Penelope Mae Dupont, summa cum laude graduate of NYU in English literature, lover of old books that crack when you open the spine and dogs that free-leash in Central Park at 8 a.m.

But then he cracked open what I guarantee was not the first beer of the day.

Made yet another leering remark.

And did the abominable. He turned on music.

Top-volume, angry, screeching, *repulsive* music that drowned out the beautiful keow of the seagulls, the laughter of children, the whistle of waves. A cacophony of sounds obliterating all the things I traveled thousands of miles through emotional anguish and physical distress *just* to experience.

He ruined . . . my moment.

"It's *my* music!" he demands.

"It's *our collective* experience you are debasing!" I counter,

pulling away one of the long locks of my wildly disobedient hair that was trying to blind me and make me eat it for lunch. I gesture at the growing crowd.

To be utterly honest, they weren't exactly here before I made a scene.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see The Seven (minus Nash at the moment) in their little huddle, watching me. Suitcases are at their feet. Massive sun hats and sunglasses cover their faces. Sunblock is smeared on Gordon's nose like a vanilla popsicle, the cruise ship we are meant to be boarding in a matter of minutes flapping its flags far in the distance.

Jackie nods approvingly at my word choice.

Ricky appears to be making a note of the word in his phone.

Crystal, well . . . her gaze alternates between me, my opponent, and her phone as she taps madly (attempting to write my current situation into a novel, no doubt).

*"Put it away,"* I say fiercely, pointing at her.

She gives me a caught-red-handed look and pockets her phone.

Pineapple Trunks takes a thunderous step my way.

"You give it back now," he growls.

"Promise to turn it off," I counter.

I'm five feet even and half of my height is covered in damp, dark brown hair. Thick and twisty hair that has tried to mummify me in the salty wind. My long blunt bangs that reach to the top of my round glasses are plastered to my forehead, sticky and no doubt incredibly unsightly in the humidity. Most days I look screamingly academic, running around in maroon sweaters and juggling black folders full of Hugh's pages, but right now I look more like a horrifying creature who has emerged from the seaweed and is stealing people's beach cargo.

Which is . . . some could say . . . fair.

Nonetheless.

I can still see nothing but that same old loyal expression of fondness in The Magnificent Seven's—currently Six's—eyes.

But then something distinctive changes in Pineapple Trunks's look as he lets out another flash of outrage, and I cast a glance at the tide and wonder just how seriously I can outswim him.

Neena jumps in.

No, that's not correct.

Shimmies in.

“Okey dokey!” she cries out in a singsong voice, moving in between me and the man. “This has been a . . . well, a nice little surprise in the day . . . but I think we'd best all settle down. Pip, honey, give the man his nice boombox.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she jumps in, adding, “And let me say, I'm *so* proud of you. This is great progress, and frankly, my dear, I'd love to sit this one out for as long as it takes. But the boat has made that honking noise three times now, and I'm afraid if we let them go on any longer, they'll leave us entirely.”

“They won't *leave us*,” Hugh says. “We're the ones putting on this cruise.”

“Never leave people believing they play second fiddle to you, Hugh,” she says, frowning at him. “It's impolite.”

Hugh tucks in his lower lip, and Neena continues, “Anyway, I think it's probably time we give this man back his property—no matter how annoying he is or how many oxymorons he uses—”

“I'm not a *moron!*” Pineapple Trunks yells.

“Of course, dear,” she says, with a *now let the grown-ups*

*talk* wave. “Or how generally wrong he seems to be in every way. It’s still his boombox, and we must give it back.”

“You heard her!” Pineapple Trunks pumps his fist in triumph and reiterates what she says very loudly, and much more forcefully, in my direction.

Neena gives him a simpering smile and, to everyone’s surprise, pats his hand a few times. “I’ll take it from here.”

The man looks from his hand to her, this sixty-eight-year-old curvaceous woman in head-to-toe glittering purple.

And to everyone’s surprise, he sits down.

She turns to me.

“Come on,” she says then, beckoning me toward her like I’m some puppy being wooed from its cage. “Let’s go, sweetheart.”

“He’s just so insensitive,” I say.

“Very much so.”

“And the music was so *abrasive*.”

I take a tiny step forward.

The sparkling starfish clip in her hair glistens as she nods, and she reaches her hand out farther over the waves. “I heard it all the way from the pier. A true blight to the human ear,” she agrees.

“And he was so . . . offensive.” I take another step forward, the boombox lowering slightly to my shoulder.

“I have no doubt. But we all make our own choices, don’t we? Some opt for a lifetime of meaninglessness. We can’t force someone else to have a positive effect on the world.”

“Can’t we though?” Hugh says casually. “With a little nudging?”

“Focus,” Neena says under her breath, smiling through gritted teeth.

I take a step forward.

Neena takes a small step forward to meet me. “The important thing is to focus on what kind of positive effect *we* can have.”

I nod, aware suddenly that the boombox feels heavy on my shoulder. The weight of this situation I put myself in is beginning to settle on me, and the fire in me that started this whole mess is fizzling out.

“I want to have a positive effect,” I murmur and trudge through the waves.

My skirt is soaked.

My white blouse is dangerously close to getting soaked as well.

And my hair has twisted so far around me, I feel like a furry teddy bear.

I step onto shore.

“I know you do.” Neena clasps my shoulder with one hand in *welcome home, soldier* fashion and grabs hold of the boombox with the other. Swiftly she hands off the boombox to Hugh, who hands it to Ricky, who hands it down the line to Gordon, Crystal, and finally Jackie, who hands it, with the kind of severe look only Jackie and very, *very* angry librarians can give, to Pineapple Trunks.

He takes it.

People begin to clap.

“What a *breakthrough*. I’m very proud of you, Pip.” Neena engulfs my soaking wet, frizzy-hair-ensconced body in a hug (effectively soaking herself entirely) that lasts several moments too long.

Eventually, the clapping dies down.

And Hugh clears his throat.

I look and see Pineapple Trunks with a screwy look on his face, the look of a drunk man trying desperately to use his remaining working neurons to deduce whether this was

a situation in which to call the police.

The cruise ship gives another honk.

And I realize I'm already gearing up to make a statement, quietly hoping for a female officer who's more likely to follow the thread of how discussion of a perfectly beautiful view has led to this.

Neena swings her wide smile to the man. "You know what?" she announces. "You look like somebody who appreciates a good fruit basket."

Crystal rolls her eyes.

"Fruit baskets are not the answer to everything, Neena," Jackie snaps.

They are, of course, to Neena, who firmly believes that a fruit basket is perfect in every situation from infant baptism to petty crime.

