The Heart Principle

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Titles by Helen Hoang

THE KISS QUOTIENT
THE BRIDE TEST
THE HEART PRINCIPLE

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The Heart Principle

HELEN HOANG

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Dedicated to all the caregivers out there:
those who care because they want to,
those who care because they have no choice,
and especially medical professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic,
every single one

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THE HEART PRINCIPLE

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Part One

Before

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ONE

Anna

THIS IS THE LAST TIME I'M STARTING OVER.

That's what I tell myself, anyway. I mean it every time. But then, every time, something happens—I make a mistake, I know I can do better, or I hear, in my head, what people will say.

So I stop and go back to the beginning, to get it right this time. And it's really the last time *this* time.

Except it isn't.

I've spent the past six months doing this, going over the same measures again and again like a rhinoceros pacing figure eights at the zoo. These notes don't even make sense to me anymore. But I keep trying. Until my fingers hurt and my back aches and my wrist throbs with every pull of the bow on the strings. I ignore it all and give the music everything I have. Only when the timer goes off do I lower my violin from my chin.

My head is spinning, and I'm parched with thirst. I must have turned my lunch alarm off and forgotten to actually eat. That hap-

pens a lot more often than I care to admit. If it weren't for the zillions of alarms on my phone, I might have accidentally ended myself by now. It's out of consideration for life that I don't keep any plants. I do have a pet. He's a rock. His name is, very creatively, Rock.

The alarm notification on my phone screen says *THERAPY*, and I turn it off with a grimace. Some people enjoy therapy. It's venting and validation for them. For me, it's exhausting work. It doesn't help that I think my therapist secretly dislikes me.

Still, I drag myself into my bedroom to change. Attempting to muddle through things on my own hasn't helped, so I'm determined to give this therapy thing a try. My parents would be disgusted by the waste of money if they knew, but I'm desperate and they can't mourn dollars they don't know I'm spending. I remove the pajamas that I've been wearing all day and pull on exercise clothes that I don't plan to exercise in. Somehow, these are considered more appropriate in public even though they're more revealing. I don't question why people do things. I just observe and copy. That's how to get along in this world.

Outside, the air smells of car exhaust and restaurant cooking, and people are out and about, bicycling, shopping, catching late lunches at the cafés. I navigate the steep streets and weave through the pedestrians, wondering if any of these people are going to the symphony tonight. They're playing Vivaldi, my favorite. Without me.

I took a leave of absence because I can't perform when I'm stuck playing in loops like this. I haven't told my family because I know they wouldn't understand. They'd tell me to quit indulging myself and snap out of it. Tough love is our way.

Being tough on myself isn't working now, though. I can't try harder than I already am.

When I reach the modest little building where my therapist and

other mental health professionals have their practices, I key in the code 222, let myself in, and walk up the musty stairs to the second floor. There's no receptionist or sitting room, so I go straight to room 2A. I lift my fist toward the door but hesitate before making contact. A quick glance at my phone reveals it's 1:58 P.M. Yes, I'm two minutes early.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, uncertain what to do. Everyone knows that being late isn't good, but being early isn't great either. Once, when I showed up early to a party, I literally caught the host with his pants down. And his girlfriend's face in his crotch. That wasn't fun for any of us.

Obviously, the best time to arrive somewhere is right *on* time.

So I stand here, tormented with indecision. Should I knock or should I wait? If I knock early, what if I inconvenience her somehow and she's annoyed with me? On the other hand, if I wait, what if she gets up to go to the bathroom and catches me standing outside her door grinning creepily? I don't have enough information, but I try to think of what she'll think and modify my actions accordingly. I want to make the "correct" decision.

I check my phone repeatedly, and when the time reads 2:00 P.M., I exhale in relief and knock. Three times firmly, like I mean it.

My therapist opens the door and greets me with a smile and no handshake. There's never a handshake. It confused me in the beginning, but now that I know what to expect, I like it.

"It's so good to see you, Anna. Come on in. Make yourself comfortable." She motions for me to enter and then waves at the cups and hot water heater on the counter. "Tea? Water?"

I get myself a cup of tea because that seems to be what she wants and set it on the coffee table to steep before I sit in the middle of the sofa across from her armchair. Her name is Jennifer Aniston, by the

way. No, she's not *that* Jennifer Aniston. I don't think she's ever been on TV or dated Brad Pitt, but she's tall and, in my opinion, attractive. She's in her mid-fifties is my guess, on the thin side, and always wears moccasins and handmade jewelry. Her long hair is a sandy brown threaded with gray, and her eyes . . . I can't remember what color they are even though I was just looking at her. It's because I focus in between people's eyes. Eye contact scrambles my brain so I can't think, and this is a handy trick to make it look like I'm doing what I should. Ask me what her moccasins look like.

