

## Author's Note

*OVEREMOTIONAL* is a story about friendship, love, and loneliness. It's about finding who you are and where you fit in the world. There are depictions of violence, drugging, and references to medical experimentation conducted on pregnant women in the past. While it is my hope this book is for everyone, I am including this note so that those sensitive to these issues can make an informed decision from the very beginning. After all, emotions have power, even if they aren't magic.

# Steven's Emomancy Cheat Sheet

Emotion	Effect
Happy	Negative stuff, disaster, destruction, dismemberment?
Sad	Positive stuff – general fixer-upper/ nice weather
Anger	Make others scared
Fear	Make others angry
Disgust	Pulls things towards (human vacuum)
Desire	Pushes things away
Guilt	All eyes on me
Pride	Invisibility

# 1

## Steven

The first time I kissed another boy was probably the worst day of my life. One moment I'm waiting for the upstairs loo at a yay-we-did-our-first-week-of-mock-exams party, the next, I'm being led into a bedroom, and I'm making out with a total stranger.

And then his head exploded.

Like, actually exploded. I was dressed like a zombie at the time, which basically meant I'd ripped some old clothes and let Freya squirt me with fake blood. Unoriginal, but at least it disguised the *real* blood.

Oh god. The real blood.

Just what the hell was I supposed to do? I couldn't exactly explain to the police that I'd snogged someone's head out of existence. I had been careless. My powers had been getting stronger, but I thought one party would be fine. That I could keep my emotions in check. And now they've . . . killed someone. *I've* killed someone. So, I did what any seventeen-year-old walking atom bomb would do.

I ran.

Ran home, packed a bag and kept on running. Okay, there were some buses in there too, but I think it's safe to say no

one will find me here. Grunsby-on-Sea: the official arse end of nowhere.

I need to stop thinking about it. I can't let myself get overemotional. Whenever I do, things . . . happen. It's weird. Whatever I feel seems to manifest in some strange and horrific way. I can't be happy without inflicting misery. It's like the universe is conspiring against me – constantly playing cruel tricks. I try not to indulge it. I try not to feel anything.

That's why I'm alone.

No one around to hurt. It's safer for everyone else if I just stay here by myself and keep my emotions (and these damn manifestations) under control.

It's 11 a.m., but I just woke up. I say "woke," but I don't think I actually slept. My body was exhausted from lugging boxes around, but my mind just doesn't want to stop. Every night, I replay that party – that popping noise – over and over. Can't remember the last time I got eight hours.

I throw on some clothes and head into the kitchen: bread in the toaster, kettle on. It's a revolting kitchen, but not because it's dirty; it isn't. The moment I feel even a whiff of disgust, I draw all the dirt and dust in the flat toward me like a human vacuum. I guess I attract what disgusts me. Handy, but showering it all off is a pain. No, the kitchen is revolting because it hasn't been redecorated since 1954. Busy floral wallpaper is peeling from the walls, and the pink paint that once coated the cupboards is chipped and flaky. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole flat were made of asbestos.

I've been considering calling myself an emomancer. Makes sense. Pyromancers control fire and necromancers bring back the dead – at least in Dungeons and Dragons or whatever. So,

emomancers have emotion powers. I mean, it sounds like I should dye my hair black and wear a trench coat, but what else can I call it? I don't think there are emos anymore anyway – a casualty of the noughties. I was too young to be one, but I do remember Freya's older brother straightening his hair within an inch of its life at the time.

The kettle boils, and I scoop some instant coffee (the supermarket own-brand kind that tastes like someone blended up topsoil) into a mug. I don't trust myself to have anything nicer. Two weeks ago, I tried a pumpkin spice latte and shattered every window in the high street. It was delicious, though. The memory of the spicy-sweet drink rushes to my lips, and my toast catches fire, yellow light fizzing around my hand.

Great.

At least burned toast might mean sunshine today. But sunshine might make me happy and cause a sinkhole in Grunsky town centre . . .

I stop myself thinking. It's something I learned from one of those meditation apps. Not sure super-powered teenagers were their target demographic, but it works. I just picture white and nothing else, and usually everything balances out. No thoughts, no emotions, no *tricks*. I call them that because they are rarely treats.

I try to scrape the burned bits from the toast, but it's completely charred. My tricks seem to be getting stronger and more frequent lately. Used to be, I'd only cause a trick if there was a particularly strong emotion, and even then, there were long periods between them. Now I run out of fingers counting all the ones before lunch.

I thought a job might take my mind off things and keep my tricks under control. Plus I could use the cash. When I came to

Grunsbby-on-Sea, a week or so ago, I tried to be a bartender in a run-down pub called the Lazy Cough. I was keeping everything together until some middle-aged hag demanded I make her a Porn Star Martini. What even is that? She kept shouting that Millennials were “entitled slackers” despite the fact I was born after the millennium, so I haven’t touched a pair of skinny jeans in my life. She just kept going on. I could feel the tricks bubbling up inside me, feeding off my anger until I just couldn’t take it and told her to shut up.

That was when I realised my anger manifests as fear in other people. Everyone fled the pub in terror like I’d brought an emotional support lion with me. I was banned from the premises and told I was lucky they didn’t call the police.

Since then, I’ve been unloading cargo at the wharf when the ships come in. It’s hard, manual work, but at least I don’t have to think. Or worry about feeling. There are surprisingly few emotional reactions one can have to stacking crates and lugging boxes.

Thus far, no tricks.