"Forget the basket. Consider this your lucky day, sir," Crystal, the youngest of 90 percent of the group by several decades, says. "You get a heck of a story and a group picture! Free of charge. That's worth a dozen fruit baskets and two dozen of your archaic boomboxes."

The man watches The Six begin nodding and mumbling in approval as though this is a most generous apology gift for an insane woman who stood in the ocean holding his boombox hostage.

"Ship's dropping ropes now," Ricky says, squinting at the cruise ship in the distance. "I think they're really going to leave."

"They're playing with us," Hugh retorts. He kicks his suitcase, which topples into the sand. "And two can play that game."

"Time for the photo op! Everybody in," Crystal says, gathering the group together. Her eyes graze over the man dubiously. "Do your . . . swim trunks have a phone swim-

ming there, or should we use one of ours?”

“All the sunblock’s covering my makeup,” Jackie protests, souring as she reaches into her handbag.

“Has anybody seen my hat?” Gordon says, twisting as he scans around him.

Pineapple Trunks notices, for the first time it seems, the crowd of bystanders with their phones all raised our direction.

“Who *are* you people?” he asks, as if we must be aliens freshly landed.

“Ah. The first intelligent question of the day.” Hugh steps out from the group, a head taller than the rest. He takes off his hat. The sun glints on his silver and gray hair. His blue eyes twinkle. He looks distinguished and mysterious, even here on this sandy port shore, just like his author photo on the back of every one of his mystery books lining the shelves at every bookstore around the globe. “We’re The Seven.”

“The *Magnificent Seven*,” someone murmurs, phone raised.

“And that girl there,” Hugh says, pointing at me, “belongs with us.”

## CHAPTER 2

I COINED THAT TERM FOR THE GROUP, ACTUALLY. RE-marketed, more like.

For some awful reason, Hugh and the other six authors had called themselves “the group” for decades (painfully uninformative, I know), and I wasn’t six months in before I changed the group’s official title to something the book world had been calling them all along anyway: *The Magnificent Seven*.

The Magnificent Seven is exactly what they are: seven celebrated authors each in a different genre who banded together forty years ago to prop one another up as they carry the candle in their distinctive fields.

It’s worked tremendously well, actually.

All things considered, it proved to be an ingenious plan to unite this unlikely group of authors together to cheer one another on. After all, fiction readers tend to read widely.

What better marketing technique is there than for one famously good author to constantly recommend the books of the same six famously good others?

Lore is that Hugh and these six other stranger authors were all en route to a writing event and became stranded in an elevator with one random reader. Stuck together for hours, Hugh eventually asked the gentleman, “So. Which of our genres do you read?”

He replied with a hearty laugh, “What do you mean ‘which’? I read you all!”

That day, a plan was hatched.

What if all of these completely distinct authors worked together to promote one another at events? Book signings? Presentations? Endorsements? What if they made an oath to promote one another—and one another *only*—whenever they were inevitably asked in interviews about their favorite book recommendations? What if, separate in so many ways and yet the same, they grabbed hands and pulled one another up as they all climbed the proverbial ladder? Together?

*The Magnificent Seven.*

And forty years later, the partnership is something of a fellowship of rings, all but two members (who recently retired and passed the proverbial baton) still the same. Rumors about the group abound, ideas involving secret handshakes, secret codes. The wildest one so far is that there is a secret passageway accessible via Hugh’s library that opens to another room, where an underground ring of publishing elites gather with the sole purpose of skyrocketing *The Magnificent Seven’s* books to the top of every chart.

For the record, there’s no passageway.

At least, I haven’t found one yet.

And if any outsider would know, it would be me, considering I’ve been working for Hugh and the group for five years.

There are seven genres under the banner of the group. Sure, we almost added the horror writer Aleksandar, but

frankly, he was too scary in real life. Even if he did live in a legitimate castle and threw the best parties (part of the thrill was that you never really knew if you would actually make it home).

And here's the list:

Vibrant Neena, always handing out fruit baskets and throwing propriety in the air for the sake of the bold life. Writes romance. You know. The stuff with people drowning in satin dresses on the covers.

Prim Jackie, the definition of “antithesis to Neena,” who considers being five minutes early as being late and collects—with particular *obsession*—pushpins from the 1700s. Like, 10/10 level hype. Goes on and on about sharing a distant lineage with the King of England and uses that single fact to promote every single one of her historical fiction books. I once saw her holding up a Garfield souvenir T-shirt in quiet fascination. She caught my eye and dropped it like it was gasoline at a fireworks show.

Gordon, who is almost always in some costume or other. To say he lives for the medieval renaissance fair or a good Comic-Con is an understatement. Fantasy.

Crystal, twenty-two-year-old fellow NYC native who made one twelve-second TikTok about her book idea and it blew up to the point of becoming a Paramount movie. She's always missing important meetings because she's off water sliding somewhere. YA.

Ricky, who, I'll be honest, is totally creepy. Has a mysterious history working at Oak Ridge National Laboratory before finding his niche in thriller. Talks extraordinarily slowly and cautiously as though he's *seen* things. You never know what they are, and you never really want to find out, but you're absolutely certain they happened. *Things*. Rumor is he and Stephen King play chess on their phones together.

Nash, who . . . well . . . he's Nash. Everybody calls him dashing. Everybody thinks he's wonderful. Me too, of course. I'd be blind, deaf, and a liar not to admit it. He's been one of my closest friends in the past three years he's been on the team, if I really had to pin a title to us. Not that we have a title, of course. Not that we *are* anything.

Good friends feels like a stretch, honestly. I don't dare tell others that. He's far too, well, everything I'm not. I'm perfectly comfortable being the group's assistant and, by design, his assistant. I'm like his cheerful butler and he the delightful-to-everyone socialite. We laugh behind the scenes; we don't laugh in them.

And as if his career alone isn't leagues more extraordinary than my own, Nash grew up on a ranch. He goes off-grid at a snap of his fingers and tells nobody. Spends half his time somewhere out west, preferably under the canopy of a full sky and with absolutely no protection from beasts or rabid people except for his God-given muscles and a larger-than-life knife. Fun fact: He has worn Wrangler jeans, boots, and a cowboy hat in every single photo I have ever seen of him. Every single one—even the blurry paparazzi photos where people catch him at 7 a.m. heading into a coffee shop. I'm not sure, honestly, if he lifts weights, but if he does, I can guarantee it's while wearing a hat. Writes . . . unsurprisingly, Westerns.

And Hugh. My boss. Incredibly intelligent. Charming. Risk taker. Founding father of the group, whose brain is constantly whirring, taking in every speck of detail from the moment. Casually chatting with you about the tarragon in the sauce while mentally solving real live murders. Still works part-time for the police department. *Voluntarily*. As a “mental exercise,” he says. Just to “keep his mind fresh” at seventy-five while being a benefit to society. Writes mys-

tery. Not the kind with an apple pie on the cover beside an illustrated cat, but Agatha Christie. Dorothy Sayers. Convoluted stories. Surprising, sometimes bitter, sometimes bittersweet ends.