"Thank you for seeing me," I say because I'm supposed to act grateful. The fact that I actually *am* grateful isn't the point, but it's true nonetheless. To add extra emphasis, I smile my warmest smile, making sure to wrinkle the corners of my eyes. I've practiced this in a mirror enough times that I'm confident it looks right. Her answering smile confirms it.

"Of course," she says, pressing a hand over her heart to show how touched she is.

I do wonder if she's acting just like I am. How much of what people say is genuine and how much is politeness? Is anyone really living their life or are we all reading lines from a giant script written by other people?

It starts then, the recap of my week, how have I been, have I made any breakthroughs with my work. I explain in neutral terms that nothing has changed. Everything was the same this week as the week before, just as that week was the same as the week before it. My days are essentially identical to one another. I wake up, I have coffee and half a bagel, and I practice violin until the various alarms on my phone tell me to stop. An hour on scales, and four on music. Every day. But I make no progress. I get to the fourth page in this piece by

Max Richter—when I'm lucky—and I start over. And I start over. And I start over. Over and over and over again.

It's challenging for me to talk about these things with Jennifer, especially without letting my frustration leak out. She's my therapist, which means, in my mind, that she's supposed to be helping me. And she hasn't been able to, as far as I can tell. But I don't want her to feel bad. People like me better when I make them feel *good* about themselves. So I'm constantly assessing her reaction and editing my words to appeal to her.

When a deep frown mars her face at my lackluster description of the past week, I panic and say, "I feel like I'm close to getting better." That's an outright lie, but it's for a good cause because her expression immediately lightens up.

"I'm so happy to hear that," Jennifer says.

I smile at her, but I feel slightly queasy. I don't like lying. I do it all the time, though. The harmless little lies that make people feel nice. They're essential for getting along in society.

"Can you try skipping to the middle of the piece that you're struggling with?" she asks.

I physically recoil at the suggestion. "I have to start at the beginning. That's just what you do. If the song was meant to be played from the middle, that part would be at the beginning."

"I understand, but this might help you get past your mental block," she points out.

All I can do is shake my head, even though inside I'm wincing. I know I'm not acting the way she wants, and that feels wrong.

She sighs. "Doing the same thing over and over hasn't solved the problem, so maybe it's time to try something different."

"But I can't skip the beginning. If I can't get it right, then I don't

deserve to play the next part, and I don't deserve to play the ending," I say, conviction in every word.

"What is this about deserving? It's a song. It's meant to be played in whatever order you want. It doesn't judge you."

"But people will," I whisper.

And there it is. We always come to this one sticking point. I look down at my hands and find my fingers white-knuckled together like I'm pushing myself down and holding myself up at the same time.

"You're an artist, and art is subjective," Jennifer says. "You have to learn to stop listening to what people say."

"I know."

"How were you able to play before? What was your mindset then?" she asks, and by "before" I know she means before I accidentally became Internet famous and my career took off and I went on an international tour and got a record deal and modern composer Max Richter wrote a piece just for me, an honor like nothing else in the whole world.

Every time I try to play that piece as well as it deserves—as well as everyone expects me to, because I'm some kind of musical prodigy now, even though I was only considered adequate in the past—*every time*, I fail.

"Before, I played just because I loved it," I say finally. "No one cared about me. No one even knew I existed. Other than my family and boyfriend and coworkers and such. And I was fine with that. I *liked* that. Now . . . people have expectations, and I can't stand knowing that I might disappoint them."

"You *will* disappoint people," Jennifer says in a firm but not unkind voice. "But you'll also blow others away. That's just how this works."

"I know," I say. And I really do understand, logically. But emo-

tionally, it's another matter. I'm terrified that if I slip, if I fail, everyone will stop loving me, and where will I be then?

"I think you've forgotten why you play," she says gently. "Or more precisely, *who* you play for."

I take and release a deep breath and unclasp my hands to give my stiff fingers a break. "You're right. I haven't played for my own enjoyment in a long time. I'll try to do that," I say, offering her an optimistic smile. In my heart, however, I know what will happen when I try. I will get lost playing in loops. Because nothing is good enough now. No, "good enough" isn't right. I must be *more* than "good enough." I must be *dazzling*. I wish I knew how to dazzle at will.

For a second, it looks like she's going to say something, but she ends up touching a finger to her chin instead as she tilts her head to the side, looking at me from a new angle. "Why do you do that?" She points to her own eyes. "That thing with your eyes?"

My face blanches. I can feel my skin flashing hot and then going cold and stiff as all expression melts away. "What thing?"

"The eye wrinkling," she says.

I've been caught.

I don't know how I should react. This hasn't happened to me before. I wish I could melt into the floor or squeeze myself into one of her cupboards and hold the door shut. "Smiles are real when they reach your eyes. Books say so," I admit.

"Are there lots of things that you do like that, things that you read about in books or have seen other people do so you copy them?" she asks.

