

the
COMEDIENNES'
GUIDE
to
Bride

HAYLI THOMSON

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

For Mum,
who has always loved Lucy

“While we have the gift of life, it seems to me the only tragedy is to allow part of us to die—whether it is our spirit, our creativity or our glorious uniqueness.”

—GILDA RADNER, *It's Always Something*

From: Taylor Parker (debbie.downer04@gmail.com)
To: Jane Lincoln (jane.lincoln@nbcunicareers.com)
Subject: Re: Congratulations! Finalist Announcement for the Emerging Writers' Diversity Award
Sent: November 1, 2016, 8:34 p.m.

Hi Jane,

I was really excited to receive your email. This is literally the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I'm sending this reply because I need to ask something of you. It's kind of humiliating. I don't want to come off as ungrateful, but I need to request that you don't include my name on the finalist list on the NBC site. The thing is, I'm not exactly out of the closet. I realize that I should have thought about the consequences before I entered a contest for diverse writers, but when I submitted my entry all those months ago, never in a million years did I think I would actually be selected as a finalist. Now I'm in a bit of a pickle—you've selected me as a finalist for this fantastic opportunity *because* I'm a lesbian, but it's actually something I'm hiding.

All I'm asking is that you keep my nomination on the down-low until the winner is announced. By then, I'll make sure I'm out (not that I think I'll win or anything . . . but just in case). All I need is a little more time. I need the news to come from me, not a social media announcement, you know?

Anyway, if you absolutely have to put my name down on the finalist list, that's still cool (well, it's not really cool, but I'm the one who got myself into this situation, and I'll get myself *out* of it—see what I did there?). In no way am I forfeiting my nomination. Seriously, Jane. I was born to be a sketch writer. I mean, I'd rather you come into Gay Narnia and drag me out kicking and screaming than I would give this up.

Whatever you decide to do, I can guarantee that you'll have my finalist submission sketch by Thanksgiving Eve, because if there's anything worth coming out for, it's the chance at winning an internship at *Saturday Night Live*. I need whoever is behind this screen to know that there's a seventeen-year-old girl living in Salem, Massachusetts, who takes her future in comedy as seriously as Trump takes his fake bake.

So, in conclusion . . . thank you.

Kind regards,
Taylor Parker

From: Jane Lincoln (jane.lincoln@nbcunicareers.com)
To: Taylor Parker (debbie.downer04@gmail.com)
Subject: Re: Re: Congratulations! Finalist Announcement
for the Emerging Writers' Diversity Award
Received: November 2, 2016, 11:21 a.m.

Hi, Taylor,

Your email made me smile. How about I go ahead and put you down on the finalist list as "Anonymous, Massachusetts"? I assure you that we won't release your name to the public until the winner is announced after Christmas.

I hope these next couple of months aren't too hard on you. You certainly sound like somebody with a fighting spirit, and I wish you nothing but the best.

Good luck writing your finalist submission, and once again, congratulations on your nomination.

Jane Lincoln
NBCUniversal Careers

ONE

I hadn't always lived in Salem. We relocated from Virginia when Mom had the bright idea to open a bed-and-breakfast on Essex Street. Conveniently, since 2010, we'd been direct descendants of Bridget Bishop, the first woman in Salem hanged for witchcraft. The lodgers always ate it up when Mom told them "our story" and "upgraded" them to the Bridget Bishop Suite. Most of the gift shop owners farther down Essex did the same thing, especially the pedestrian street "psychics," who charged two dollars a minute and sold rosemary-filled apothecary bottles for twelve dollars a pop. It was a twisted little thing about Salem, Massachusetts: more than three hundred years after the witch trials took place, most people still claimed some sort of connection to the hysteria.

I was eleven when Mom sat me down and made me watch *The Crucible*. "Taylor," she'd said, "if you're going to grow up in this town, you're going to need to know what Salem is all about." I think my mother actually believed that what went down in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was the honest-to-god true story—that seventeen-year-old Abigail Williams had an affair with thirty-year-old John Proctor and that when he dumped her, Abigail tried to send Proctor's poor pregnant wife, Elizabeth, to the gallows for dancing with the devil. Soon after, I found out that in real life Abigail had been *eleven* and John had been

sixty—most likely, nothing had ever happened between them. The truth was that the hysteria had been ignited by a bunch of bored eleven-year-old girls who'd decided to play a very dangerous game. At eleven, I could sympathize. I knew what it was like to be bored in Salem without electricity—we'd once had a power outage, and without screen time I'd had no option but to keep myself busy by shaving everything from the waist down until I looked like I'd fallen pants-less into a bramble bush.

Out of everyone involved in the witch trials, I always felt kind of bad for Abigail. From my place on our newly delivered leather couch—on my third rewatch of *The Crucible*—the whole thing just seemed like an unfortunate accident to me. I was sure Abigail didn't *mean* to send half the town to the gallows (in hindsight, my judgment *might* have been clouded by Arthur Miller's choice to cast Winona Ryder and her perfect face as Abigail Williams).

There's one scene where Abigail meets Proctor in the woods. It's the first time in the whole movie that the bonnet's gone, her hair's down, and Winona's looking like a goddamn Pantene commercial for the *Mayflower* pilgrims. "You will *never* cry witchery again!" Proctor threatens, and a vengeful Winona just glares up at him with her huge brown eyes and grins seductively. My eleven-year-old body flared up—I was burning at the stake of Desperate Longing right there in my living room. "Isn't he dreamy?" Mom said from the other end of the couch. I think I nodded, but as far as I was concerned, Mom could have Daniel Day-Lewis—watching Winona Ryder claim that Elizabeth Proctor's spirit had come into her bed "in the middle of the night" and "bitted" her breast was the single most exciting thing I'd ever seen.