Nobody in the group fights.

There are no arguments. Not really. Not *actual*, shout-to-the-rooftops arguments over anything more substantial than where to eat dinner.

Just pure support year in and year out.

In my five years as Hugh's assistant and, by extension, assistant to *The Magnificent Seven*, I've never seen anything like it.

Honestly, if I didn't know them better, I'd say they were hiding secrets.

If I didn't know better, I'd say they had to be.

After all, they're human.

"Come along, Pip," Neena chirps. "Even through our mental breakthroughs, we cannot dawdle."

It takes approximately twelve more honks and thirty more minutes, but at last here we are, halfway up the gangplank with our luggage, hundred-degree sweat carving streaky paths down our sunscreens faces. My skirt is mostly dried. My hair is knotted in the ugliest let's-just-keep-everything-together bun alive. My blouse is missing a button.

I feel terrible they all followed me down to the beach, but as Neena says, "Once we saw the whole thing through Ricky's binoculars"—another question for another time: Why was Ricky watching me through binoculars?—"What choice did we have but to save our baby?"

(I'd ignore the reference to my babyhood and assert myself as a capable adult, except for the fact that at the time, I was indeed acting like a child and did indeed need a capable adult.)

Neena has put on her gigantic floppy beach hat, which looks like it weighs approximately forty pounds. She turns toward me, and despite being a full three feet ahead, it whacks me in the face.

“He was gross. *And*,” I add pointedly, “he was *inconsiderate*.”

A far worse crime.

Somewhere along the way, driven by guilt mostly, I’ve added Neena’s suitcase to my load.

It’s not easy dragging our bags, considering her suitcase is not only one hundred pounds of glow-in-the-dark purple with a thousand stickers of her book covers smashed all about, but also twice the height of mine with a dodgy wheel. I’m lopsided, pulling along her protesting suitcase beside my modest (and personality-less) beige one.

And while I’m kicking myself while I’m down, I must note it reflects well who I am though, doesn’t it?

“Of course he was inconsiderate. As men so often are,” she says in a *we of the female population have resigned ourselves to this fact* singsong voice.

Hugh ahead raises his brow.

“Quite the statement for the romance author,” I say.

It’s funny because, for one thing, she’s surrounded by the most trustworthy, upstanding men in the universe (minus Ricky?), and for another, her specialty is writing utterly unrealistic, nearly nauseatingly self-sacrificing and noble firemen-type males.

“Gordon and I are the same, honey,” Neena says. “We both write fantasy.”

Now it’s Gordon who jerks his head back.

She’s just trying to make me feel better. I’ve suffered from a male, ergo, she too will strike her fist in the air. I appreciate the move of solidarity. Even if it’s a bald-faced lie.

She stops and turns, and I dodge another whack of her hat to the face. “Would you like me to write him into my next book, sweetheart? I’ll kill him off, if you like. Just for you.”

Golly gee. What a treat.

“I appreciate the gesture, Neena. But that’s more Hugh’s genre.”

“*The Pineapple Murder*,” Hugh announces cheerfully. “Has a ring to it.”

“How would you . . . have them . . . do it?” Ricky says with morbidly piqued curiosity. “I just read . . . a cyanide toxicity report in . . . fruit juices. Watch out, everyone,” he says, casting a foreboding look at each of us. “It’s too easy.”

*Too easy to what, Ricky? Kill someone?*

*Are these really things you should announce out loud?*

This from Ricky, for the record, is normal. We are informed on a daily basis via email or otherwise how something can and will kill us. And it often ends with a statement about just how easy it’d be for he himself to do it. Reassuring stuff.

We all ignore him.

“The whole incident with the stereo is too funny *not* to use in a book,” Crystal says. She hoists her camo backpack that’s twice the size of her body higher over her shoulders as she strides alongside us, her little legs working like a seagull on a brisk walk. “It’d be a *travesty* not to show the world the hilarious moment of the Pip Breakdown. I’m working on a book set here in Miami—”

“Is that what we’ll refer to this incident as?” Gordon says, ever the one for naming things. He has an entire language he’s created for curse words, which he uses, in our real world, on the daily. “Binks” is one of them.

“Finks” if you’re going for a low blow.

You should see Gordon and all his buddies at Comic-Con in their wizard hats holding 32-ounce sodas, each tossing their own made-up languages into the pile of conversation, each secretly, desperately hoping their made-up words will catch on.

And while Neena and Hugh and the rest carry on, arguing over exactly *who* is going to get the honor of using Pineapple Trunks in their next novel, I glance to the shore, back to the specific spot in the distance where I completely lost it.

Man, I really lost it.

In all the lifetime events of Penelope Mae Dupont, none will be as extreme as this. Mom likes to talk about how I once walked outside of my room as a three-year-old and peed on the carpet in defiance while in time-out one time. But that's the point. People who know me laugh, precisely because it's the exact opposite of something I'd do. I'm compliant and obedient.

I obey laws.

I give away cats when the landlord says they are no longer allowed (*difficult*, I assure you).

Hugh gives me a deadline for two days from now? I do it in one.

Hugh wants me to fly with him on a whim to an abandoned hospital in the middle of Nowhere, America, for some terrifying research? I say, "Shall I pack one bag or two?"

But that spot on the shore . . .

It seems that everybody's relieved I actually have a breaking point.

For weeks they'd been trying to get me to open up, to display any emotion, and I'd clamped my mouth shut.

I had composed myself.

I'd brushed my unruly hair until it went into a nice, neat ballerina bun. Every single one of my cardigan buttons was

looped in place. I put on a polite smile and said to every single person who dared ask, *So how are you, Pip . . . really?*, “Me?” (as though it was funny they should ask such a surprising thing). “Oh, I’m doing well. Really well. Thank you so much for asking. And how are you, [insert anyone from distant aunt to secretly unsympathetic, gossipy downstairs neighbor]? How is your [dog, geranium, wart issue, whatever possible topic comes to mind to get the subject off me]?”

And I had just gotten to the point where everyone was possibly believing the ruse—including myself—when today happened.

The moment the man broke my perfect peace bubble and was so wholly *inconsiderate*, not thinking for a moment about how his actions affected the rest of the world around him, that I lost it.

Because the reality is, what you do with your life affects other people.

Thinking only of yourself comes with a cost, always.

You just may not be the one paying it.

People should know that.

Michael should know that.

Pineapple Trunks—and every other person on earth for that matter—should know that.