I swallow uncomfortably. "Maybe."

Her expression turns thoughtful, and she scribbles something down on her notepad. I try to see what she's written without looking like I'm peeking, but I can't make anything out.

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"Why does it matter?" I ask.

She considers me for a moment before saying, "It's a form of masking."

"What's masking?"

Speaking haltingly, like she's choosing her words, she says, "It's when someone takes on mannerisms that aren't natural to them so they can better fit in with society. Does that resonate with you?"

"Is it bad if it does?" I ask, unable to keep the uneasiness from my voice. I don't like where this is going.

"It's not good or bad. It's just the way things are. I'll be able to help you better if I have a clearer understanding of how your mind works." She pauses then and sets her pen down before forging ahead to say, "A lot of the time, I believe you tell me things just because you think that's what I want to hear. I hope you can see how counterproductive that would be in therapy."

My desire to crawl into her cupboard intensifies. I used to hide in tight places like that when I was little. I only stopped because my parents kept finding me and dragging me out to whatever chaotic event they had going on: parties, big dinners with our enormous extended family, school concerts, things that required me to wear itchy tights and a scratchy dress and sit still in silent suffering.

Jennifer sets her notepad aside and crosses her hands in her lap. "Our time is up, but for this next week, I'd like you to try something new."

"Skipping to the middle and playing something fun," I say. I always remember her to-do items, even when I know I won't actually do them.

"Those would be great things to do if you could," she says with an earnest smile. "But there's something else." Leaning forward and watching me intently, she adds, "I'd like you to watch what you're

doing and saying, and if it's something that doesn't feel right and true to who you are, if it's something that exhausts you or makes you unhappy, take a look at *why* you're doing it. And if there isn't a good reason . . . try not doing it."

"What's the point of this?" It feels like going backward, and it doesn't have anything to do with my music, which is all I care about.

"Do you think there's a chance that maybe your masking has spread to your violin playing?" she asks.

I open my mouth to speak, but it takes me a while before I say, "I don't understand." Something tells me I won't like this, and I'm starting to sweat.

"I think you've figured out how to change yourself to make other people happy. I've seen you tailor your facial expressions, your actions, even what you say, to be what you think I prefer. And now, I suspect, you're trying, unconsciously perhaps, to change your music to be what people like. But that's impossible, Anna. Because it's art. You *can't* please everyone. The second you change it so one person likes it, you'll lose someone who liked it the way it was before. Isn't that what you've been doing as you go in circles? You have to learn how to listen to yourself again, to *be* yourself."

Her words overwhelm me. Part of me wants to yell at her to stop spouting nonsense, to get angry. Another part of me wants to cry because how pitiful do I sound? I'm afraid she's seen right through me. In the end, I neither yell nor cry. I sit there like a deer in headlights, which is my default reaction to most things—inaction. I don't have a fight-or-flight instinct. I have a freeze instinct. When things get really bad, I can't even talk. I fall mute.

"What if I don't know how to stop?" I ask finally.

"Start with small things, and try it in a safe environment. How about with your family?" she suggests helpfully.

I nod, but that doesn't really mean agreement. I'm still processing. My head is in a haze as we wrap up the session, and I'm not entirely aware of my surroundings until later, when I find myself outside, walking back home.

My phone is vibrating insistently from my purse, and I dig it out to see three missed calls from my boyfriend, Julian—no voice messages, he hates leaving voice messages. I sigh. He only calls like this on those rare occasions when he's not traveling for work and wants to meet for a night out. I'm exhausted from therapy. All I want to do right now is curl up on my couch in my ugly fluffy bathrobe, get delivery, and watch BBC documentaries narrated by David Attenborough.

I don't want to call him back.

But I do.

"Hey, babe," Julian answers.

I'm walking down the sidewalk alone, but I force a smile onto my face and enthusiasm into my voice. "Hi, Jules."

"I heard good things about that new burger place by Market Square, so I made us a reservation at seven. Gonna try to make it to the gym, so I gotta go. Miss you. See you there," he says quickly.

"What new burger pla—" I begin to ask, but then I realize that he's already hung up. I'm talking to myself.

I guess I'm going out tonight.

TWO

Anna

CONFESSION: I DON'T LIKE GIVING BLOW JOBS.

That's probably not a good thing to be thinking while I have my boyfriend's dick in my mouth, but here we are.

Some women enjoy this act, and I figure their enjoyment drives them to excel at their craft. For me, however, it's tiring, monotonous work, and I doubt I'm great at it. My mind often wanders while I'm down here.

