

SIZE 12

AND READY
TO ROCK

MEG
CABOT

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Leave Alone

I've been called a fattie
I've been called big-boned
I've been called a leave-alone
As in "leave that one alone"

Sometimes love can suck
It can really, really suck
Sometimes love can suck
The life right out of you

Even fatties feel things
Big gals feel things too
And leave-alones feel so alone
Their hearts can break in two

Sometimes love can suck
It can really, really suck
But life has sucked a lot less
Since I finally met you

"Leave Alone"
Written by Heather Wells



Racing up the stairs to the second floor, my heart pounding—I'm a walker, not a runner. I try not to race anywhere, unless it's an emergency, and according to the call I received, that's what this is—I find the corridor dark and deserted. I can't see anything except the blood-red glow of the EXIT sign at the end of the hall. I can't hear anything but the sound of my own heavy breathing.

They're here, though. I can feel it in my bones. Only where?

Then it hits me. Of course. They're behind me.

"Give it up," I yell, kicking open the doors to the student library. "You're so busted—"

The bullet hits me square in the back. Pain radiates up and down my spine.

"Ha!" shouts a masked man, springing out from an alcove. "I got you! You're dead. So dead!"

Movie directors often cue their heroine's death with flashbacks of the most significant moments from her life, birth to the present. (Let's be honest, though: who remembers her own birth?)

This isn't what happens to me. As I stand there dying, all I can think about is Lucy, my dog. Who's going to take care of her when I'm gone?

Cooper. Of course, Cooper, my landlord and new fiancé. Except that our engagement isn't so new anymore. It's been three months since he proposed—not that we've told anyone about our plans to get married, because Cooper wants to elope in order to avoid his unbearable family—and Lucy's grown so accustomed to finding him in my bed that she goes straight to *him* for her breakfast and morning walk, since he's such an early riser, and I'm . . . not.

Actually, Lucy goes straight to Cooper for everything now because Cooper works from home and spends all day with her while I'm here at Fischer Hall. To tell the truth, Lucy seems to like Cooper better than she likes me. Lucy's a little bit of a traitor.

Lucy's going to be so well taken care of after I'm dead

that she probably won't even notice I'm not there anymore. This is disheartening enough—or maybe encouraging enough—that my thoughts flicker irrationally to my doll collection. It's mortifying that someone who is almost thirty owns enough dolls to form a collection. But I do, over two dozen of them, one from each of the countries in which I performed back when I was an embarrassingly overproduced teen pop singer for Cartwright Records. Since I wasn't in any particular country long enough to sightsee—only to go on all the morning news shows, then give a concert, usually as the opening act for Easy Street, one of the most popular boy bands of all time—my mom got me a souvenir doll (wearing the country's national costume) from each airport gift shop. She said this was better than seeing the koalas in Australia, or the Buddhist temples in Japan, or the volcanoes in Iceland, or elephants in South Africa, and so on, because it saved time.

All this, of course, was before Dad got arrested for tax evasion, and Mom conveniently hooked up with my manager and then fled the country, taking with her the entire contents of my savings accounts.

"You poor kid." That's what Cooper said about the dolls the first time he spent the night in my room and noticed them staring down at him from the built-in shelves overhead. When I explained where they'd come from, and why I'd hung on to them for all these years—they're all I have left of my shattered career and family, though Dad and I have been trying to reconnect since he got out of prison—Cooper had just shaken his head. "You poor, poor kid."

I can't die, I suddenly realize. Even if Cooper does take care

of Lucy, he won't know what to do with my dolls. I have to live, at least long enough to make sure my dolls go to someone who will appreciate them. Maybe someone from the Heather Wells Fan Club Facebook page. It has close to ten thousand likes.

Before I have a chance to figure out how I'm going to do this, however, another masked figure jumps out at me from behind a couch.

"Oh no!" she cries, shoving her protective eye shield to the top of her head. I'm more than a little surprised to see that it's a student, Jamie Price. She looks horrified. "Gavin, it's Heather. You shot Heather! Heather, I'm so sorry. We didn't realize it was you."