And be held accountable.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say on behalf of everyone, we are all very proud of you, darling,” Neena says quietly, bringing me back to the world around me. The beating Miami summer sun overhead. The blue and white bunting flags of the cruise ship snapping in the wind. Nothing depressing or unhappy in sight.

She’s now got her arm wrapped around me as we walk several paces behind the others.

“I’m never dating again,” I mutter as I grunt along, drag-

ging our suitcases.

“We’ll never date again, together!” Neena agrees in a tone that suggests, *Whatever you say here, I’m going to echo, darling. Because that’s what you need right now. A good corroborating spirit over facts.* The captain of the ship glides past our periphery, and she follows his gait. “Except for men in hats,” she says. “I’ve always had a weakness for a man in a good hat.”

“You know, this could be an interesting start to kick up *your* novel,” Hugh says cheerily. The fact that all my dirty laundry has been and continues to be so obviously aired in group conversation speaks volumes to my mental state right now. And to our group closeness.

Regardless.

“I don’t have a novel,” I say automatically. “There is no novel.”

“Sometimes when you don’t have the inspiration, you just have to make it,” Hugh says in his *I’m guiding* voice. “Sometimes the best way to get your foot in the door if all the doors are locked is to simply build a new door.”

My brows cinch together. These “words of wisdom” are frequent, by the way.

He’s always trying to push me into writing and I’m always trying to push him out.

His brilliance just assumes everybody else’s mind can work the same as his.

“What?” I say. “What do you mean by just build a door—”

“Butt out, Hugh. This is my pep talk, not yours,” Neena says, shooing him off with her hand.

“You had to let it out sometime,” she says, squeezing my shoulders despite the fact that I’m now (a) being pushed along on a gangplank, (b) dragging two heavy suitcases, (c) with gusts of wind trying to blow me over the railing and

into the water below.

“Nobody can live very long with that kind of passion inside without it eventually blowing up and out. It’s human nature. None of us are immune, no matter how much we sometimes wish it were so.” She gives me a kiss on the top side of my head (blinding me in one eye with her hat while doing so) like the doting-but-eccentric grandmotherly figure she is.

“You know what, love?” she says in an entirely new tone, “this really might be the perfect time to let me see that novel of yours—”

“That’s what I said,” Hugh interjects.

“Get your mind off things,” she continues, ignoring him.

“It’s not a novel,” I say.

“I heard you’ve got three chapters in!”

“I’ve been writing those same three chapters for three years.”

“I heard you entered it into a writing contest and earned *fourth place*,” she continues triumphantly.

“There were three contestants total,” I reply. And after a pause, “Somebody’s name was duplicated.”

Neena purses her lips.

Yes, Neena. Try to find something positive to say about that one. The sad little “novel” I’ve been writing on and off (mostly off) for the past three years is nothing. *Really*.

Those evangelical pamphlets people leave beneath windshield wipers are longer than my “novel.”

My new vacuum cleaner has a manual longer than my “novel.”

It was stupid of me to even try to write a while ago. But it was like cigarettes, really. When *everyone* around you just so happens to be a literary giant and eat writing, drink writing, breathe writing, you can’t help but pick up the proverbial

cigarette eventually and say, “Hmm. What if I tried just *one*?”

The answer, in my case, was you cough and spasm and turn out to be totally, absolutely wrong.

“Hugh says one day you’re going to take the mystery genre by storm. And he knows,” she says, tapping her nose. “He has a sense for these things.”

“That I do,” Hugh chimes in.

“Shh,” Neena says tersely, pushing him forward.

She stops us and waits ’til everyone moves on.

When he’s shuffled ahead so far that he and the others are on board, she continues. “Hugh really does know, love. When he’s right, he’s *right*. He called out Bick Denton before he ever even picked up a pen. I thought it was crazy at the time, but sure enough, now he’s *Bick Denton* and giving us all a run for our money.” She smiles motheringly as she looks at me. “And he says the very same of you. Says your research skills are bar none. And I’ll tell you what right now. It’d be a true pleasure to see you giving us all a run for our money too.”

“Just because I can find him a unique set of weapons, means, and methods for his books doesn’t mean I can piece all those facts together into anything cohesive. Believe me, Neena. I’ve tried. Researching pieces and parts for Hugh’s books is one thing. Writing a masterpiece, as I have discovered to my great disappointment, is another. I can talk about dimethylaminopropionitrile all day long, but creating anything with actual creative genius is another.”

“Hugh disagrees. He says you’re talented.”

“Yeah, well, currently my ‘manuscript’ is something between a journalistic piece and a medical dissertation, a bunch of technical terms gurgled up and emotionlessly splattered on page.”

She shrugs. “Hugh says though, love.”

“Yeah, well, he can be wrong sometimes.”

“That he can.” She pauses. “But not when it counts like this.”

Agree to disagree.

“Oh, you just need someone to push you off the ledge is all,” Neena says, shimmying herself through the narrow entrance on board the ship, holding on to her hat like Marilyn Monroe. The silvery heads of several staff members turn.

An attendant opens his mouth to welcome us on board, but Neena raises a finger with a smile. He waits, gloved hand over gloved hand.

“I’m going to tell you a little secret, darling.”

“I don’t believe you are capable of secrets, Neena.”

“We’re all terrified when we first start. None of us think we have what it takes. You know what Hugh says: ‘It’s all about the first chapter. It’s all as simple as getting down that first chapter. Once you’ve got that, you’re nearly there.’”

How many times has Hugh said that to me? A hundred. A thousand.

*When are you going to give me what I want, Pip? I want to see that first chapter. It’s all as simple as getting down that first chapter.*

“And that’s where we differ, you and I, Neena,” I say calmly. But it hurts, really. It hurts to have to defend the painful reality that I so wish were not true. “You actually had talent under that imposter syndrome of yours. I don’t.”

“You know,” Neena says, looking at me with huge, eternally sympathetic eyes, standing beside the welcoming staff member with his now equally large, sympathetic eyes. “One of these days, I’m just going to break into that laptop of yours and read it myself.”

I frown. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I absolutely would.”

“Breaking into laptops isn’t really on brand for you, Neena.”

“There’s almost always more to people than meets the eye.”

At a sudden gust of wind, she grabs her floppy hat and pushes it down firmly over her sparkling starfish clip. “Ah,” she says with a sigh. “The sea. There is nothing quite like the sea.”

The cruise ship is smaller than one of the giant cruise liners, bigger than a ferry boat and capable of taking on the open seas, but more manageably sized. Quainter. Classy. The hull and main deck are a gorgeous baby blue, the color of hydrangeas sweeping over Cape Cod porches in summer, the color of stately swinging French doors of old chateaus teeming with life in the countryside. Everything else is a pearly white, from the ornately designed railings with their graceful swerves and swoops, to the bow where a figurehead of a woman with an intricate golden crown smiles as she looks with confidence to the glistening sea. Crisp blue and white bunting banners flap everywhere overhead, stretching across the bow side with the glistening pool to the stern and the generously sized lounge chairs in striped blue and white on the other. Pagoda-style umbrellas in various shades of blue and white surround the pool, all with golden tassels shimmying in the breeze.