As I pull on my boots, my triceps burn, and back muscles I didn’t know I had grind like rusted gears. If the tricks don’t kill me, then my sheer unfitness in the face of manual labour will. Why couldn’t I have gone to the gym more often? The one at school was free for all sixth formers, but I felt too embarrassed to go. What if everyone laughed at me for standing on the elliptical the wrong way round? Someone might film me, and I could end up on TikTok. Freya loves watching videos of people hurting themselves. How I would love to laugh at someone else’s misfortune for a change. But any rogue laughs could cause a thunderstorm or an old woman to slip and break her hip.

I don't know if there are any others like me. And if there are, would they make good things happen when they are happy, or would they be broken like me? I wonder if they can . . . relieve their "teenage urges" without causing a hurricane.

I did that.

I finished, then looked out the window to see next door's shed flying around like it was about to drop on the Wicked Witch of the West. At first, I didn't connect the dots. My powers were still developing, and my hands weren't glowing different colours yet. It wasn't until puberty really had its claws around my hormones that I began to see the trail of devastation. Earthquakes, lightning strikes – I'm pretty sure I even caused a foot-and-mouth outbreak across the county when I bunked off school.

I was probably the most sexually frustrated teenager to ever walk the planet. I learned to stop thinking about it. And it works. It *was* working until a guy I had just met kissed me, and I made his head pop like an angry spot.

But it's not just sex stuff. Other tricks happen depending on how I feel. Things often go in pairs and opposites, and the stronger the emotion, the stronger the trick. I keep a little chart in my pocket to keep track: my cheat sheet. I've left some empty boxes because I seem to develop a new trick every couple of months. Just the other day, I pushed a convertible into a wall by admiring it.

I used to live my life and ignore whatever occasionally manifested. Now I don't have that luxury. All I can do is try not to feel – go about my day with mechanical efficiency, like a passenger in my own body. But it's so hard. Every time I slip up, something terrible happens.

At this point, all I want is to feel nothing.

Jacketed and booted, I step out of my gross time capsule of a rental flat, and the November sea breeze bashes my face. There's something particularly cruel about the seaside in winter. The wind is extra cold, and it carries salt that licks your face like a cat's tongue.

Grunsbby-on-Sea is a dump. That's partly why I chose to come here: some vague sense of altruism. If I torture myself, then maybe nothing bad would happen to anyone else. This place topped every BuzzFeed listicle for worst places to live and was even voted "Most depressing town in the UK". Not that the Grunsbians have noticed. It probably wasn't always like this, though. Back in the forties, this was probably a lucrative holiday destination. People would take their kids to play at the seaside with jam sandwiches and ginger beer like something out of an Enid Blyton novel. Now the only visitors are film crews looking for the saddest looking place in England and emomancers hiding from the law, I guess.

At some point, some optimistic soul tried to liven the seafront up with a pastel-pink coat of paint over everything: railings, buildings, the old, ruined pier. Obviously, they didn't maintain it as everything in town is cracked and flaking from the sea air. Even the town's crown jewel, the Grand Regalia Hotel, which now offers "colour TV in every room", looks like it has a bad case of eczema. The hotel, situated just next to a rickety old Ferris wheel, overlooks the sunken pier like a post-apocalyptic art deco monstrosity. No one ever seems to be staying there, but I can hardly blame them. Any parent who willingly brought their child here today would have social services round faster than a seagull on chips.

One good thing about Grunsbby-on-Sea is that no one bats an eyelid at you. It's the perfect place to hide away and have zero



questions asked. You can walk to the corner shop without anyone sparing you a second glance.

Speaking of which, I pull my coat up over my mouth and head down the hill.



The shopkeeper grunts at me as the beeping door heralds my arrival. I'm the only one who seems to come in here, but it's not hard to see why. Plastered to every inch of the glass door are scraps of paper saying "no children", "no loud talking", "no browsing", "no old people" and "no phones".

I flash him an awkward no-lip smile and pick up a basket. Much like the rest of the town, the corner shop is frozen in time. Worn boxes of Jaffa cakes sit limply on the shelves; their sell-by date seemingly older than I am. I pick up a bottle of what I assume is Pepsi – the label is coated in so much dust, it is hard to see. My thumb streaks across it, and a handsome man with way too much gel in his hair looks back at me. Apparently, he's a football player from the 1998 World Cup – not that I have any clue about football despite my dad's repeated attempts to teach me.

I wonder what Mum and Dad are doing right now. They've been visiting my uncle in Madrid for the month – supposedly to "give me room to revise" for my mock A Levels, but I'm pretty sure they just wanted to sunbathe for the whole of November. By now, they're probably the colour of tanned leather and haven't worried about me once. I'm sure Freya's worrying, though. We've been best friends since we were six. She saw my *Ben 10* lunch box from across the playground, marched straight up to me, and demanded we play together. We pretended to turn

into aliens and fight baddies together almost every lunchtime. Since then, she's always been in my life, except for that brief few months in Year Seven when we decided we hated each other. She's in my form but we don't have any subjects together. I tell her everything . . . Well, almost everything.

Recently – well, before I went AWOL – she'd been boring me with every intimate detail of her new boyfriend, Marcus.

Prick.

I've never felt such an instant dislike for someone. He always insinuates that he's a lot smarter than me, just because he's already got uni offers for engineering. He can basically fix anything; it's super annoying. "Stevie, you're doing this wrong . . ." "Stevie, I passed my driving test first time . . ." "Stevie, I'm a prick who has biceps and a car . . ."

Some people assume that I'm jealous, but I'm honestly not. Freya is like my sister – I imagine. I don't have any siblings. But I can safely say our relationship has only ever been platonic. I guess certain things bind you to someone for life. And, apparently, running around the playground pretending to be alien butterflies with freezing breath is one of them. God, I miss her so much . . .