So even though I didn't really have ancestors of the Puritan kind—of the gallows kind—I could trace the origins of my lesbian proclivities through a single person: Abigail Williams.

* * *

For the second time since I'd received the finalist notification, I ventured over to Salem's Museum of Witchcraft. Like a professional stalker, I drifted into the theater on the tail of the line and disguised myself among the November tourists in the back row.

I didn't want to think about how obsessive I was becoming. I didn't want to think about why I kept the museum's flyer hidden in my nightstand drawer. I was so unbelievably tired of thinking. Almost two weeks had passed since I'd been named a finalist, and I hadn't told a soul. What I *had* done was think and stress and think and stress while November ticked by like a time bomb.

The curtain pulled back. The spotlight switched on. There she was. Abigail Williams was fake hyperventilating downstage left and I was low-key *actually* hyperventilating. As Abigail pointed her finger at Elizabeth Proctor and accused her of witchcraft, it all came rushing back—my eleven-year-old theoretical affair with Winona Ryder, my blind sympathy for Abigail, my complete and total disinterest in Daniel Day-Lewis. There was that hot, familiar feeling when Abigail went to slap Elizabeth Proctor in court, but stopped, brushed her fingers over Elizabeth's cheek before recoiling, shrieking that her fingers burned. I wanted it to be *my* skin that burned Abigail's fingers, but in a *good* way, and I still wanted it ten minutes later when Abigail sent another hundred villagers to the gallows. It was happening all over again. Abigail's phantom touch was reaching

all the way to the back row of the theater and strangling the lingering breath of heteronormativity right out of me.

But it wasn't Abigail Williams who seemed to have her hands around my neck so tight I couldn't breathe. No. It was Charlotte Grey. Charlotte Grey, head to toe in Puritan costume. Charlotte Grey, who'd lived the first decade of her life in Salem and returned from Maine last year just in time to start her junior year and turn my entire universe upside down. Charlotte Grey, with her heart-shaped face and wide eyes, who was just as alluring as Winona in that bonnet. Charlotte Grey, who was bound for *way* better than the Museum of Witchcraft's Saturday reenactment and walked in and out of every one of my Advanced Placement classes like she knew it. She had the X factor—it was especially radiant when she put seventy-year-old Rebecca Nurse in a dungeon cell so small, the innocent woman couldn't even sit.

I knew what was coming next. Upstage, five dilapidated mannequins were preparing to plunge to their death from the museum's papier-mâché Proctor's Ledge to the tune of Chopin's funeral march, but it might as well have been "Bridal Chorus" because Charlotte Grey was fainting downstage right like the Oscar-caliber actress she was, and I was falling in love all over again for the first time since I was eleven. I wanted Charlotte Grey—I wanted everything about her.

After taking her bows with the rest of the cast, she pushed back her bonnet. Her gaze danced across the sea of wool hats. "Any questions from the audience?"

My fingers curled around the edge of the pew. *Marry me?*

* * *

Outside the museum, I checked my phone.

Mom: Just got home from Walgreens and Jen has already checked in. She's asking where you are!! This is the second time in a row you've done this the day she's arrived! Don't be such a 🍆

Really, Mom? An eggplant emoji?

I took the long way home through Salem Common. Snowfall hadn't come yet, and it was colder without a blanketed ground. I really wasn't dressed warmly enough in my leather jacket, but it didn't matter—I was on fire.

As excited as I was to see Jen, I was also a little bit terrified. I felt the same way each time she came back to Salem; I always wanted her to like me more than she had the time before. In every way imaginable, she was exactly the kind of person I wanted to be—sure of myself. The summer I was thirteen, I'd seen her take a woman into the Proctor Suite late one night. I'd known what it meant. I'd only ever heard Jen call herself a lesbian once; she was one of those progressive lesbians who obviously thought their sexuality was the least interesting thing about them, but even though she was quiet about it, you could tell she was really proud, too, because she'd show it in little ways—an extra thumb ring or a fresh undercut or how she'd gesture for our female guests to take the stairs before her like she was an extra on *Downton* fucking *Abbey*. And she loved her community, too—this past summer, the morning after the Orlando gay nightclub shooting, she'd gone out to drink coffee with a guest on the porch, and when she'd come back in, her eyes had been bloodshot.

As for me? I knew there was a *reason* why I dialed the rotary phone at least three nights a week thinking about how pretty Charlotte looked in her sandy-colored sweater,

but my sexuality was still Amelia Earhart-themed—I had no idea where it was going to end up. I'd been questioning for a long time. The year before, when I was sixteen, I'd even tried to go to a PFLAG meeting at Prides Crossing Community Hall, but I hadn't been brave enough to push open the door and figure out how I fit in. *You should have it figured out by now. You should be able to feel it in your bones. . . .* I knew there wasn't a single guy at school who'd ever set my heart racing, but it wasn't like I was drooling over every girl who passed my locker, either. Just one. Just one with dark hair and blue eyes and a cleft chin and dimples deeper than the Hoover Dam. What if I was just really, really gay for Charlotte Grey?