For example, right now, I'm going over what Jennifer said in therapy earlier today. *I'd like you to watch what you're doing and saying, and if it's something that doesn't feel right and true to who you are, if it's something that exhausts you or makes you unhappy, take a look at* why *you're doing it. And if there isn't a good reason . . . try not doing it.*

As Julian guides my head up and down, I think about how my jaw aches and I'm tired of sucking—is he even concentrating? It's been a long day, and after smiling and being bubbly for him through-

out dinner, my endurance is shot. But I keep going. His pleasure is supposed to be my pleasure. It shouldn't matter if it takes forever.

Please don't take forever.

Naturally, this train of thought leads me to remember that line everyone's mom tells them at some time during their youth: *If you keep making that face, you'll look like that forever.* Ladies and gentlemen, if I'm going to be stuck with this sucking face for the rest of my life, you might as well kill me now.

He finally finishes, and I sit back, rubbing at the blower's wrinkles around my mouth. They're set deep into my skin, and I know from experience that it'll take several minutes for them to go away. My mouth is full, and I force myself to swallow, even though it makes me shudder. When we first started dating, Julian told me that it hurt his feelings when women didn't swallow, that it made him feel rejected. As a result, I've probably swallowed gallons of his semen to safeguard his emotional well-being.

He kisses my temple—not my mouth. He refuses to kiss me on the mouth after I've gone down on him, and tonight I don't mind. When he kissed me earlier, he tasted like a hamburger. Tucking himself back into his pants and zipping up, he flashes a smile at me, grabs the remote to turn the TV on, and rests against the headboard. He is the picture of relaxation and contentment.

I go to the bathroom and brush my teeth, making sure to thoroughly floss and use mouthwash. I don't like the idea of having sperm stuck in between my teeth or wriggling on my tongue.

As I'm crawling back onto the bed to take up my regular spot next to him where I usually surf social media on my phone while he watches sitcoms, he pauses the TV and gives me a thoughtful look.

"I think we need to talk about the future," he says. "About how we want to move forward."

My heart jumps, and the fine hairs on my skin stand up. Is this . . . a proposal? Whatever excitement I feel at the prospect is outweighed by sheer terror. I'm not ready for marriage. I'm not ready for the changes that would bring. I'm barely handling the status quo.

"What do you mean?" I ask, making sure to keep my voice neutral so I don't give away my ambivalence.

He reaches over and squeezes my hand affectionately. "You know how I feel about you, babe. We're great together."

I put on my best smile. "I think so, too." My parents love him. His parents love me. We fit.

He caresses the back of my hand before sighting a bit of lint on my T-shirt, picking it off, and tossing it to the carpet. "I think you're the one for me, the one I'm going to marry and have kids and a house with, all of that. But before we take that final step and settle down, I want to be sure."

I don't know where he's going with this, but still, I smile and say, "Of course."

"I think we should see other people for a while. Just to make sure we've ruled out other possibilities," he says.

I blink several times as my brain struggles to shake off its shock. "Are we . . . breaking up?" Just saying those words makes my heart pound. I might not be ready for marriage, but I definitely don't want our relationship to end. I've invested a lot of time and energy to make this work.

"No, we're just putting our relationship on pause while we consider other options. We started dating exclusively when I was still in grad school, remember? Should you buy the first car you test-drive on the lot? Or should you test-drive a few more to make sure that first car is really as great as you think?"

I shake my head, quietly horrified that he's comparing proposing to me with buying a new car from a dealership. I'm a *person*.

Julian sighs and reaches over to squeeze my leg. "I think we should really take some time apart, Anna. Not breaking up, just . . . seeing other people, too."

"For how long? And what are the rules?" I ask, hoping that this will make sense if I learn more.

He focuses on the frozen image on the TV as he says, "A few months should be good, don't you think? As for rules . . ." He shrugs and glances at me quickly. "Let's just go with the flow and see where things go."

"You're going to have sex with other people?" An unpleasant feeling pools in my stomach at the thought.

"Aside from you, I've only been with one other person. If we're going to get married, I want to do it without regrets. I don't want to feel like I'm missing out. Doesn't that make sense?" he asks.

"You'll be okay if *I* sleep with someone else?" I ask, hurt and not even sure why. He makes it sound so reasonable.

He smirks slightly. "I don't think you'll sleep with someone else. I know you, Anna."

I glower at his confidence.

"What? You don't like sex," he says with a laugh.

"That's not true." Not entirely. I've orgasmed with him twice. (Twice in five years.) And even when I don't like the sex itself, I do like to be close to him, to feel connected to him.

It makes me feel less alone. Sometimes.

Smiling, he takes my hand and squeezes it. "I just need to know what else is out there," he says, returning to the main point of this conversation. "Because when we marry, I want it to be forever. I don't want to get a divorce two years later, you know? Can you see where I'm coming from?"

I look down at our joined hands. I know I should say yes or nod, but I can't quite bring myself to do it. His proposal makes me inexplicably sad.

"I'm going to leave," I say, pushing his hand away from mine and getting up from the bed.