I catch myself, but it might have been too late. I stare at my fingers, hoping that nothing happens, but of course, it does. A faint yellow aura crackles around my hand. I'm manifesting happiness. The sky outside darkens, thunder crashing overhead. Long, spear-like rain plummets to the ground, and a powerful wind rips open the door to the shop.

I grab some milk and pay for it quickly, the shopkeeper too distracted by the sudden downpour to notice my glowing hands. Wrestling the door shut, I turn my face against the storm and trudge back up the hill.

By the time I am at the foot of the rusted metal steps to my flat, the worst of it has passed, but I am entirely saturated. Why couldn't I have packed a jacket with a hood? I didn't have much time to think. I just had to shove everything I could into a bag and leave before anyone noticed. Before anyone could stop me, and by anyone, I mean—

“Freya!”

Stood outside my little shabby door, almost completely dry under an obnoxious frog umbrella, is a copper-headed young woman. Her outfit is a coordinated event of oversized woollen things and bright-pink wellies, and her hair is piled up on her head in a messy bun.

“Alright, Percy? What does a girl have to do to get a cuppa around here?”

## 2

### Freya

“You look like crap,” I say.

And I definitely mean it. Steven Percival has always been built like a racing snake, but today he looks like a miner who got trapped underground. Skin and bone with eyes dark like a murderer. His wet, brown hair is unkempt and starting to curl at the edges.

“Nice umbrella,” he says with a sneer. “Steal it from a primary school?”

“Marcus got it for me, actually.”

Nothing. That’s weird. I usually can’t mention Marcus without Steven pretending to retch.

“Are you going to let me in? Because I don’t fancy pneumonia, to be honest.”

He mutters something under his breath, probably about the wellies, and fetches the keys from his coat.

His flat is probably the worst thing that I’ve ever seen. Wallpaper! Actual wallpaper . . . in a house. Ew. I’m all for retro stuff – my earrings were my mum’s in the nineties – but this is just way too old and way too ugly. No one wants to live in a place that was decorated when they were still doing rations.

While Steven busies about in the kitchen making tea, I perch on the vinyl-wrapped sofa in front of the deepest TV ever known to man. I check my phone out of habit, but it's been dead for the past three hours. Troy still has my charger. Lucky I wrote down everything before I left.

"Three sugars and strong enough to stand the spoon up," says Steven as he plonks a bone china cup on the coffee table in front of me. No bourbon biscuits, which is strange; we always have a packet with tea. He sits down on a worn armchair and eyes me suspiciously. He opens his mouth, but I hold up my hand. We aren't even going to consider talking until I have finished my tea. He stares at the floor, avoiding my gaze. His eyes seem hollow, like they've been drained of life. Creepy.

"Right. We are out of the cold, and tea has been drunk. First things first: have you gone full Norman Bates? Should I be checking this flat for dead old ladies?"

A flicker across his face. So, he is still there somewhere.

"The only old lady here is the one on the sofa." His voice is as dry as ever, but his face is stern and impassive.

"Great, now I guess my follow-up question is – what the actual hell, Steven Percival?"

He stares at me. He knows I am serious because I didn't call him Percy. Nothing passes his stony expression. Eventually, he shrugs and looks down at the tea gripped in his hands.

"That's it? Nothing to say? You disappear completely for over a week and don't have anything to say? I have been beside myself with worry, you tit. That little cover story you told school about a family emergency was a load of rubbish. I texted your mum, asking if everything was okay, but she didn't have a clue what I was on about."

Steven blanches at that. I can see a hundred panicked thoughts behind his eyes as his breath catches in his chest.

"Y-you texted—"

"Don't worry, I just pretended I was talking about their holiday," I say, rolling my eyes. Honestly, what kind of best friend would I be if I didn't lie to his parents? "I figured it was the pressure of A Levels or something. Mock exams or too many books to read or something – I don't know what you do in English Lit. I assumed you would text me eventually, and I would come over with a pack of bourbons, and we would talk everything through. But no. You ignore my texts, reject my calls, and pretend I don't exist. Even when we hated each other at the end of Year Seven, you never ignored me."

"That's because you kept telling people I cried during *Inside Out*."

"Percy, you did cry during *Inside Out*. A lot."

"You didn't have to tell everyone. Liam Stalworth thought I was such a loser."

"Oh, what a shame, the kid with a criminal record before he was ten thought you were a loser for crying at a Pixar movie."

"He made fun of me for months!"

"Whatever. The point is, you dropped off the face of the Earth, and I want to know why."

Steven pauses, a muscle flaring in his jaw. He mutters, "It's complicated," gets up and takes his empty cup out to the kitchen.

Ugh, I hate when he does this. If Steven Percival can do one thing, it's sweep out of a room when he wants to be dramatic.

\*

## Steven

I take my cup to the kitchen because I don't know what to say. Freya will probably say I swept off dramatically. She's always saying I do that. What the hell is she doing here? No one was supposed to find me. I had been so careful. I took all the cash I could out of an ATM and left no paper trail. I bet she asked her dad to help. He's a police officer: probably got access to facial recognition software or some other equally unsettling tool for privacy invasion.

As I wash up my cup, I can feel Freya's eyes boring into me from the doorframe. She isn't going to let this go.

"I'm not going to let this go," she says.

Knew it.

"I can understand running away if exams got too much, but why here?" she asks, trying a different tack.

I consider the wool-clad figure by the threshold. Fierce hazel eyes scanning every inch of the revolting kitchen. Good thing Freya isn't an emomancer: she's so disgusted by the decor the whole flat would probably implode. I give her a bit. Mainly to just shut her up.