Leaves crunched under my Timberlands. What if Jen took one look at me and saw the uncertainty written all over my face? What if she *pitied* me? After what had gone down between us last summer, this time the rumbling low in my chest was a whole lot more intense. . . .

I followed Jen out onto the balcony of the Proctor Suite, where she'd always smoke and I'd always pretend it didn't bother me.

The June heat lingered after dark, washed over my bare arms as I sat up on the railing.

Jen took a long drag of her cigarette and watched my bare feet dangle. "Don't fall."

"Don't smoke."

A grin trembled at the corners of her mouth.

"Honestly, Jen, the whole mothering thing doesn't look good on you."

"Honestly, Taylor, I wouldn't want it to." Her gray eyes matched the ash drooping from the end of her cigarette. "Not my style."

Down below in the garden, cicadas sang out.

Jen blew smoke into the night. "Have you told anybody?"

My legs stopped swinging.

"Maybe when I come back this Thanksgiving," she said, "you'll have told your mom."

At the front gate of the inn, I stopped. On the highest landing, the light was on in the Proctor Suite. A tall silhouette shifted. Pulling at the neck of my sweater, I squinted. It didn't look like Jen. I mean, the way she held herself *was* bolder than seventeen-year-old Jodie Foster telling an interviewer she didn't have a steady boyfriend because she didn't "have time," but this silhouette . . . it wasn't rakish the way Jen was. Or slender. It was taller, and beefy. Maybe she was wearing heeled boots, her coat, too.

It had to be Jen. Mom always reserved the Proctor Suite for Jen. She was entitled to it because she'd been our first ever guest. We'd met her six years before, when she'd stayed with us for two whole months, even babysitting me a few times when Mom worked night shifts at Walgreens while she struggled to get the inn on its feet. Since then, the mid-thirties doctor of fine arts would stay with us twice a year—in the summer and over the holidays. After Jen managed whatever exhibition the Peabody Essex Museum assigned her here in Salem, she'd head back to New York City.

Instead of getting out my keys, I rang the bell.

With Jen upstairs, I expected Mom to open the door.

But she didn't.

"Well, well . . ." Jen pressed her side against the open door. "Taylor Parker has *finally* arrived."

My heartbeat fired against my chest. I'd forgotten that we'd been the same height for two years, that our eye lines *matched*.

Her fair hair had grown a few inches since the summer.

It curled around her ears softly, *prettily*, as though it had always done just that. And her gray eyes? They glowed. I say *glowed* because, even though she was wearing a thick sweater, I could make out the swell of her pregnant belly.

I nodded at her middle. “When were you diagnosed with that?”

TWO

Mom had made dinner reservations for the three of us at Jerry's Boathouse—Jen loved their pistachio-crusting salmon, Mom loved that she had an excuse to wear the pearl earrings Dad had given her after *Affair Number One*, and I loved that I didn't have to eat Mom's cooking. When we arrived at the hostess station outside, Mom had to change our reservation to accommodate the Impregnator.

Widowed Wanda had waited tables at Jerry's Boathouse longer than Nathaniel Hawthorne had been linked to the House of the Seven Gables. As Wanda ran her leathery finger down the reservation list, her expression twisted. "You want to change your reservation to three? It already says three, honey."

Wanda didn't see me lingering behind the three of them, trying not to pass out on the dock from the fumes of the Impregnator's aftershave.

Mom ran a hand through her long blond hair. "No, my daughter, too." As she turned to usher me closer, her six-inch heel slipped into a crevice between the pier planks. Tearing her hands from the pockets of her oversized coat, Jen grasped Mom by the arm. *Oh god, Mommy dearest.*

Mom continued. "We have a reservation for three. We just need to add another—"

The Salem Fast Ferry's horn blasted across the harbor,

swallowing up the Boathouse. Wanda stretched her stooped frame across her lectern. “You say you’re waiting on another person?”

The Impregnator reached for Jen’s hand like a panicked toddler. I bit back a grin. *Well, this is wicked fun.*

The restaurant was full of lingering tourists eager to Instagram Salem’s rotting jack-o’-lanterns, so Wanda switched us from our regular window table. “Seriously?” I murmured to Mom as we followed Wanda to a booth in the corner. “The whole point of going to the Boathouse is the view. We may as well have ventured over to the Olive Garden in Danvers with its view of I-95.”

“Taylor, don’t be a whiny little b—oh, there’s Claire Wilson!” Mom grinned so wide, her underbite disappeared. “Go ahead and sit with Jen and Ryan, and I’ll be right there—”

“No, Mom, please don’t leave me with—”

Too late.

Wanda seated us at Table 13—I should have known the night would only go downhill from there. Jen and Ryan sat on one side of the booth; I sat on the other. Wanda was halfway through the specials menu when she mentioned the pistachio-crusted salmon and Jen pressed two trembling fingertips to her lips. “I’m sorry,” she said, and slipped out of the booth.

“Almost five months pregnant,” Ryan explained to Wanda. “She’s got the tactical vomit down.”

Wanda’s faded blue eyes flickered between Ryan and me. This wasn’t her first rodeo—it wasn’t worth relaying the rest of the menu to a teenage girl and a boy-man with a hemp bracelet thicker than his topknot. Wanda was well aware that neither of us would be leaving the tip in ninety minutes.

Please don’t leave me alone with him, Wanda. “What’s the soup of the d—”

“Clam chowda,” Wanda said bluntly. “I’ll be back when the rest of your table joins you.”