"Oh, come on, Anna. Stay," he says. "Don't be like this."

I rub at the wrinkles around my mouth that still haven't entirely gone away. "I need some time before—" I stop speaking when it occurs to me that he's not going to wait until I'm ready to go through with this plan of his. He never asked for my permission. He's already decided. I can be on board, or I can lose him. "I need to think."

Against his continued protests, I leave. In the elevator, I sag against the wall, overwhelmed and on the edge of tears. I take out my phone and type a text message to my closest friends, Rose and Suzie. *Julian just told me he wants us to see other people for a while. He thinks I'm the one he wants to marry, but before he settles down, he wants to be sure. He doesn't want to have regrets.*

It's late, so I don't expect them to answer right away, especially Rose, who's in a different time zone. I just needed to reach out, to feel like I have someone I can go to when things are crashing down around me. To my surprise, my screen instantly lights up with messages.

OMG WTF?! I WILL KICK HIS ASS, Rose says.

WHAT A DICK!!!!! Suzie says.

Their instant outrage on my behalf startles a laugh out of me, and I cradle my phone close. These two are precious to me. That's a bit ironic since we've never even met in person. We connected through social media groups for classical musicians. Rose plays violin for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Suzie, cello for the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

I'm glad you two are upset, I tell them. *He acted like he was being so reasonable, and it made me question myself.*

THAT'S NOT REASONABLE, Rose says.

It's not! Suzie agrees. *I can't believe he said that!!!*

The elevator door opens, and I rush through the posh lobby of Julian's building (his parents bought him his condo as a graduation gift when he got his MBA from Stanford's business school). I text as I walk home. *I asked if he was going to sleep around, and he dodged the question. Pretty sure that means sex is on the table. Is it closed-minded of me that I hate that?*

I would not be okay with that at all, Rose says.

Suzie replies, *Me neither!!!!*

I don't know what to do now. Other than, you know, go out and have revenge sex with a bunch of random guys, I say.

I expect them to laugh in response, but instead, the group chat goes eerily still for several moments. Cars pass by, their engines extra loud in the quiet of night. Frowning, I check if I've lost cell reception—there's one tiny bar. I hold my phone up higher just in case that will get me an extra micro-bar of connectivity.

I get a text from Suzie first. *Maybe you should take advantage of this opportunity to see other people.*

I agree with Suz. It would serve him right, adds Rose.

I'm not saying you need to sleep with anyone, but you could turn this around. See if HE is right for YOU. Someone else might be a better fit, Suzie says.

That makes so much sense, Suz. Think about it, Anna, Rose says.

I can't help making a face as I type my response with my thumbs. Meeting new people isn't my favorite. *I haven't dated in five years. I think I forgot how. To be honest, I'm scared.*

Don't be scared! Rose tells me.

Dating can be fun and kind of relaxing, Suzie says. *It's not an audition or anything. You're just seeing if you and this other person are a fit. If you don't like them or something embarrassing happens, you never have to see them again. There's no pressure. Every time I dated a new person, I learned a little more about myself. There's no incentive to try to be someone else, you know what I mean?*

Also, from someone who's done it many times, one-night stands can be empowering. It's how I learned to demand what I want in bed and not be ashamed. 100% recommend, Rose says, adding a winking emoji at the end.

You almost make me regret getting married, Suzie replies.

Rose's advice strikes a chord with me, though I'm not exactly sure what it is that resonates. I know this is one of those conversations that I'll be replaying in my head for days and analyzing from different angles.

My old-fashioned apartment building comes into sight, Victorian rooftops and tiny iron balconies with well-tended planter boxes. Home. Suddenly, I'm aware of how drained I am on every level. Even my thumbs are tired as I type out a last set of messages. *I need to think about this. Just got home. Going to call it a night. Thank you for talking to me. I feel better. Sorry to bother you so late. Love you guys.*

It's no bother. We love you! says Suzie.

Anytime! LOVE YOU! Good night! says Rose.

THREE

Quan

I MIGHT BE AN ADDICT.

A running addict. If my mom caught me doing drugs, she'd chase after me with a clothes hanger—she wouldn't catch me, though. I ran yesterday for three hours, and I'm at it again today even though my left knee's been acting up. I just can't seem to stop. Lately, it's the only thing that keeps my mind off stuff.

When I turn onto my street, my head is calm and the only things I want are a cold drink of water and ice for my knee, but Michael is waiting outside my apartment building. He's got sunglasses on, his hair is perfect, and he looks like he's ready for a fashion shoot. It's kind of disgusting.

"Hey," I say, using the front of my T-shirt to wipe the sweat from my face. "What's going on?" It's a Saturday, and he's always got stuff going on with his wife, Stella. It's weird for him to be here.

Michael pushes his sunglasses to the top of his head and gives me a direct look. "You haven't been picking up, so I started to worry."