"Didn't think anyone would think to find me here."

"You've got that right. I've been in this town for half an hour, and already I want to throw myself into the sea."

"I think there's already a pretty long queue," I say, smiling weakly. "You might have to take a ticket and come back."

I probably shouldn't be cracking jokes, no matter how small. They lead to joy, and joy is *very* dangerous. Hopefully, the storm I just caused will mean no tricks for a little bit. My batteries have to recharge – at least that's the theory. But almost every

time I think I understand this emomancy, it throws another curveball at me.

Freya smiles but then peers at me like she can't really see me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing, you just seem . . . muted."

I feel muted. But if I want to keep Freya and everyone else safe, then that's the price I have to pay. I have to be a diet version of myself: less emotional, less engaged, less sugar.

I shrug noncommittally, which just annoys her.

"Okay, if you won't tell me what you are running from or why you are here, then at least tell me when you are coming back?" she says, hopping up on the counter. Her legs idly kick the paint-chipped cupboards.

"I'm not coming back, Freya. I can't."

She rolls her eyes again and says, "You always have to be so bloody dramatic."

"No, you don't understand—"

"Then make me understand. Tell me. Talk to me. Say something!"

"FREYA, I CAN'T!"

I shouldn't have shouted. I try to stop it, but it's too late: a red shimmer is curling around my fingers, the temperature plummets, and Freya's face grows fearful. She jumps to her feet, backing out of the kitchen. I've never seen her so afraid in my life.

"Freya, I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ." I trail away, not sure what to say. I close my eyes and think desperately of nothing but white. Pure white. No anger, no colour, just white. Breathe in for four and out for four. My heart slows down from its furious pounding.



“N-no, it’s o-okay,” she stutters, lingering at the doorframe. “Gave me a fright, is all.”

“I shouldn’t have got angry.”

“It’s fine. My fault. I shouldn’t have come. Obviously, you are going through something and want to be left alone,” Freya says as she heads toward the front door.

“Freya, wait.”

It’s true. I wanted to be left alone – that’s why I came to this awful town. But I don’t want to be lonely. And I don’t want her to go. Not just yet.

Freya looks me up and down and frowns. Without saying a word, she puts down her frog umbrella and sits back down on the couch. I sit next to her, my bum squeaking on the vinyl wrapping.

“How did you even find me, McCormac?”

“Ah, if I told you, I’d have to kill you,” she says quietly.

“Use your dad’s police equipment?”

“Err, no. Your phone has been sharing its location with me since we went to that music festival.”

I laugh – the first proper laugh in a month. My attempt to go off the grid foiled by my fear of being lost in a crowd. God, that’s pathetic. Freya loves live music and had been trying to drag me to see something for ages. I only agreed to go if we shared our location at all times and didn’t split up except for runs to the loo.

I hastily glance at my fingers, but no yellow, so I must be safe from tricks for a few minutes at least.

“Shouldn’t you be in classes right now?” I ask.

“Could say the same to you.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Mocks are done, so no one’s really doing anything till the end of term except talking about how they went. Which means I can

follow my best friend to the arse end of nowhere to rescue him from crippling loneliness.”

I laugh again. I am really pushing my luck. If my tricks come back, I might set her hair on fire. Joy is the most dangerous thing to feel.

“How were they then? Bet you aced everything,” I ask, hoping to keep the subject off me for a bit.

“Biology was easy but boring. General Studies was a doss. Missed the whole back page of Maths because I’m an idiot. Chemistry: I think I had an aneurism on the second question but whatever. And just before my Psychology, your mum replied to me. I was so distracted I’m pretty sure I failed. But I was in good company; Troy had a nosebleed midway through. Got blood all over his test, bless him.”

Ah, Troy Anderson: the new American guy in our year. Apparently, he did his AS levels over the summer and our school allowed him to come finish his A2s here. I’ve chatted with him a few times while waiting for Freya to get out of class. He seemed nice. An ethnically ambiguous All-American type with impossibly white teeth, a handsome face, and hair effortlessly parted at the side. I mean, he’s a bit intense. Stares a lot and looks like he might ask you to join a cult. Then again, Americans can be a bit full-on. And tall. Probably all the corn syrup.

“Things have been a bit weird since you left. I haven’t really seen Marcus much – he’s fine, thanks for asking—”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t care.”

She ignores me.

“Did you hear about what happened to a guy at his school? Harry Foxton? He died at that house party we went to after you’d left. Marcus says the whole school is freaked out.”

I freeze. Someone has just reached down my throat and twisted my stomach. My mouth goes dry. How can all my saliva vanish so quickly? Harry. His name was Harry. My powers . . . no, *I* killed Harry Foxton.

I glance at Freya, but she hasn't noticed the tremor spreading up my body. She's picking off the chipped nail varnish from her hand.

"Oh, really? What happened?" I ask, hopefully sounding nonchalant but definitely not.

"They reckon an appliance blew up or something. Faulty wiring, who knows. He was all burned when they found his body at the end of the night."

My body is shaking like mad. This is what you get for letting Freya drag you to a party. At least they don't know it was me yet. But bloody hell, I killed someone. By accident, of course. But someone . . . Harry . . . is dead, and it's all my fault. I screw up my eyes, and when I open them, Freya is staring right at me, mouth agog and her huge eyes even wider.

"What? What is it?"

"Percy . . . you're . . . glowing."

I look down. A black aura is dancing around my hands, but the rest of my body is giving off an intense light. The same light that followed me all the way to Grunsby-on-Sea. But I can't hide from this emotion. Just distract myself until I remember again. I don't need to look at my cheat sheet; I know what black means.