I sank back into the booth. *God, Brooke is not going to believe this.*

Ryan looked around like he’d been led to the table blindfolded and his too-close-together eyes had only just been granted sight. “If you twist around and stretch up a bit, you can still see the harbor.” Turning back to the table, he looked me in the eye. “Hey, it’s great that you got into the writing program at Emerson. Jen told me all about it. You know, I’m actually a novelist.”

“I *know* you are.” Did he have early-onset dementia? Enduring the tale of his writing career when I got home had really put a damper on my post-Charlotte Grey euphoria.

“I said to Jen, your application must have been pretty outstanding to get early admission.”

“I’m pretty sure I only got in because I used to write to a soldier deployed in Afghanistan who sent a character reference.”

“You don’t write to him anymore?”

“*Her*. Not really. She’s home now, back with her family.”

“Well, you must have written something clever for Emerson that spoke for itself. You have to send a sample piece, right?”

“I wrote a mock-humor column.”

“On?”

“On people in Salem who lie about their connection to the witch trials.”

“People lie about that?”

“Oh yeah. Big moneymaker. Our know-it-all neighbor Linda sells ‘I Got Stoned in Salem’ T-shirts at this kiosk on Essex Street Pedestrian Mall—‘stoned,’ by the way, is a totally historically incorrect pun because literally nobody was stoned

to death during the witch trials—and she tells customers she’s a direct descendant of Giles Corey.”

“Giles who?”

“The old guy pressed to death during the witch trials.”

“Well, maybe she is—”

“She isn’t. She pronounces ‘Giles’ with a hard G—it’s ‘Jiles.’”

“What did you call the column?”

“Gallows Humor.”

“See, I knew it. Emerson’s something to look forward to, right? Moving to Boston?”

“I’m not moving to Boston.” Mom couldn’t afford housing *and* tuition. “I’m commuting from Salem every day.” I wiped my water-stained knife against my cloth napkin. I was sick of talking about Emerson, about a future all planned out that I didn’t really want. I’d only ever applied to Emerson because Brooke and I had made a pact to go to college together. And then she’d gone and changed her mind. “Where did you meet Jen?”

He rested his elbows on the table. “At a bar.”

“But like . . . not *that* kind of bar, right?”

“*What* kind of bar?”

I wagged my eyebrows. “I mean, your profile is startling similar to Ellen DeGeneres’s, but I’m having trouble picturing you in a dyke bar. Not that I know *for sure* that Jen frequents dyke bars. But I imagine she would have spent at least some time in them. You know, back when she had a vacant uterus.”

As the smile dropped from his face, his Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Sorry. I was only kidding.”

Bun-head reached for the wicker basket and broke the bread like Jesus Christ. “You know what they say: there’s a grain

of truth in every joke.” He studied me. “It was an airport bar. JFK. My flight home had been delayed, and Jen was there early for her flight out—Chicago, I think. You know how she is about time management. Not my speed. But I love that about her.”

I reached for the table water. “You’re not from New York?”

“No—the Wolverine State.”

“Huh?”

“Michigan. The Wolverine State.” He watched in amusement as I struggled to get the flip-top lid back onto the bottle. “You’ve never heard anybody call Michigan ‘the Wolverine—’ Oh shit!”

Water spilled across my thighs, immediately soaking through my jeans. My thermal tights were *saturated*.

Ryan leaned across the table to survey the damage. My face burned hotly. I mopped at my lap. My starched napkin was sodden. “I think you’ll need another napkin, Taylor. I can flag a waiter over—”

“It’s fine.”

“That’s a *lot* of water.”

I laid my coat across my drenched lap and struggled to remember what he had last said. *Michigan!* “Actually, my dad was born in Michigan.”

“So you and I both have a bit of *bloodthirstiness* running through our veins.” He felt the need to clarify. “The Wolverine thing.”

“I wasn’t born in Michigan.” I shifted in my damp denim hell. “I was born in Tennessee.”

“The Volunteer State,” he jumped in, like he was on a game show and nobody had told him that he was the only contestant. “So, there’s a bit of *generosity* inside you.”

Can you give yourself an eye disease from straining to keep your

eyeballs from rolling back into your head? If he kept it up, Wanda was going to have a serious opponent in the Salem Cataract Competition.

I looked to the restroom hallway for Jen, then across the room at Mom, who was *still* talking to Claire Wilson. “Did your parents make you memorize every state name or something?”

“My dad lectured in American politics at Michigan State.”

“If my dad was a professor, he’d lecture in adultery and parental neglect.”

“You don’t see him much?”

“I have to see him next weekend. He’s touring—he’s a comedian, a Christian one—and he’ll be in Boston for a couple of shows and Mom’s making me go into the city to . . .” *Why the fuck are you telling hipster Jesus the depressing tale of your broken home?* “He has a twenty-seven-year-old girlfriend, and they live on the Cape. So, no I don’t see him much.”

“You don’t like his girlfriend?”

I worked the hem of the tablecloth between my legs. “She’s all right. Just a little oblivious. Like, she didn’t know who Gilda Radner was until I told her. She had no idea that Gilda was one of the original *Saturday Night Live* cast members in the seventies.”

“Right . . .” He edged across the vinyl seat. “I’m going to see what’s taking Jen so long. Will you keep an eye on her purse for me?”