"I must have forgotten it on Do Not Disturb again." I pull my phone out of the holder strapped to my arm, and sure enough, there are a bunch of missed calls. "Sorry."

"This isn't like you," Michael says.

"I forgot," I say with a shrug, but I'm purposefully missing the point. I know what he's getting at. I just don't want to talk about it.

He doesn't let me avoid the topic, though. "So, did you hear from the doctor? What did they say?" His face is creased, and I notice now that he's got bags under his eyes.

I guess that's because of me, and I'm sorry for it. He's really tried to be there for me over the past two years. Some things I just have to do alone, though. I squeeze his arm and smile reassuringly. "It's official, I'm good. Completely recovered."

He narrows his eyes. "Are you lying because you don't think I can handle the truth?"

"No, I'm really all better," I say with a laugh. "I'd tell you if I wasn't." Aside from my rickety knee, I've never been healthier. Things could have been much worse, and I know how lucky I am. I'm more grateful than words can describe.

But big life events change people, and the truth is I'm different now. I'm still figuring everything out.

Michael surprises me with a crushing hug. "You motherfucker. You had me so scared." He pulls away, laughs in between deep breaths, and swipes at his eyes, which are suspiciously red. The sight makes my own eyes prick, and we're about to have some kind of emotional man moment when he grimaces and rubs his palms on his pants. "You're all wet and gross."

I smirk, relieved that the intense moment has passed, and barely resist the urge to smother him with my sweaty armpit. Two years ago, I would have done it without hesitation. See? I'm different.

He probably wants to talk, so I sit down on the steps outside my building and motion for him to join me, which he does. For a while, we sit side by side and enjoy the afternoon, the cool air, the rustling of the leaves in the trees that line the street, the occasional passing car. It's kind of like when we were kids and used to sit on the front porch of my house and watch the homeless guy walk by in nothing but a T-shirt. Seriously, why wear a shirt if you're going to leave your dick hanging out?

"I'd invite you up to my place, but it stinks. I think it's my dishes." I haven't done the dishes in . . . I don't know how long. Pretty sure they're growing mold. Recently, I've been eating out a lot due to pure laziness and dish avoidance.

Michael chuckles and shakes his head. "Maybe you should hire a cleaning person."

"Eh." I don't know how to explain that I don't feel like having to deal with a stranger in my apartment. I'm a people person. Strangers don't usually bother me.

"What does your doctor say about dating . . . and other stuff? Are you cleared for that?" Michael asks, casting a carefully neutral glance my way.

I rub the back of my neck as I say, "I've been good to go for a long time. Some guys even get back at it a couple weeks after surgery, but that's kind of extreme. That would hurt, you know?"

"You're good now, though, right?"

"Yeah." More or less.

"So are you seeing people again?" Michael persists.

"Not really." From the look on his face, I know he understands that I really mean "not at all." My body feels personal in a way it never did before. Getting naked with someone was never a big deal in the past. *Sex* was never a big deal. Plus, I was good at it, and that's

always a confidence booster. But now I'm scarred and slightly damaged. I'm not what I was.

Michael gives me a long look before he kicks at some rocks on the pavement. "I've thought about how you might be feeling. I can't say I really know, because it's not happening to me. But have you thought about maybe just ripping the Band-Aid off?"

"You mean like stripping down and riding naked through SF on Naked Bike Day?" I ask.

Michael grimaces like he's in pain. "Can you even ride anymore after everything?"

I give him a disgusted look. "You're doing it wrong if you ride sitting on your balls."

He laughs and scrubs a hand wearily over his face. "Sorry, you're right. And no, Naked Bike Day isn't what I meant. I was thinking that maybe, if you're uncomfortable about being with someone again, maybe it would help to just do something really casual that doesn't matter. Like a one-night stand, you know? Just to get the first time over with. And by 'first time,' you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know. I've been thinking about doing something like that, too." It's just that the idea of it leaves me feeling hollow, which isn't like me. Casual sex has always been my thing. No strings attached. No expectations. No promises. Just fun between consenting adults.

"I have a friend who—"

My whole body cringes, and I don't wait for him to finish before saying, "Thanks, but *no*, thanks. I don't want to be set up with anyone." Least of all Michael's female friends. They try to hide it because he's taken, but they're all in love with him. I don't want to be some weird kind of consolation prize. And what kind of prize would that even be with me like I am? "I know how to meet people."

"But will you actually go out and do it?" Michael asks. "From what I can see, all you do is work and run now."

I shrug. "I'll reinstall my dating apps. It's easy." And kind of boring. It's always the same thing—messaging hot chicks, recycling the same witty lines, arranging a time and place, meeting and flirting and all that, the sex, and then going home alone after.

Michael gives me a skeptical look, and I make an exasperated sound and unlock my phone.