Guilt.

# 3

## Freya

What the actual hell.

Steven Percival is glowing. Not like when he got sunburnt when our families went to Menorca or when you say pregnant women glow when they are actually just sweaty. He is a solar flare, and I can't take my eyes off him no matter how much I want to.

"I can explain," he says. Just like Steven to talk in dramatic clichés like this is some nineties sitcom.

But I can't say anything back.

I want to, but all I can do is stare like a goldfish that swam too hard into the wall of its tank.

Steven closes his eyes and breathes deeply. When he opens them again, there's a kind of blankness behind them. A calm tranquillity like he turned off his turmoil with the flick of a switch. The glow fades, and I can finally drop my gaze. Picked the wrong day to forget eyedrops: my contacts feel dry and scratchy and are threatening to murder my poor eyes. I blink furiously like I'm sending Morse code.

Steven is watching me but not saying anything. He's not even joking that I should have worn my granny glasses. Who even is this Steven-shaped lump on the sofa next to me?

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"What the bloody hell was that, Steven Percival?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Try."

"You weren't supposed to ... I didn't want ... It's ... I only came here ... And ..."

"Oh my god. Finish a bloody sentence."

He sighs, and I catch him glance at the door.

"Don't think you can get past me, Percy. Even with twelve stone of knitwear, I'm still faster than you."

It's true, and he knows it. Percy runs like a noodle at the best of times. I give him my best death stare, and his resolve breaks.

"I have these powers," he says, choosing his words very carefully.

"Like glowing?"

"That's one of them. I can do things – they depend on what emotion I'm feeling. But they come out all wrong. If I feel happy, then something terrible seems to happen; if I feel sad, something good happens."

We sit in silence for a while as this all sinks in. To be honest, I don't know what to think. If it were anyone else, I would say they were pulling my leg, but I know Percy. I've known him almost my entire life, and I know when he's lying or trying to be smart with me. Besides, he gave me a demonstration a few moments ago.

But how can this possibly be true? Superpowers don't exist. Even if they did, how did Steven hide it from me all these years? It makes absolutely no sense. No, it must be a trick of the light or something. Right?

"I can't control it," he mumbles. "I feel things, and stuff just happens." He looks weary and ... haunted. What happened to him?

“So you have emotion superpowers. You manifest whatever you’re feeling like you’re, I don’t know . . . *Feeling Man*?”

“I prefer emomancer,” he says with the barest hint of a chuckle.

“Emomancer?” I scoff.

“Yeah, like emotion and ‘mancer’ as in pyromancer, necrom—”

“Yeah, I got that, Percy. It’s just a hilarious thing to call yourself. Bloody hell, you’ll be getting snakebite piercings and wearing guyliner soon.”

“So I should go by *Feeling Man* instead?”

“On second thoughts, no, it makes you sound like a sex offender. *Emotional Magician*? No, that’s like you saw a woman in half then cry about it. *Captain Feels-a-Lot*? Nah. Wow, the Avengers make superhero branding look so easy. We can keep workshopping the name. What else can you do – other than sad-good, happy-bad?”

He hands me a crumpled slip of paper with a poorly drawn table on. Percy really has shocking handwriting. I can make out, “Steven’s Emomancy Cheat Sheet” at the top.

“I’ve been keeping this cheat sheet with everything I’ve noticed. Like, when I’m angry, I make others frightened.”

“How long?”

“Usually just a few minutes, I guess.”

“No, you tit. I mean, how long have you been doing this? Being emotional litmus paper?”

“Oh. I guess it started when I was like twelve, but it was only occasionally. Now it’s all the time, and they’re getting worse. You can’t tell anyone, Freya. Not until I get it back under control again.”

I roll my eyes involuntarily. “Who am I going to tell, Percy? ‘Hey, did you hear? Steven Percival is a low-budget superhero who might kill you if he laughs too hard.’”

"I'm *not* a superhero."

"No, you definitely don't have that Hemsworth body."

"Freya, I mean it," he says with just a hint of desperation, snatching back his cheat sheet. "This is serious."

Another eye roll. I know it's serious, but that has never stopped us from having a joke before. Even when Nanny died, Steven was making jokes about her catheter whilst I cried on his shoulder in the hospital. The foundation of our entire relationship is sarcasm and bourbon biscuits. Right now, there is a distinct lack of either.

"Fine. I swear to you I will not tell another soul, living or dead, that you are . . . *the Magnificent Moody-man?*" He cocks an eyebrow at me. "No, you're right. That was terrible. I thought the alliteration might help."

He sits back on the vinyl-wrapped sofa and sighs.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and we sit quietly for a moment. Out of the window, I can see a flat, grey sea washing over a sunken pier. Whatever happens, Steven needs to get out of this hellhole.

"I knew you'd been keeping secrets from me, Percy, but I never expected this. I just assumed you were gay or something."

I glance at him out the side of my vision. Nothing. Not even a twitch. Damn. Either he's really good at hiding how he feels, or he isn't gay (which I still refuse to accept.)

"Do you want another cuppa?" he asks, his face completely impassive.

Classic Percy. Every time I bring up his sexuality, he changes the subject. Let's review the evidence:

One: he has never had a girlfriend nor shown any interest in a girl.

Two: he is very well put together . . . well, usually.

Three: over the years, I have watched him get attached to one pretty boy after another and follow them around like a shadow until they turn out to be pricks.

And four: he's always Princess Peach in *Mario Kart*. That might've been so I had to be a short Italian plumber, but it's pretty damning evidence to me.