That was one of the grossest things, maybe worse than the baby, worse than the Mansplaining Impregnator: Jen carried a purse now. It was the feminine kind of purse that fit everything you needed: your phone, your keys, your wallet, your makeup, the vape pen your boyfriend sucked on like a binky.

One moment, I was playing with the little leather toggle on the side. The next, I was unzipping it, tugging out the black leather wallet Jen always brought to dinner.

I don't know why I pried the wallet open. I don't know why I glanced at Jen's dead mother in the picture frame before I curled my finger behind the little window and pinched my photo out from behind.

Jen had been carrying my wallet-sized photo around for years—I'd watched her put it in there. The photo had been taken the summer before we met Jen, when I was ten, when we'd rented a house on Martha's Vineyard called "Seas the Day." In the master bedroom of "Seas the Day" had been a floor-to-ceiling crab mural. Mom had made me stand up on their king-sized bed and strike poses in my bathing suit while she took photos for the family scrapbook she gave Dad each year for Christmas. Ironically, that was the year Dad caught crabs from a scouting agent in a comedy club and proceeded to give them to Mom for Christmas.

I flipped the photo over and read my twelve-year-old handwriting: *Merry Christmas, Jen! Here is my autograph! My block-lettered scrawl—T. PARKER.*

A few seconds after I'd stuck the photo in my coat pocket and zipped the purse back up, Mr. and Mrs. Heterosexuality returned to the table. "I'm getting better," Jen told me, "but sometimes an odd smell will hit me and I just . . ." She slid in next to him.

I slipped the sharp curve of my straw through the fine gap between my front teeth until the ache felt good. If she was expecting my sympathy wrapped up with a shiny bow, I had nothing to offer. She'd spread her legs and brought this on herself.

Meanwhile, Wanda was hot on Mom's six-inch heels, all coral-painted smiles as she followed her to our table.

I felt pretty silly when Mom and Ryan ordered wine and I ordered soda. I felt even sillier when Jen ordered an apple juice and winked at me, like we were both the fundamental partnership of some cool alcohol-free club. The humiliation dissipated somewhat when Ryan took a sip of his Merlot and smiled widely, showcasing a full set of burgundy teeth, and then again when he ordered a *burger*. To be precise, he ordered a prime rib sandwich—in a four-star New England seafood restaurant. I think they were holding hands under the table, but then our food arrived and he needed both hands to manage that cholesterol tower of wheat and grease; I gathered from his red-meat-inciped moans that the burger was more important than public displays of hetero affection.

Jen spent most of dinner watching Mom dig her two-prong pick into a claw of her half lobster. She couldn't take her eyes off her. She smiled when Mom smiled, frowned when Mom went off on her Debbie Downer tangents. I drizzled olive oil over the lone piece of bread Ryan hadn't pilfered and watched a glint sharpen in Jen's eye as Mom laughed. I swallowed over the lump of dough—Jen was looking at Mom the same way I'd spent the last year looking at Charlotte Grey. I plonked the oil back in the center of the table. Jesus Christ. *Could she be any more obvious?*

While we were all reading over the dessert menu, Jen snuck off to the restroom—the Diagnosis was “trampolining on her bladder.”

I followed.

“Why don't you leave your coat at the table, Tay?” Mom called out.

Jen was already in a stall. “Is that you, Taylor?”

Leaning back against the tiled wall, I glanced down to make sure my coat was disguising the dark patch on my jeans. “You pee really loudly.”

“I can’t help that—”

I swiped my palm under the hand dryer and let the shrill sound of air engulf the restroom.

When she came out, our eyes locked. The hand dryer stopped.

I cleared my throat. “How long are you staying this time?”

Washing her hands, she looked at me in the reflection of the mirror. “As usual—until Christmas.”

“Ryan’s staying the whole time?”

“. . . Yes?”

“He’s okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Because it’s obvious.”

“What’s obvious?”

“That you have a thing for my mom.”

The automatic tap cut off. Blanched, Jen shook her hands into the sink. “Taylor . . . I hope you’re joking.”

“Course.” *Except the way you looked at Mom didn’t seem like a joke last summer—and every summer before that.*

Yanking a paper towel from the dispenser, she tried to shift the conversation. “What do you think of Ryan? I thought you two might get along, what with your sense of humor, with his writing . . .”

“Ryan’s . . . nice.”

“I’m sensing a *but* . . .”

“I don’t want to say it.”

“Go on. I won’t tell him.”

“No.”

“Say it.”

“No.”

“You’re transparent,” she said, playful. “Fine. Two days and I’ll guess anyway—”

“You two don’t match.”

A stale, uncomfortable tension settled.

“Maybe that’s how you see it,” she said, tossing her paper towel into the trash. “I *know* that’s how everyone sees it. But I love him, and that means that it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. Labels are a funny thing. You can go your whole life thinking . . .” She trailed off with a sigh. “Sometimes life works out differently than how you think it will when you’re seventeen. Everybody has their own truth.”

My voice wavered. “I don’t know about the whole fluid thing.”

Leaning back against the counter, she appraised me like an absurd art piece she didn’t know how to place in one of her fancy museums. Then she nodded, as though she had drawn a conclusion: *Place The Strange Case of Taylor Parker in the American Politics wing. Close it off to the public until further notice.*

“Don’t listen to everything you read, Taylor. Part of figuring all this out is learning to make decisions for yourself, not basing the rest of your life on what a BuzzFeed article dictates. I know you’re having a hard time right now. Coming out is a process. You just have to take your time, do it when you’re ready. But you’re going to be okay. I know that Carrie can say things sometimes that seem pretty homophobic—trust me, I know that. And I know that coming out seems like the most terrifying thing in the world, but—”

She was trying to be helpful, but she was just coming off

like she was quoting those It Gets Better YouTube videos that celebrities make so that gay kids will stop killing themselves. “Sorry, Jen, I really have to pee.” Crossing the room, I closed the stall door behind me.