Waiters in deep blue waistcoats and blue feather bow ties glide around us, arms laden with crystal glasses full of fizzing amber and pink.

The cruise ship is straight from the twenties. It’s classic glamour in a boat.

And, uncoincidentally, an absolutely perfect choice for the location of The Magnificent Seven’s Inaugural Book Cruise.

I exhale as I watch the first impressions stretch across Jackie and the others' faces. Everybody's thrilled. Everybody is smiling in wonder at something—the waiter in his gorgeous purple-blue feather bow tie who just slipped seamlessly backward between two clusters in his polished black roller skates, the cocktail glasses in his hand not even so much as quaking at the shift. The slew of people—older women mostly—already stretched out on pool chairs on the sundeck, books (of *The Seven*, naturally) in hand.

Gleaming white marble side tables stacked with our team's books can be seen everywhere. (I thought it'd be a nice touch, but make no mistake, discussing mailing 2,500 books to the liner with express wishes to “thoughtfully set them around” was a more difficult conversation than one would think. Eventually we landed on a smattering around the ship and a neatly tied bundle on each person's pillow.)

The amount of organization and planning that went into this book cruise, the first ever for *The Magnificent Seven*, was heavy, to say it lightly. Over a year went into planning what I imagined would become our first of many book cruises: seven-to-ten-day excursions to stunning places around the world where readers could meet and share magical memories alongside their favorite authors. There were reasons behind this mad plan. Photography and film rights were included in the contracts. I'm hoping to capture so many perfect moments of the authors with their readers during this trip. There should be enough footage for newsletters, posts, advertising, and website management to last a year. And readers—of whom there are approximately three hundred on this ship—have been given so many books as part of this trip package, they'll be going home with a new library.

A win-win for all.

I round up the troops and announce that we will meet

back on deck in thirty minutes to go over the schedule, and then everyone departs for their rooms. Some attendants sail by while I'm not looking and take my bags—so sleekly, in fact, I thought for a moment I had just been robbed. Honestly, where did they hire these people? I can absolutely picture the CEO of this cruise liner tasking his underlings to loiter around the Eiffel Tower and find the smoothest pick-pockets lifting wallets from tourists for the job.

My room is, in a word, incredible.

For one thing, it smells of lemon drops.

Plush pearly carpet looks like it was installed yesterday. Tendrils of gold are woven into the grasscloth wallpaper. The king-sized bed overtakes the room, stuffed with a dozen plump white pillows of various sizes beneath a large, gilded oil painting of a water scene. What I expected from online searches was a head-shaped porthole. What I've received, however, and what makes up for the small space, are four floor-to-ceiling glass panels that take up the length of the room.

I pull open the door and immediately am washed in a breeze of warm, sea-salt air.

I step out to the little terrace, look down, immediately regret just how *far* down the tiny waves lap against the ship below, and step back inside.

Making a mental note here: Good to know. Avoid the patio.

When I step back inside, I notice for the first time my suitcase was somehow magically placed in my room.

*How did they . . . ?*

*How did the staff know who I was when they took my bags?*

*Or that I was in this room?*

This is next-level hospitality stuff.

I gasp in shock when I lift the suitcase and feel it's empty.

I audibly say, “Wow,” to the gilded wallpaper when I pull out a dresser drawer and see all of my belongings inside. Crisply folded. Down to the shaggy sweatshirt I wear at night with the gaping hole in the armpit.

Okay, I love this place.

I, even with terrifying balconies leaving nothing but a three-inch steel bar between me and certain death, am meant for a life at sea.

I jump in the shower to scrub off the sea salt and the airplane-travel memories of the day and put on a pair of black leggings and a sensible I’m-working-not-relaxing-here cream blouse. I don’t have time to do anything but wind my hair into a wet bun, but at least I braid it first, then wind it round and round until it’s one gigantic Celtic pancake at the back of my neck.

Sensible.

Little bit prudish.

Could easily come off as a cross schoolmaster at an all-girls school, but I probably need to look it after the day I’ve had.

I’m the first to get back on deck, and as I wait, I scroll through work emails and text messages that have piled up over the day. All of the family messages that have been coming in waves in the past six weeks since everything with Michael went down. An electric bill to be paid. Thirty-seven spam emails swiftly trashed.

There is one text thread that my finger keeps swiping over to as I sit perched on a creamy stool by a marble top, one plain black flat hooked on the lower rung, swiveling me slowly back and forth as a live band plays an old Sinatra tune. Why hasn’t he responded yet? Where *is he*?

*Hurry up.*

He was supposed to be here an hour ago.

It feels like the day has dragged to a lifetime.

A new, most terrible thought occurs and my heart plunges into my stomach. What if he missed it?

What. If. He. Missed. The. Boat?

Sweat prickles over my body like an army of soldiers called to action by my hypothalamus commander.

Surely not.

Surely they wouldn't *leave* one of The Magnificent Seven.

And specifically *him* of all of them.

I'm about to break into a full sweat and commence running about, grabbing ropes and throwing anchors over ledges and full-on dragging us back to shore, when the bartender steps forward.

"For the lady."

I raise my head at the sight of a drink slid beneath my nose.

"Oh, no thank you, I—" I begin.

"Rhubarb and Rosewater Fizz Mocktail," he announces.

"Very nice choice. It was new to me; I'll have to add it to the list. Recipe compliments of the man over there."

He points somewhere over my shoulder, but he doesn't need to.

I knew as soon as he said *rhubarb* that he was here.

How can you put into words exactly what it feels like knowing your coworker / favorite friend / person you've been fully allowed to enjoy interacting with during work hours / person who is *your* person for the proverbial nine-to-five but then erases into memory once the day is done and the weekend has come, or (as in this case) goes off-grid for a series of months, has just returned?

Elated doesn't do it.

More like . . . like a mother who loses sight of her kid at

a playground and anxiously scans the area knowing everything is *probably* fine, it *has* to be fine, surely it *is* fine, and then—*pop*—there he is hopping out of the bottom of the slide and you find you can breathe again.

Seeing Nash, well, it's like I can breathe again.

And I didn't even know I had been holding my breath.

The hours of exhausting emotional strain and physical travel slip away as I push off the barstool.

Nash heads toward me, cowboy hat and jeans and all, making his way through a cluster of women. His eyes are linked on mine, but even so, he tips his hat toward the ladies in one of those endearing little ways that makes women swoon, because *oh, isn't he so charming and dashing and brave—and he smells just like sunlit dew resting on a fresh hay bale.*

And to be honest, he does smell like that.