If he can come out of the closet about his powers, you'd think he could come out of the actual closet too.



### Steven

I ignore Freya's attempt to pry for the umpteenth time. Does she really think that one day she'll catch me off guard? Trust me, if I can hide my stupid powers for six years, then I can hide anything. Well, unless I start to glow again and rainbows shoot out of my hands.

"Why don't we go for a walk on the beach?" Freya suggests as she redistributes the four metric tonnes of wool engulfing her.

"It's November, you freak."

"Perfect beach-walking weather."

"Fine," I say. "We can walk along the seafront for a bit. And then you really need to go back to Dorset."

"Percy, I didn't take four trains and two buses just to have a cup of tea and leave empty-handed."

"I don't want you getting hurt. I can't . . . I can't control it like I used to."

She doesn't say anything, just rolls her dinner-plate eyes in her round face for the four billionth time. I try a different approach.



“Won’t your parents be expecting you back?”

“Dad’s working nights, and I told Mum I was staying with you for a few days because of your ‘family emergency’. You know, emotional support.”

“What about Marcus?”

She looks away. Freya might not manifest her emotions like I do, but she telegraphs them like huge neon signs.

“You did tell him where you were going, right?”

“He has been really busy with his exams, and I didn’t want to bother him. He wouldn’t have come anyway. And I figured if you’d had some sort of mental breakdown, the last person you’d want to see is Marcus.”

She has a point. Stupid Marcus with his stupid face and stupid muscles.

Prick.

“So, no one knows you’ve come halfway across the country?” I ask as I wrestle my feet into my trainers.

“I left a note in my room in case I got murdered on the journey. I also saw Troy on the way to school while I waited for the bus. I just told him I was checking in on you and your family emergency, and he seemed to buy it.”

“Just like you bought my family emergency?”

“That’s different. Troy believes anything anyone says,” she says as she stands up like a mountain of wool rising from the sofa. She lumbers forward and knocks over the pile of DVDs at her feet. “Sorry, couldn’t see over the scarves . . . Percy, do you have the entire back catalogue of Pixar movies?”

I feel my ears flush scarlet.

“Y-yeah. I mean, all except *Cars 2*. I started watching the first ten minutes of *Up*, so I would, you know, feel . . . sad.”

“Bawl like a baby, you mean?”

I ignore her. “And it worked for a bit. It’d stop me blowing anything up for about an hour and make the weather nice.”

“Jesus, that’s masochistic. Did you punch yourself in the groin too?”

Freya stacks them again but spots that *Inside Out* is the only one still in its plastic wrapping. She picks it up and cocks one of her perfectly groomed eyebrows. I shrug and head for the door before she brings up my uncontrollable sobs when Bing Bong dies for the second time today.



Ten minutes later and Freya and I are walking arm in arm down the seafront. There isn’t a lot to see or do. The amusement park and most of the seaside shops are closed for the winter, and Grunsby doesn’t have any museums. It does have a charred, sunken pier and four pie shops on the high street.

I feel a small seed of happiness plant itself in the bottom of my stomach, and my fingers glow yellow. Guess the trickless window has closed. A storm whips up the sea like a grey beast thrashing wildly in a cage. Spears of rain hurtle down, and flashes of lightning strike the sea. Freya screams as thunder rumbles overhead, and her eyes bug out like a *Looney Tunes* character when they fall off a cliff – I forgot how jumpy she is. I breathe, let the happiness go, and think of nothing.

I feel nothing.

The thunderstorm dies down, but the rain doesn’t, so we seek shelter under the roof of a hut that once sold seafood. A paint-chipped sign next to it still shows the prices of cockles and

mussels in shillings and old pence. Is everything in this town stuck in 1956? The sign has also become the victim of graffiti, with such hits as “Gemma smellz”, “DEMA BNBR6”, and “TJ has a big willy” – truly this town is a work of art.

We should probably find a more sheltered spot. Freya points to an awning between a row of shops and the Grand Regalia Hotel. Below it, lights are flashing in a very large room. It’s only when we are halfway towards it that I realise it’s an amusement arcade.

The sign above it was clearly supposed to say “STARSHINE ARCADE”, but the letters have either been blown out to sea or stolen years ago, so now it just says “\_\_ARS\_\_E ARCADE”.

The inside is warm and, most importantly, dry. The carpets are burgundy with migraine-inducing swirly patterns that have been worn down by years of sand and salt. Two rows of penny falls machines flank the entrance, their coins tantalisingly close to the edge. When we were younger, Freya heard that if you stomp next to them, the coins fall without activating the alarm. Weeks of my life were lost to jumping around the arcade, and not once did anything ever fall.

I’m about to remind her of her stomping theory when I realise she’s made a beeline for the shooting game at the back. The machine sits underneath a blacklight, which makes the neon trim pop but unfortunately reveals some dodgy-looking splatter on the screen. Freya fishes around inside her knitted cocoon, pulls out her purse, and starts loading up the machine.

“Come on, Percival,” she goads. “Let’s see if you’re still a terrible shot.”

I pick up the pink plastic handgun next to her, and we shoot terribly animated werewolves for three minutes. She wins as per

usual. My accuracy is thirteen per cent, which honestly seems higher than I was anticipating. Freya jumps every time a werewolf appears but somehow always manages a headshot. It's times like these when I am glad she isn't following her dad into the police force. The last thing a quiet, rural town needs is a jumpy, trigger-happy bobby with ninety-seven per cent accuracy.