After a moment, the heels of her oxfords tapped their way across the tiles. Just like that, she was gone.

I pulled the photo from my coat pocket. For a long moment, I stared at it—the picture of who I used to be. My stomach rolled. With a flick of my wrist, I dropped it into the bowl and slammed the flusher like T. PARKER’s autographed portrait was marked drug money.

* * *

My phone was still charging where I’d left it on my nightstand. I hadn’t taken it to the Boathouse.

I could only see the first few lines of a private Facebook message—from Charlotte Grey. *Hi, Taylor, I’m sorry if this message comes off as a bit . . . strange. I was wondering if I could ask for your help with something important?*

Riddled with excitement, I fumbled with my phone. *Yes, Charlotte Grey, I’ll run away with you to sunny California! While you audition for a pilot season, I’ll work two jobs to cover rent for our West Hollywood studio! On Sundays, we can wander hand in hand through the farmers’ market, and I’ll even get a third job if you only eat organic!*

I’d tell Brooke all about Jen, about Ryan, about the Boathouse. But not this. Not Charlotte’s message. Not when Brooke despised her so much.

I opened it.

I'm sure you've heard in AP History that I'm doing my senior project on the history of Salem. Tacky, but as they say, write what you know. I've heard you're doing an internship at the Peabody Essex because you know somebody who works there? You're lucky!

So . . . I'm documenting the impression of the witch trials on the town—the museum where I work, the Witch House, the Old Burying Point. But I need access to Witch City Waxworks after hours—your manager won't let me take any photos. I know you've been working there for a while, and I was wondering . . . do you think you could get me in? Do you have time to meet up for breakfast tomorrow and talk about it? I have a feeling you'll be really cool about this.

I had a feeling, too. I had a feeling I was about to move mountains for Charlotte Grey.

THREE

I'm not sure what I was expecting to happen when I met Charlotte at Red's Sandwich Shop on Sunday morning.

The streets were deserted, the asphalt shaded charcoal by the early-morning storm. In the drizzling rain, council workers were erecting the Christmas tree beside the *Bewitched* statue in Lappin Park. The tree wasn't decorated—wouldn't be until after Thanksgiving—but they'd hung a lone icicle ornament from Elizabeth Montgomery's fingertips like a promise of the cold to come.

When I spotted Red's, I got all clammy beneath the armpits. *If Brooke had the first clue about what you're about to do, she'd never forgive you.* Rain had saturated the clapboard walls of the restaurant dark cognac, and I stood there on the corner of Central and Front, quivering and perspiring, the *Fun Home* cast recording blaring in my ears—Alison Bechdel's musical memoir about discovering she was a lesbian was really helping me feel welcome in the can't-quite-come-out club.

The bell chimed as I held open the door of Red's for a family trying to collapse a stroller. I fumbled with my umbrella, desperate to get out of their way, and my hands shook so ferally that I brought the plastic shaft down the runner too quickly. The tip of my pointer finger squeezed inside that slight gap and the hairs pricked on the back of my neck. Agony tasted iron, like sour milk. *Fuck.* It hurt worse than the time Brooke and I had

watched *Practical Magic* at a sleepover and I'd suggested that we slice into the heels of our feet and declare ourselves blood sisters. We'd cut each other so deeply that we'd hobbled for three weeks.

I must have made a real face at the sight of my purpling index finger—one of the waitresses behind the register mouthed *ouch* with a twisted smile.

I jammed my umbrella into the little bucket.

Charlotte Grey: *I got us a booth in the back.*

Swallowed up in what looked like the world's softest cream sweater, Charlotte had plaited her hair in two braids. Her alabaster skin was three shades paler than her sweater. *Do not joke, Taylor Parker. Do not flirt, do not do any impressions.* I dropped my wallet and phone on the table and slid into the booth across from her. "You look like Wednesday Addams's heavenly twin."

Oh. My. God.

Wrapping her slender fingers around her mug of black coffee, she sat up straighter in the booth. "Oh. I . . . Thank you." Her eyes snapped to my phone.

My heart leapt to my throat. Beside the holder of Sweet'N Low, the *Fun Home* icon was bright yellow.

I flipped my phone over.

Her electric-blue eyes darted all over me as I took off my parka, my scarf. It made me feel as stiff as the time Ms. Glazer had made us do the "calming circle" cooldown where we'd all sprawled across the stage and rested our heads on each other's bellies—when Charlotte's hair had rolled like ink across my ribs for six very still minutes and then she hadn't looked me in the eye for the next sixteen days.

"Have you seen *Fun Home*, Taylor?"

Oh, Jesus Christ. "No."

“I saw *Fun Home* with my mom in New York last year.”

Of course she had. Of course Charlotte Grey had willingly sat beside her mother and watched Alison Bechdel sing about her coming out experience.

She handed me a menu. “Let’s order before we get distracted?”

Food was the last thing on my mind—I’d barely been able to stomach water before leaving the house. I ran my finger down the breakfast column. It *ached*.

“You know,” Charlotte said, “this used to be a coffeehouse where patriots met. Before the revolution.”