It's the jeans.

It's sort of baked into him in all his travels.

Least, that's my theory.

"You're late," I announce, far less enthusiastic than I really am, as I rise off my stool to give him a hug.

"That painful without me, huh?"

"You have no idea."

"Who's to blame this time?" he says as he gives me a squeeze.

"Me, actually. I'd tell you all about it, but I don't think I could live through reliving it."

He's a foot taller than I am, and suddenly I'm swallowed up in denim and his signature hay bale scent, and when my feet are lifted off the floor, a few sighs of envious ladies escape in the distance.

Here's the thing about us.

I've never texted Nash outside of a work-related context.

I've never been to his apartment.

I've never suggested we casually get together "as friends" ever.

He, likewise.

But during the work hours I'm free.

I'm allowed to laugh at his jokes.

I'm allowed to stand by his side on the street and discuss in low and humorous tones exactly what I think about Jackie and Crystal elbowing their way to get into the taxi first. I'm allowed to confide in him and appreciate him and all the ways we have each other's backs while on duty.

He's just . . . my person.

My work person.

And up until six weeks ago, that was all he was allowed to be.

There. That's how I'd describe us.

Nash is my nine-to-five person who lights up my nine-to-five life in a way that makes me feel that all the joy of work would be sucked out of my life without him.

Simple, and exceedingly platonic.

When he has finally let go and takes a seat beside me, I'm out of breath again, but for entirely different reasons.

Wordlessly, the bartender holds up a chilled mug in one hand and plain beer in the other. Nash taps the beer and he slides it over.

"Today was . . . not the best travel day," I say, feeling more grounded in Nash's presence than I have in weeks.

*This is what I needed*, I realize, taking a steady sip of my rhubarb and rose.

Not the salt air.

Not the bubbly waves.

I needed this right here.

That poor (I mean, but we can only pity him so much,

can't we?) man with the boombox went through it for nothing.

"Neena didn't make you listen to 'Desperado' again, did she? I told you, Pip. You don't have to listen to it—"

"I know," I say. "But she plays it through her phone—"

"You gotta stand up to her—"

"She thinks it's bonding."

"What part of 'Desperado' is bonding? No part of that song speaks to group travel. I don't know why she clings to it. How many times was it this time?"

"I lost count after thirty-seven."

He whistles.

"And that marked hour one. I told you," I say, then pull the drink to my lips, "it was a long day."

My phone dings with an incoming text followed three seconds later by ringing. Nash and I both lean in to see who it's from.

That, I think, might sum up Nash and me.

We are both unapologetically nosy about other people's calls—and don't mind.

We press speakerphone when we answer.

It's more like a secret third party on every call.

Neena's text is simple.

SOS.

Her name is also the one on the banner as it rings.

"How long have you been on board?" Nash whispers.

"Thirty minutes."

"Is that a new record?"

"Hardly," I say, then pick up the call. "Hi, Neena. Where are you?"

And as I commence working her through the twists and

turns that would get her to the top deck, Nash makes small talk with the women who have been perched on the pool chairs, listening in.

Then he does something that stops me mid-sentence.

He takes off his hat.

Hooks it on his knee as one drops a hat on a hook by the door, one boot resting on the bottom rung of my stool.

And for a blink of an eye, he is rolling his shoulders and shaking out the glinting blond-brown locks of his shaggy (in a very nice way) hair, and I see as he rubs the back of his suntanned neck a look in his composure of one who is bone-weary. Of one who has just returned from a distant war to the squishy armchair of his living room, the one he'd dreamed of through all those cold and scary nights far abroad.

He's listening to one of the women drone on, nodding. Contented.

That's what he looks like.

Bone weary but contented.

Like this is just where he wants to be.

Too.

A warmth blossoms in my chest and I quell it.

I listen as Neena somehow gets herself onto the wrong elevator and ends up in some underwater dining room. All the while, I'm remarkably aware of Nash's knee so casually touching mine.

How long have we been friends now?

Coming up on four years? And yet it feels like a lifetime.

Nash catches me looking at his knee and we lock eyes momentarily.

He clears his throat and pulls his knee back to his chair side.

I swallow my pride, forcing myself not to take it person-

ally.

Silly, really. *We are professionals.*

“Oh, I see some coattails,” Neena says. “I’m going to grab on and not let go until he takes me up. Yoo-hoo!”

The line goes dead.

Moments after I break off, Nash picks up his beer and, after some polite niceties, the crowd of women drifts away, leaving us alone again.

He swivels my way.

“So,” I say, “where was it to this time?”

“Buhl, Idaho. Down a tiny valley near Snake Ridge Canyon.”

“Snake Ridge Canyon,” I repeat with a suggestive lift of my brow. “Sounds charming.”

I know the place.

I looked it up when he told me he might be going offline again a few months back, heading out beneath the wild sky to clear his head for book research and just general living. He juggles the states up quite a bit, but they all have some similarities: out west. Places either hot enough to melt butter or so cold you get frostbite (he’s had it—twice). Humidity that you could slice through with a knife.

He brings his boots and his hat and jumps on a random horse with two saddlebags of canned beans and jerky and a tin coffee can and water and a notebook and his trusty computer and—let’s hope—a toothbrush.

Sleeps on the ground with his hat over his head—just like in his books.

Drinks coffee that looks a lot like mudwater—just like in his books.

Pops into town to charge up his laptop every few days and grab a few more cans of beans.

Does nothing but muse in silence for days on end—and

write his books.

He usually comes back with a half-written novel or, if not half, at least a quarter and a plan.

Every author has his method for inspiration, I guess.

“I thought you were going for four weeks this time.”

“I went eight.”

“You never go eight.”

“This was a trip I needed eight. I had to . . .”—he pauses and his eyes jog away for a moment—“Get away from it all for a bit. Get some perspective.”

“About what?”

Nash hesitates.

Shakes his head.

“Just people. Work. Life. To remember my place.”

He’s shutting down over it. I can see it plainly in the shift of his body as he turns and takes a swig of his beer.

Well. I understand. If there’s one thing, one tiny little takeaway I’ve had drilled into my brain over the past six weeks, it’s that I will never pry again. People can be well-meaning, but if I have to say, “I’m fine, and you?” while piecing my face into a perfectly effortless smile for their daily inquisition one more time, I just might throw a boombox into the ocean.

I shift the subject, keeping my tone light.

“Get bit by anything interesting?”

“Found a rattler in my boot one morning.”

I make a face. It’s revolting. His hobbies are *revolting*.