I holster the gun, leaving Freya to her monster hunting, and look around this sad arcade. In the corner, behind a plastic screen, is a bored-looking attendant flicking through a tabloid magazine. Knockoff toys and sad-looking plushies are pinned to the wall behind her. I can see a Pikachu, who might have had a stroke, dangling from his foot for five hundred tickets, and a half-melted Power Ranger for three hundred. It doesn't look like any prizes have been claimed in a while. The only thing not covered in dust is an A5 poster stuck to the plexiglass – apparently, some missing girl from the local high school.

I decide I must get Freya that deformed Pikachu – it's sort of a tradition that we buy each other horrific gifts. As I put 50p into a Whack-a-Mole that appears to be missing several moles, I get the feeling I'm being watched. I casually glance over my shoulder. Under the awning is a young woman in a slightly-too-big business suit. Her auburn hair is cropped short around her small pixie-like features. An iPhone is pressed to her ear, but she is doing a terrible job at pretending to talk to someone. In fact, she is trying to scan the room nonchalantly, but her eyes keep focusing on Freya and me.

I'm being stupid. No one is following me. No one could have followed me . . . well, apart from Freya.

Piss biscuits, the Pixie is definitely staring. Okay, just keep calm and act natural.



Oh, look, if it turns purple, it means you are horny. Wait, aren't these designed for, like, ten-year-olds? Jesus. You'd think they—"

"Freya!" I say before she rambles on again. She stops and looks at me, bewildered. I incline my head ever so slightly, and she follows with her eyes over my shoulder.

"She's been staring and taking photos."

Freya frowns and looks at the woman again before muttering, "Okay, let's leave."

I turn around to go, but the pixie-face woman has now moved between the rows of penny falls, blocking the exit. A lump rises in my throat. Oh god, not only have I let myself be caught, Freya will be arrested too. Aiding and abetting. This can't get any worse.

"OI!" screams the attendant from behind the plexiglass. "DID YOU BREAK MY WACK-A-MOLE! I'LL KILL YOU."

The foam mallet suddenly burns red hot, and I drop it. I'm confused for all of three seconds until I see blue sparks fizzing around my hands.

Fear.

We need to get out of here, *now*. I grab Freya's hand and pull her towards a door marked "Employees Only".

"COME BACK HERE!" bellows the attendant, and I think I can hear Agent Pixie making a dash, but we are through the door, and I quickly lock it from the other side.

Freya is already at the other end of the small, dirty corridor, pushing on the emergency exit bars that lead to an alleyway. We dash outside and almost make it back to the seafront when a figure blocks the path.

"Don't move!" yells Agent Pixie in a bouncy Newcastle accent, although she sounds a little unsure of herself. First day on the job, maybe? "Put your hands where I can see them."

There's no way through. I suppose I could tackle her, but she might have some fancy ninja MI6 training or something. Or a gun. She hasn't drawn anything. Yet.

"Ladder behind us," whispers Freya. Considering her dad is a police officer, she seems to have no qualms ignoring this woman's orders. At least we're on the same page – I am *not* about to turn myself over to this woman.

Sure enough, at the other end of the alley there's a ladder on the concrete wall to the street above. But we'd be caught the moment we tried to climb. There must be something we can do? Something we can use? But we are in a small alley with only old crisp packets and two large bins to keep us company.

The bins. Maybe I could push them towards her. When I feel disgust, things pull towards me, and when I pushed that car away from me, I had been admiring it. I wanted it. Maybe I need to . . . admire the bins?

I focus as hard as I can. The bins are green and grey and have plastic lids on hinges. That's about it. They stink of rotten food and are covered in suspicious brown muck. Nothing really to admire. This is impossible, and Pixie-face is advancing towards us.

Maybe I could admire something else and focus it on the bins? But what? It needs to be something I want really bad. Oh god, this is hard under pressure. What is the thing I want more than anything right now? I'm hungry, so I can only think of food.

And then it comes to me: Mum's bacon sandwiches, crispy and drowned in ketchup. Every Sunday morning since I can remember, she would make them, and we'd sit together and watch telly while we ate. I'd give anything to have one right now.

My hand glows pink, and I throw them out towards the bins like I'm a wizard casting a spell. I'm not sure if that's how this works but screw it, I'm doing it now.

There is a flash of pink light. The bins stay exactly where they are, but Agent Pixie is flung off her feet, performs five summersaults and lands with a splash halfway out to sea.



## 4

### Marcus

This is such a waste of time *and* petrol. I've been speeding the whole way, but the ETA on my phone isn't getting any shorter. This is, without a doubt, the worst road trip I have ever done. And the stupid thing is that it'll be fine. Freya's phone is probably just dead; she always forgets to charge it. She'll frolic around the seafront with Stevie for a few hours and be back before dinner. I don't know why Troy has his knickers in a twist about this. I glance over at him.

He's still talking.

Hasn't realised I zoned out forty miles back. Why do Americans always talk for the sake of talking? He's got no chat either. He's just saying anything that pops into his head.

It's my fault. I let him come along. Then again, he did offer to pay the petrol money.

✱

### Troy

Why doesn't he say anything? Please say something. Like anything. Words, please! I keep talking and talking, hoping that he'll eventually join in and help fill the quiet, but he never does.

He zoned out like thirty minutes back and burdened me with the silence. Oh my gosh, if he doesn't open his mouth soon, I might have to fake a heart attack or something.

I suppose this is my own fault. I did ask him to drive. Had to basically bribe him with gas money. But what else was I supposed to do? Jack a car and head out by myself? Even if I wanted to, Brits seem to only drive stick for some reason, and I have no clue how that all works. Don't they realise the car can do all that for you? I watch Marcus push the gearstick back and forth as he weaves down these terrifying country lanes, and I thank God I'm not doing it. I have honestly never seen a road so narrow or bendy in my life. Every ten seconds, we jolt suddenly or swerve dramatically, and whenever another car comes toward us, we basically have to drive half in the bushes. It's like no one told Great Britain that highways exist.