Her bottom lip was caught between her perfect teeth as she perused the menu. I wanted to lick it as badly as I wanted to lick the dimple in her cleft chin. “That’s cool.” I didn’t care where in the hell George Washington took his coffee break, but the way Charlotte’s face lit up when I called her fun fact “cool” did matter to me. It mattered a whole lot.

No longer was she rows away from me high on a stage in a Puritan bonnet. She was *there*, across the booth, making conversation with the waitress with the confidence of a grown-ass woman. I admired the way she said *please* and *thank you* too many times, *take your time, we’re not in a hurry* when the waitress apologized for the wait on her pancakes.

“I don’t see you on Messenger often,” Charlotte said when we were alone again. “Ever since you dropped out of drama club, I really only see you in theater.”

My chat was permanently turned off—I didn’t want anyone to think that I didn’t have a life. “I was on this morning. I think I liked your post.”

She’d shared a *Hollywood Reporter* article praising Kate McKinnon’s rendition of “Hallelujah” on *SNL* the night before.

The three-minute cold open of Kate McKinnon as a mourning white-suited Hillary Clinton on piano had gone viral, and Charlotte had captioned the article with the praise-hands emoji, like Kate McKinnon was the Lesbian Savior and Charlotte one of her twelve disciples.

“How great was that?” she said. “I wish I’d stayed up to watch it. Were you watching live?”

Had I been watching *SNL*? Me, Anonymous, Massachusetts, the secret finalist for the *SNL* internship? *Oh, Charlotte. Buckle up. . . .*

1. There was a framed poster of Kristen Wiig as Target Lady hanging above my bed.
2. When I was eleven, I called Dad when it was his weekend to have me stay over and made up a whole story about having chronic diarrhea, but really, I just wanted to stay home to watch *The Women of SNL* special with Mom.
3. The main reason I asked to stop weekend visitations with Dad was because he didn’t have NBC in high definition on the Cape.
4. I cried myself to sleep the night of Kristen Wiig’s last episode.
5. I was surer about the lyrics to the “Debbie Downer” jingle than I was of the national anthem.
6. I had a pile of journals hidden in a trunk beneath my bed like dirty magazines, filled with silly, embarrassing sketches I’d handwritten before Mom bought me my first laptop.
7. Every Monday, between five and seven, I secretly caught the bus a few neighborhoods over to Prides Crossing Community Hall for improvisation class.

“Oh, yeah. I was watching live.”

The cold open had obviously touched Charlotte more deeply than it had touched me, because she didn't let it go even when our food arrived. She sliced into her gigantic pancake. “I know she was singing about the election and he-who-shall-not-be-named, but it was just . . . it was so *queer*.” I liked the way *queer* rolled off her tongue, pretty and strong. “Especially at the end. Right?” Was she talking about when Kate McKinnon had finished singing, looked directly into Camera One, and said, *I'm not giving up, and neither should you?* “It was like she was speaking directly to every gay girl in America. Don't you think?”

There was something in her stare, a sparkling concoction of glory and empathy that made my mouth go as dry as a two-pack-a-day smoker's. Was she trying to coax some kind of lesbian confession from me? As her pink tongue poked out to swipe her syrup-glossed lips, I tried not to stare.

Looking back down at her pancakes, she waved her butter knife in the air. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just thought it had queer undertones or something.”

I swallowed a mouthful of too-hot coffee. This girl was so confident in her queerness that you would have thought she was some kind of time-traveling lesbian who had thrown bricks at Stonewall herself. “I think a lot of her sketches have pretty queer undertones.”

Charlotte's eyes snapped up.

I yanked off my sweater and threw it down onto the mountain of clothes beside me.

“You're funny, Taylor.”

I looked up at her.

"I'm serious. You're great in theater when we do improv games and stuff. You're the quickest in the class."

Nobody had ever called me *quick*. *Funny*, but never *quick*. "I like improv."

"You always do this thing with your face in the middle of a scene and it just kills me, every time. I don't even think you know you're doing it." Her voice softened. "That's the best part."

We gazed at each other, and I felt it in my knees. Suddenly she dropped her eyes back to her plate. "So, about your wax museum."

"Oh, yeah," I said casually, cutting into my two-egg omelet I'd already let go lukewarm. "I can get you in there."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to get into trouble—"

"I won't get into trouble."

As she raised an eyebrow, I swallowed. *Oh god. Could you be any more obvious?*

"I really appreciate that, Taylor. The photos are going to be great. Your museum is so quirky."

"You should go to Salem Willows, too. There's a fortune-telling machine in the arcade, but it's been redressed as a Puritan witch. The eyes light up red and everything."

"Isn't it shut for the cold season?"

"My boss co-owns the arcade. I worked there the summer of sophomore year while they were training me, and she never asked for the key back." My pulse raced. "I have a few afternoon shifts this week, but I could take you there one day next week after school?"

"You'd really do that for me?"

Since I'd opened her message the night before, I'd had this nagging voice at the back of my mind saying that she was just

using me to get her photos. But as Red's grew busier and busier, Charlotte stayed.

I asked her about her college applications. As she talked, she pulled at the sleeves of her sweater. She'd only applied to Boston College, Northeastern, and Columbia so far. I was having trouble focusing—I was too busy imagining how she'd react if I reached across the table and felt that oversized cashmere sweater between my unblistered fingers. "NYU has a great history program too," she finished. "I still have more applications to think about."