“The number of times you’ve discovered living creatures in your shoes is really concerning, Nash. Have you ever, oh, I don’t know, considered rolled-up towels in them or something?”

“No room in the saddlebags.”

“You have shirts.”

"I have *shirt*," he corrects.

"You don't even carry an extra *shirt*?"

"If it gets dirty, you just take it off. Clean it. Put it back on again. Keeps things simple."

I laugh, picturing the twenty-*two* shirts sitting in my drawers in my room below at this very moment.

"Plus, a little threat of snake in your boots keeps you on your toes. You gotta have some adventure."

"Hey now," I say, putting up a hand. "I put three packets of sugar in my coffee at the airport this morning instead of two."

His brows rise amicably. "That so?"

"Darn tootin'. So. Any full moons? Any of those famous write-all-night-under-the-pale-moon-twenty-thousand-word spells of yours?"

"Couple. The stars were . . ."—he pauses, that little smile on his face he gets when he's conversing about something he likes—"You would've loved it, Pip. The whole sky was covered in them."

"You know, from what I read, the night skies out here are going to be pretty worthwhile too. *And*," I say, raising a finger over this very noteworthy bonus, "rattler free."

"I did hear something about that. It was your tactic to get me on this floating prison, after all," he says, and we pass a mutual grin.

In a moment of weakness, I did send him twenty separate text pictures of star-swept skies on cruise liners to sway him to go on this trip. And at least three articles on tonight's meteor shower.

I had to do some heavy-duty pleading for him to come.

For some reason, Nash in particular was resistant, unlike everybody else who jumped when I said the words "book sales" and "free buffet."

And for Jackie, when I mentioned the sheet thread count.  
And Gordon, with the magic show entertainment.

“How close are you to finishing up this book?” I ask, ever secretly amazed by how quickly Nash can throw out books.

“I’m close to the end of this one,” Nash says, rubbing a hand up and down his stubbled chin. “A little bit stuck, though. I keep hammering on the page, but it never seems to make anything of itself.”

“Case of the yips? No such thing with Nash Eyre.”

“There’s a first for everything, and I’m certainly living it.”

“Even with a hiatus of snakes in the boots and rocks for pillows and everything?”

“Even with the snake,” he says with a shake of his head. “I might just find one of those chairs and try to make an end to it tonight beneath that meteor shower of yours.”

“I’ll join you,” I say cheerily.

It just pops out of my mouth.

A self-invitation.

There’s an obvious pause.

“Yes. Can’t miss this,” Nash says, but there’s something in his tone that carries a slight stilt. A wordless distancing. His boot ever so slightly shifts an inch away on the stool. “I can . . . knock on your door—”

What is that?

Is that too far over the line?

Daytime work friends, not alone-beneath-stars-at-night memory makers. I mean, what did I expect? I haven’t seen him or heard from him in two months.

Immediately a warmth spreads across my neck, and I rub it subconsciously.

Stupid of me.

“No, *no*,” I say in a casual rush, over-grinning. “I’ll just meet you here. We’ll have to duke it out with our elbows

against the elderly to get a couple of chairs most likely. Don't worry about me."

"We're baaaaack," Neena says in a singsong voice, shimmying up to the two of us with the rest of the group trickling in behind. The time for Rhubarb and Rosewater is over.

"Did people break into your room and steal your clothes?" Hugh asks the group. "I went to the bathroom, came out, and it was all gone."

"Check your drawers," Gordon says cheerily. "They put everything away. Down to a very tidy arrangement of my hats by color and size."

Jackie sniffs. "They *wrinkled* my tweed blazer."

"It's been ten minutes. Can tweed really . . ." I begin.

"Sixty seconds," Jackie hisses. "You can ruin a whole wardrobe in *sixty seconds*—"

"Oh! Somebody grab me some pearls to clutch! The tea is *boiling*!" Crystal announces cheerily. "What'll be next at this diabolical luxury cruise? Unwashed slices of lemon in the water glasses? Lint on the bathrobes?"

"A dangerous thing . . . to do," Ricky murmurs in his painfully cryptic voice. "Breaking in . . . to the room of . . . a man so closely acquainted . . . with murder."

Nash gives me a look.

I give him one back.

"Okay, okay, everyone," I jump in before the conversation snowballs down this loooooong hill. "In good news, Hugh didn't attack anyone trying to fold his laundry. I'll personally head over to your closet with an iron later, Jackie. And I have a tour to go over with you all. Move along."

I shepherd the group through a tour of the cruise ship in terms of workshops, meals, planning sessions, and free time. I lose Crystal to the slip and slide at some point and end up backtracking a fair bit to drag her back, but ultimately the

day is smooth sailing (pun intended).

The big group introduction session goes as planned (except for Gordon, who loses his pet rabbit and spends the rest of the session checking under tables for a missing Holland Lop), and by dinnertime, we're all enjoying a feast of every meat under the sun in one of the big ballrooms.

The room is loud and jubilant with first-night energy. Nothing but sea and sunshine to the ends of the earth.

As dessert plates are being cleaned up, Hugh steps over.

"I need a word, Penelope. Just you and me," Hugh murmurs quietly with a touch to the elbow.

"We're just about to head to Coffee and Conversation in the parlor," I say with a *can it wait?* tone, but he just shakes his head.

"Okay," I say, swinging my head to the others.

Jackie is already halfway out of the room.

Neena, not even in view, is probably already there.

"They'll wait," he says, pressing me toward the back door.

There's no humor as we walk briskly down the hall, away from the others.

Which is odd, because Hugh *always* looks like he's on the brink of hearing a big joke.

I follow along the intricately patterned dark blue carpet, our feet making no sound. We twist this way and that until even I am turned around, and just when I think I *may* recognize an elevator in the distance, he pulls me into an empty room.

He switches on the light, illuminating gilded spines of books all around. Six stuffed red lounge chairs and couches circle the interior of the room, the blackness of night of three portholes soaking the view. A room of red, gold, and black. Fitting for the sense of dread coming over me.

I move next to one of the standing lamps, like a moth

hunting for light.

He looks both ways down the hall, then shuts the door with particular care.

When he turns, I'm frowning.

"Is this about Jackie telling you not to eat the ice cream? I know she can be overbearing, but she's just worrying over you. It's the freakish way she shows she cares."

"No," he says, exhaling as he moves to a chair. He drops into it and beckons me to sit on the couch opposite. "No. But I wish it was."

He waits until I'm fully settled on the couch. Gives a look around as if expecting someone to be peeking out from behind the velvet curtains.

"Hugh," I say, because *honestly*, it's nine o'clock and everyone is waiting on us.

And he's starting to creep me out.