"Here, I'll do it right now. You can watch." I download a bunch of apps, some that I've used before, some that I haven't.

Michael points at one of the apps and arches his eyebrows. "Pretty sure that one's only used by prostitutes and drug dealers now."

"You're shitting me." It's a famous app that everyone was using two years ago.

He shakes his head emphatically. "There's this whole code that they speak to avoid cops and detectives and everything. I wouldn't really recommend that app for you. It'll get awkward. Do you need tips on pickup lines or anything? You're kind of scaring me."

I delete the app and give him an insulted look. "I had cancer, not amnesia. I remember how to have a hookup. And how do you even know about that app? You quit dating before I did."

Michael shrugs, cool as a cucumber. "People tell me things. *You* can tell me things. Anytime. About anything. You know that, right?"

"I know." I release a tight sigh. "And I'm glad you came. I need to move on. This will be good for me. So . . . thanks."

He smiles slightly. "I'm going to go, then. Stella's parents are coming over for dinner, and I haven't gone grocery shopping yet. Unless you want to come?"

"No, thanks," I say quickly. Stella's parents are nice and all, but they're so proper and wholesome that hanging around them always

feels like a trip to the principal's office to me. I've spent too much time in principals' offices as it is.

"Let me know how it goes, okay?" Michael asks.

I feel stupid about it, but I give him a thumbs-up.

With a wave good-bye, he heads off. Only when he's disappeared around the corner do I recognize the hollow pang in my chest. I miss him. It's the weekend, nighttime is rolling around, and I'm super aware that I'm all by myself.

I open up one of my old apps and start editing my profile.

FOUR

Anna

THE NEXT MORNING, I AWAKEN ON MY COUCH IN THE SAME exact position as when I collapsed last night, too tired to go the extra distance to my bedroom. I slept like a corpse, and I basically feel like one today. My head aches, and my muscles are sore. It's like I have a hangover even though I missed the fun of actually getting drunk. Yesterday was too much. The looping hell of violin practice. Therapy. Dinner with Julian. The blow job. Our discussion.

Ugh, I'm in an open relationship now. I need to decide if I want to start dating. Groaning, I cover my face with a throw pillow. I should get up and start my day, but I have zero desire to do anything.

My purse vibrates against my thigh, and I plop a limp hand inside and half-heartedly fish for my phone. If my mom is yelling at me about something, I'm going to ignore her until lunchtime. I just can't deal with her right now.

It turns out it's not text messages from my mom. It's a picture of

Rose's fluffy white Persian cat in a pink tutu. She's only sent the picture to me because Suz is a late riser.

What do you think? she asks.

I laugh silently to myself as I reply, *You take your life into your own hands every time you do that to her.*

I know. I'm lucky I still have all my fingers. But she looks so pretty dressed up! she says.

She looks like she's plotting your murder, I tell her.

But she'll do it IN STYLE, she says, pausing briefly before she messages me again. *How are you today?*

I don't have energy to go into it, so I keep things simple. *I'm okay. Still processing. Thanks for asking.*

I really do think you should try dating. I meant what I said about it helping to empower me, she says.

I'm considering it, I reply, and because I don't want everything to be about me, I ask, *Are you exhausted today? You were texting past midnight your time.*

> *Yes, so tired. I couldn't sleep last night. I'm supposed to hear back from the producers for that special project on TV this week.*

I think you're going to hear good news. You're exactly who they need, I say.

> *I hope so! I really, really, really love this piece.*

Envy sparks in my chest at her remark, and I dislike myself for it. I wish I still loved music like she does, that it brought me joy instead

of this suffocating pressure. I will be happy for her if this opportunity pans out, though. I'm not a complete monster.

How are you doing on the Richter piece? Any progress? she asks.

I hate talking about my progress on the Richter piece—because there never is any—so I keep my reply short. *Nope. But I'll keep trying anyway. I should get to it.*

Good luck! she says. *One of these days, everything is going to flow right out of you. You're just creatively constipated right now.*

I don't believe her, but I keep my reply light so that she doesn't turn this into a long motivational chat. *I hope so. Have a good one!*

I don't want to, but my bladder forces me to get up and plod to the bathroom. Bad instant coffee and half a bagel later, I drag myself to the secretary desk in the corner of my living room where my black instrument case resides. Rock sits next to the case, his painted smile aimed up at me, and I pet him once in greeting.

"You're such a good boy," I say. "The cutest rock I've ever seen."

His smile doesn't move, of course it doesn't, but I can tell he's pleased with the attention. If he had a tail, he wouldn't be able to control his wag. I recognize that it's possibly a bad sign that I've taken to anthropomorphizing a stone, but there's something about his crooked eyes and mouth that gives him an extra splash of character. After a moment, I can tell he wants me to get to business, and I sigh and focus on the instrument case.