"History?" The world tilted on its axis. "I thought you wanted to be an actress?"

She forked an overripe blueberry across her plate. "Acting's not really practical, you know, for the future." The light went out of her eyes. "What about you?"

"College?"

"Yeah?" She laughed. "What else would I be talking about?"

I couldn't tell her about the contest without telling her about the whole diversity thing. "I got into Emerson."

"Why Emerson? You could go Ivy League if you wanted to."

Maybe I would have been offended if I had actually *wanted* to go to Emerson. "Emerson has a great writing program."

"You write? Like . . . poetry?"

For the first time in my life, right there in Red's Sandwich Shop, I told another living, breathing human being about the *thing* that had been bubbling inside me for years. "Actually . . ." My face burned hotter than when she'd brought up Kate McKinnon. "I write sketches."

"Wow, Taylor. Is that what you want to do? Be a sketch writer?"

With all my heart. "Oh, no. I just write sketches for fun. I'm

going to be a journalist. Hopefully, write humor columns or something.”

“You *would* make a good sketch writer, though.”

Something inside me clicked into place. *Lock, clack, snap* . . . peace. No matter what happened after we paid the breakfast check and parted ways, even if she never spoke to me again, even if that voice was right and she’d only used me to get what she needed for her senior project, I was going to be okay because Charlotte Grey thought I’d make a good sketch writer.

She looked like she was going to say more, but then she craned her neck and looked out the window. “It wasn’t raining when I left home,” she murmured. “I don’t have an umbrella—”

“I have one. I can walk you home.”

Oh god, there they were—those gorgeous fucking dimples. “But you said you have work at the museum after this. You’d be walking all the way across town and then all the way back. Are you sure?”

Honey, I’d piggyback you across Route 66 all the way to Sacramento. “I’m sure.”

As we stepped out into the rain, I opened the umbrella, *carefully* this time. We huddled underneath, arms pressed together as we started downtown. As I listened to her tell me all about her horrible driving lesson the day before, I sent a promise up to Sappho that I would happily accept a plague of a thousand blood blisters if it meant I could have Charlotte Grey all to myself once more before death became me.

My tongue was heavy in my mouth as we skipped puddles. I tried to think of something to say, but I was overwhelmed by how good her hair smelled—like apricot and vanilla—and by the way we fell into step with each other so perfectly, bumping

shoulders as we went. She joked that I was hogging the umbrella because I was taller than her, which made me so self-conscious about how I was angling it that I ended up with a soaked sleeve by the time we reached Pratt.

“You live in that big pink house, right?” she asked. “The inn at the end of Essex?”

“We didn’t choose that color. It was like that when Mom bought it.”

When we’d first moved to Salem, I’d begged Mom to repaint the sickening shade of over-chewed bubble gum. Mom had said that our new house wasn’t pink at all—it was the color of cherry blossoms. *There’s a difference, Taylor*, she’d huffed as I sat in the bay window and watched her crawl around on the living room floor, sweat dripping from her hairline as she tore up the worn-out carpet with her bare hands. A month later, when renovations were completed and we were open for business, Mom renamed the house Blossom Inn. “Ugly paint job, but I suppose it *is* a Queen Anne Revival,” Dad had said when he’d picked me up for our first visitation that week. He’d peered low over the steering wheel to see the tip of the tower. “Do you know when it dates back to, darling? It’d have to be worth over half a million . . .” he’d mumbled as I’d buckled my seat belt and the secrets I shared with Mom.

“When I was a little girl,” Charlotte said, “I used to think that it was some kind of castle, that princesses lived in there, up in the steeple. I’ve always wanted to see inside.”

“There’s not much to see,” I said, and then I wanted to saw my own tongue off with my house keys because here was Charlotte Grey, offering me an excuse to invite her over, and I’d shut her down.

“You know,” she said, “when I sent you that message last night, I wasn’t sure if you’d agree to meet me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“You and Brooke are best friends. We all overheard what she said about me in the tech box that day when the mic was left on.”

We stopped outside a two-story brick house with a neat little garden out front. “I . . .”

“What?” she said softly.

After the tech box incident, there was no point in pretending there wasn’t tension between Brooke and Charlotte. I gripped the umbrella tighter. “Can I ask you something? About what you told Ms. Glazer?”

She gazed up at me.

“When we had to write and perform that ensemble project last year, when you told Ms. Glazer that Garrett’s group copied their script from the internet . . . Why *did* you do that? Tell on them?”

Her lips twisted. “I know what Brooke thinks, maybe what you think too. Maybe what everyone still thinks. But I really wasn’t trying to sabotage Garrett’s group so that my own would get the top grade. It was just plain unfair. They did the wrong thing, and they were more than okay with taking the A that Ms. Glazer gave them—so I spoke up.” She paused. “*Do* you think I did it because I wanted the top grade? That I’m ruthless?”

“I . . .”

“I’m not going to apologize for doing the right thing. I can live with people thinking I’m ruthless if it means I respect myself.”

Whooooa.

She stood a little taller. “I put a lot of effort into theater. It matters to me. I love it.”

“I know you do.” I swallowed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I watched her race down the path to her front porch, her twin braids flying around her head as she skipped up the steps. At the door, just before she slipped inside, she called out, “Thanks, Taylor!” and I swear to Sappho, the rain just stopped. Ceased. The skies cleared and so did my skin and world hunger was one step closer to being solved because I was *full*.