Working for Hugh, for the record, is not like other PA jobs. Other PAs print off copies. I print off copies while testing out how many seconds it takes me to snap the bullets of a .44 Magnum into place as research for his new mystery (he realized early on I was a handy amateur in all things crime, making me the perfect test subject for most of the characters who had normal jobs and lives before randomly murdering someone in his books).

Other PAs bring coffee. I bring Hugh three cups of coffee with sedative in one to see if he can guess which one knocks him out. And then test exactly how long it took him to actually be knocked out (oh, the pizza delivery guy who walked in on that one).

I keep him to his calendar. I remind him of deadlines and then drag him away from fun to lock him in his room to hit those deadlines. (Literally. His request.)

I pull the bayonet out of his sleeping hand and bring him

his pills in the morning to keep his blood pressure down.

I am, essentially, the mother of an eccentric seventy-five-year-old author.

And now he needs reining in.

“We at least have to message them—” I begin, still thinking about how to salvage the event we’re late for.

“I have reason to believe someone is trying to murder me. And it’s one of The Seven.”

I pause from reaching into my pocket for my phone. Squint at him.

“Hugh,” I say again. “Come on. What’s this really about?”

“I’m serious, Pip. I think my life is really and truly in danger.”

The idea is so preposterous, so out of nowhere, that I laugh.

And yet he doesn’t chime in, and after a few seconds, my laugh dies out.

“You can’t be serious,” I say.

He brushes a hand over his face, looking away to the left, somewhere in the distance. “I am,” he says, more to the drapes than to me. “Incredible to believe, but I am.”

I sit back, leaning against the upholstered pinches in the couch. Cock my head. Sit in silence for some moments.

“No,” I say at last.

Can’t be.

Not *them*.

“You have been working too hard, Hugh,” I continue.

“That’s my fault a bit. I haven’t been as attentive the past couple weeks, and you’ve gone . . .”

*Mad* is the word I want to say.

*Manic*.

Because that’s another thing with Hugh. I learned early on that part of my job is to keep him from spending both

too little *and* too much time writing. It's a thin line to balance and a long fall on either side if he missteps—and with Hugh, he tends to fall off the line every time without me.

Too little writing and pushing too far past the deadlines and the publishers come threatening.

Too much writing and escaping into his little office hole and he forgets to eat, sleep, bathe, and comes up with the most insane conclusions and ideas.

And the past six weeks, well, I've been chasing a rabbit down my own little rabbit hole.

I reach forward. Pat his knee and move to standing. "Come on. Let's do this recap and go straight to bed. You'll feel better in the morning—"

"I found a note."

That's when I notice Hugh's hands. Are they *shaking*?

"What did it say?" I ask.

"I went out yesterday from the office. Left my door unlocked as I always do."

Sure. And probably wide open.

"And when I came back, I saw the other door was open."

"What other door?" I say, brows rising.

"The secret door," he says, as though this was obvious.

"The one we don't talk about."

"Wait. There actually *is* a secret door?"

"Have you not found it by now?" he returns, with a mild look of disappointment in me. "The point is, it was open. And on the round table—"

*There's a round table? The gang meets up around a round table like medieval knights?! There is so much to unpack here!*

"—was my book. With a knife stabbed right through it.

And a note."

A chill runs up my spine. "What did it say?"

"Off to sea but never stay, you will go home another

way.”

Okay. That is terrifying.

But.

*But.*

“But, and to go back to that note in a moment, that could be written by anyone—”

“It was signed. ‘Of The Seven.’”

I stare at him.

“Where’s the note?”

“In my top desk drawer.”

“Did you take a picture?”

“No.”

I rub my face.

Rub my face again.

He’s expecting me to say something.

“Hugh . . .” I begin. “I don’t know what to say. Maybe it wasn’t one of them. Maybe it was someone else—”

“Who knew about the secret room? Come now,” Hugh says, hands outstretched, “even you didn’t know.”

“But why would they do something like that? It makes no sense.”

Warnings in mysteries, for that matter, *never* make sense.

If you wanted to kill someone, go on and do it.

“Someone must’ve found out I know their secret.”

“What secret?”

“I never should’ve allowed myself to get caught . . .”

“*What secret?*” I say with more urgency.

“I need you to do something for me,” he says, grabbing me by the elbow. In his hype he’s not listening. “Promise me, Pip, whatever happens, *should* anything happen, you’ll get the note from my desk the second you get back to New York. Get to it. Hide it. It’ll be little evidence, but there just might be something there for the investigators to go by.”

“Stop it, Hugh. If this is some kind of twisted joke . . .” I say, winding my arm out from his.

“And no matter what, don’t tell a soul. Pretend you know nothing. Keep yourself away from trouble. Not a soul, you hear me? That’ll give you time to deliver it to the police without putting yourself in harm’s way. *But no matter what, don’t put yourself in harm’s way.* I would never be able to forgive myself if I put you in a dangerous place because of my actions.”

He rubs his lips.

His eyes dart back and forth, like he’s reading through an invisible manuscript and watching this all play out. And he doesn’t like the ending.

Hugh leans himself back suddenly. “You know what? Never mind. This is all too dangerous for you as it is.”

He stands.

“Hugh. *C’mon.*” Now it’s my turn to grab his elbow.

“You heard nothing,” he says. “Stay out of whatever comes.”

I purse my lips. “Well, now I obviously can’t, Hugh. This is all insane.” I stand too.

“Never mind, Pip. Just let it go.” He pauses, his milky blue eyes roving round the room. “Just the ramblings of an old man.”

I tilt my head as I look at him.

When did this transformation happen? How long has he been this pale and I haven’t noticed?

Wasn’t he laughing this afternoon?

There’s a piercing look in his ice-blue eyes as I weigh the question.

The clock strikes nine on the wall, and he jolts his head up. “Ah,” he says and pulls out his medicine from his chest pocket. The medicine he is *specifically* supposed to be taking

at 9 *a.m.* every morning. He pops one into his hand and I grab it.

“These are for *a.m.*,” I say. “Take one in the morning.”

“Ah. Right.” He grabs the pill back.

“Oookay then,” I say with an exhale. My blood pressure is starting to drop. The black spots in my vision begin to clear. “Fine. Fine, Hugh. Should you mysteriously disappear by one of your lifelong best friends in a freak incident of the world flipping upside down, I promise I won’t tell a soul. Happy?”

He swallows the pill dry.

There’s a terrible dry gulp as it goes down and he opens the door.

Motions for me to go through.

“Tremendously.”



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Taylor Meo Photography

**Melissa Ferguson** is the bestselling author of titles including *How to Plot a Payback*, *Meet Me in the Margins*, and *Famous for a Living*. She lives in Tennessee with her husband and children in their growing farmhouse lifestyle and writes heartwarming romantic comedies that have been featured in such places as *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Travel + Leisure*, and *The New York Post*.

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