My life is in this box. The best parts. And the worst, too. The highest highs and the lowest lows. Transcendent joy, yearning, ambition, devotion, desperation, anguish. All right here.

This is the ritual: I run my fingertips over the top of the case, undo the latches, and open it up. I retrieve my bow and tighten the

horsehairs, apply rosin. I shut my eyes as I breathe the pine scent into my lungs. This is the scent of music to me, pine and dust and wood. I pull my violin out and tune the strings, starting with the A. The discordant sounds relax me. Adjusting the tension of the strings relaxes me. Getting the notes to ring true relaxes me, the familiarity, the everydayness, the illusion of control.

I begin with scales. Critics can say whatever they want about me artistically, but when it comes to my technical abilities, I have always been a strong violinist. It is because of these scales, the fact that I practice them for an hour every day, rain or shine, in sickness and in health. I set my timer and run through my favorite keys, the sharps, flats, majors, minors, the arpeggios, the harmonics. The notes sing from my violin effortlessly, fluidly, as slow or as fast as I want them to.

At the end of the day, however, scales are just patterns. They aren't art. They don't have a soul. A robot can play scales. But music . . .

When the alarm on my phone rings, I turn it off and step over to the music stand that I keep by the French doors leading to my small balcony, which overlooks the street below. The sheet music is sitting there, ready for me, but I don't really need to see it. I memorized the notes long ago. I see them in my sleep most of the time.

The top of page one reads "Untitled for Anna Sun, by Max Richter," and that title alone nearly makes me hyperventilate. There are probably violinists who would commit murder if it would inspire Max to write them something, and yet here I am, letting these pages gather dust in my living room.

I glance at Rock, and his smile looks a little stretched now, a little impatient. He wants me to get on with it.

"Okay, okay," I say. Taking a breath, I straighten my back, settle my violin under my chin, and bring my bow to the strings.

This is the last time I'm starting over.

Only nothing sounds right, and when I get to the sixteenth measure, I know that was all garbage. I'm not playing this with the right amount of feeling. I can *hear* it, and if I can, others will, too. I stop and start back at the beginning.

This is the last time I'm starting over.

But now I sound like I'm trying too hard. That's a horrible criticism to get. Back to the beginning.

This is *really* the last time I'm starting over.

But it isn't. I'm a liar. I start over so many times that when my alarm rings, telling me it's time for lunch, I've lost count of how many restarts I've had. All I know is I'm exhausted and hungry and on the edge of tears.

I put my violin away, but instead of heading to my kitchen to reheat the leftovers of yesterday's leftovers, I slump down to the floor and bury my face in my hands.

I can't keep going like this.

Something is wrong with my mind. I can see it when I take a step back and analyze my actions, but in the moment, when I'm practicing, I can never tell. My desperation to please others deafens me so I can't hear the music the way I used to. I only hear what's wrong. And the compulsion to start over is irresistible.

For that's the only place where true perfection exists—the blank page. Nothing I actually do can compete with the boundless potential of what I *could* do. But if I allow the fear of imperfection to trap me in perpetual beginnings, I'll never create anything again. Am I even an artist, then? What is my purpose, then?

I have to make a change. I have to *do* something and take control of this situation, or I'll be stuck in this hell forever.

Jennifer said I need to stop masking and people pleasing, that I should start with small things, in a safe environment. Her suggestion that I try it with family, however, is ridiculous. Family is *not* safe. Not for me. Tough love is brutally honest and hurts you to help you. Tough love cuts you when you're already bruised and berates you when you don't heal faster.

If I'm going to stop people pleasing, I need to try it with the very opposite of family, which is . . . complete strangers.

Pieces click into place in my mind one after the other, like pin tumblers in a lock when the proper key is inserted. Stop masking. Stop people pleasing. Revenge on Julian. Learn who I am. Self-empowerment.

Reckless resolve grips me, and I push myself off the floor and march into my bedroom to yank open my closet door. I have fifteen different black dresses in here, no low necklines, no high hems, perfectly decent dresses for a concert stage. I shove them aside and look for something that will show off my cleavage and thighs.

When I see the red dress, I go still. I purchased it for a Valentine's Day that Julian wasn't here to celebrate with me. The way things are going, I'll probably never get the chance to wear it for him. I'm not sure I want to anymore.

But I can wear it for me.

I take off my exercise clothes from yesterday that I've never actually exercised in and step into the dress. It's tighter than when I tried it on last, but it still fits. When I turn around, my eyes widen at how my butt has grown. A pity. Julian would love this, though he wouldn't approve of my methods. I didn't drink protein shakes and spend

hours in the gym doing donkey kicks and squats. These curves are made of Cheetos.

I reach under my arm and yank at the price tag until the plastic snaps. I *will* wear this dress out. Maybe not today. But soon.

After retrieving my phone, I search the App Store for "dating apps" and install the top three.