Marcus isn't helping the situation. He has two driving speeds: fast and breakneck. And the weirdest thing is he told me the speed limit down here is sixty. Not that he's sticking to it.

Sixty-gosh-darn-miles-per-hour down a road narrower than a parking spot at Walmart.

Marcus yanks the wheel suddenly, and my head slams against the side of the car. I can't tell if there was something there or if he just wanted me to shut up.

✱

### Marcus

Finally. He shuts up. And all it took was almost crashing the car. Now he's rubbing his necklace like some sort of nervous tick. So long as his mouth isn't moving, I'm happy.

We are twenty minutes away now, and suddenly sheets of rain batter the car. Looks like we are heading right into a storm. Why did Troy have to drag me into this? Now I look like the insecure boyfriend who can't trust his girlfriend to disappear without telling him.

I mean, she probably *should* have told me.

It's not that I don't trust her. Freya always does Freya: she goes where she wants, and I'll be damned if I could ever win an argument with her. But she does have a bad habit of finding trouble, especially with Stevie. Something is going on with them, that's for sure.



## Troy

Something is going on here, that's for sure.

First, I see Freya getting on a bus at the crack of dawn, then some woman in a suit starts asking me questions. "Do I go to school with Freya McCormac and Steven Percival?" "Will they be in today?" "Where was the last place I saw them?" Something about her just freaked me out. Don't think she was a cop but still probably something official. She sounded Scottish, so she can't be CIA. Anyway, I haven't told Marcus about it yet. He probably wouldn't be too thrilled helping a fugitive if Steven really is on the run. Why couldn't Freya have answered her phone? We could've avoided all of this.

Who am I actually doing this for: Freya or Steven? Like I know it's none of my business, and I've only met him a handful of times, but Steven's cute. I had a crush on him the moment I saw him in the many photos stuck to the inside of Freya's

locker. I remember one in particular: a Polaroid of the two of them pulling stupid faces at a party. Yes, even with a cross-eyed grimace, Steven Percival was hot. With his short chestnut curls and a face that's cheeky yet boyishly handsome.

Plus the accent. Oh my gosh, British guys really don't understand how much their accent makes Americans weak at the knees. When I finally met him in person, he looked at me with those vivid green eyes, gave me a smirk and said, "Alright, mate?" I thought I might die. I just sat there staring at him like a total idiot until Freya got out of class. He tried making a joke about Freya taking too long, but I totally didn't get that he was being sarcastic until after he left.

British sense of humour: 1

American homosexual mess: 0

Every time I open my mouth around him, I turn to Jell-O. And the stupid thing is, I don't even know if he's interested in guys like that. I could be wasting my time pining for a straight guy. Then again, most gay men get hung up on a straight guy or two. And it's not like I haven't had offers since coming here. A guy in my Chem class keeps DMing me on Instagram ever since he saw me in a tank top at the gym, but I'm not interested. Besides, I'm going halfway across the country to rescue my friend and her potentially straight best friend who might be on the lam, all because I have a major crush on him.

Gosh, I'm a mess.

If anything, I am surprised Marcus doesn't care as much as I do. His girlfriend's best friend up and vanishes, and he didn't seem to care. Then his girlfriend takes four trains and two buses to find him without telling anyone, and it's an inconvenience to go check she's okay. Do these Brits suppress

their emotions so much that they forget to care about their loved ones?

I pull out my phone and stare at the dot on the map – the place I saw Freya frantically googling after our Psychology exam. I only remembered it because it sounded like the most British sounding place name I’ve heard. *Grunsbby-on-Sea*. It wasn’t till after I saw that agent lady that I put two and two together and realised Freya was taking the bus there this morning.

We finally turn off this godforsaken road (if you can even call it that) and are on a roundabout when Marcus’s phone loses all signal and freaks out. He makes three full loops of it before he sees the dirty sign for Grunsbby-on-Sea and swerves to take the exit.

I would throw up, but Marcus wouldn’t stop for snacks, so nothing is in my stomach. However, four hours without a pee, and I am about ready to pop. I don’t even marvel at the quaint stone bridge we cross as we head into the town because I’m fighting the urge to wet myself.

“Can we stop, please? We won’t find them any quicker if I have kidney failure,” I ask, but Marcus grunts and mutters about how we’re basically there now.

The road takes us around the outside of the town and then runs parallel to the sea. I spot a public restroom on the seafront below, so Marcus reluctantly parks. I jump out the car and waddle down the zigzag path to the small grey hut, trying not to pee myself.

Five minutes later, I walk out of possibly the worst restroom I have ever seen, traumatised but looking decidedly less pregnant. I’m halfway up the path when I hear shouting from the seafront below.

I race to the top and lean over the railing just in time to see two very familiar faces climbing a ladder below.

“Jesus, Percy!”

“I know, I know. I was aiming for the bloody bins.”

The car door opens behind me, and Marcus’s head pops up over the roof and says, “What’re you doing?”

But then he sees them too.

The woollen-wrapped figure of Freya suddenly hauls herself up, with Steven not long after. He’s gaunt with dark circles under his eyes, but seeing his face still makes me smile. My hand instinctively goes to Dad’s dog tags around my neck.

They stand up and are about to start running when they clock Marcus and me not two feet away.

“Hey babe,” says Freya between breaths. “Couldn’t give us a lift?”