"Heather?" Gavin raises his own face mask, then lowers his gun. "Oh shit. My bad."

I gather from his "my bad" that he means it's his mistake that I'm dying from the large-caliber bullet he's shot into my back. I feel a little bit badly for him because I know how much I meant to him, maybe even more than his own girlfriend, Jamie. Gavin's probably going to require years of therapy to get over accidentally murdering me. He always seemed to relish his role in the May-December romance he imagined between us, even though our love was never going to happen. Gavin's an undergrad film major, I'm the assistant director of his residence hall, and I'm in love with Cooper Cartwright . . . besides which, it's against New York College policy for administrators to sleep with students.

Now, of course, our romance is *definitely* never going to happen, since Gavin's shot me. I can feel the blood gushing from the wound in my back.

I'm not even sure how I'm still able to stand, given the size of the bloodstain and the fact that my spine is most likely severed. It's a bit hard to see how deep the wound is, since the room—along with the rest of the second-floor library—is in darkness, except for what light is spilling in from the once-elegant casement windows overlooking Washington Square Park's chess circle, two stories below.

"Gavin," I say, in a voice clogged with pain, "would you make sure my dolls go to someone who—"

Wait a minute.

"Is this *paint*?" I demand, bringing my fingers to my face so I can examine them more closely.

"We're so sorry," Jamie says, sheepishly. "It says on the box that it washes easily out of most material."

"You're playing paintball *inside*?" I do not feel sorry for Gavin anymore. In fact, I'm getting really pissed at Gavin. "And you think I'm worried about my *clothes*?"

Although truthfully, this shirt does happen to be one of my favorites. It's loose over the parts I don't necessarily want to show off (without making me look pregnant), while drawing attention to the areas I do want people to notice. (Boobs. Mine are excellent.). These are extremely rare qualities in a shirt. Jamie had better be right about the paint being washable. "Jesus Christ, you guys. You could put someone's eye out!"

I don't care that I sound like the kid's mom from that Christmas movie. I'm really annoyed. I'd been on the verge of asking *Gavin McGoren* to take care of my collection of dolls from many nations.

"Aw, c'mon," Gavin says, regarding me wide-eyed. "You've

been shot at before with live ammo, Heather. You can't take a little paintball?"

"I never *chose* to put myself in a position where I could be shot at with live ammo," I point out to him. "It isn't part of my job description. It simply seems to happen to me a lot. Now would you please explain to me why Protection Services called me at home on a *Sunday night* to say there's been a complaint about an unauthorized party—at which they claim someone has allegedly passed out—going on in a building that's supposed to be *empty* for renovations for the summer, except for student staff workers?"

Gavin looks insulted. "It's not a party," he says. "It's a paintball war." He holds up his rifle as if it explains everything. "Fischer Hall desk and RA staff against the student paint crew. Here." He disappears for a moment behind the couch, then reappears to pile a spare paintball gun, face shield, coveralls—doubtless stolen from the student paint crew—along with various other pieces of equipment into my arms. "Now that you're here, you can be on the desk staff team."

"Wait. *This* is what you guys did with the programming money I gave you?" I ask, barely able to hide my disgust. I know from the class I'm taking this summer that it takes the human brain until the midtwenties to reach full maturation and structural development, which is why the young often make such questionable, even rash, decisions.

But playing paintball *inside* a residence hall? This is a boneheaded move, even for Gavin McGoren.

I throw the paintball stuff back down on the couch.

"That money was supposed to go toward a *pizza party*," I say. "Because you said all the dining halls are closed on

Sunday nights and you never have enough money for anything to eat. Remember?”

“Oh no, no,” Jamie assures me. For a big girl, her voice can sound awfully babyish sometimes, maybe because she often ends her sentences on an up-note, like she’s asking a question even when she’s not. “We didn’t spend the money on paintball equipment, we checked it out free from the student sports center? I didn’t even know they *had* paintball equipment you could check out—probably because it’s always checked out during the school year when there’s so many people around?—but they do. All you have to do is leave your ID.”

“Of course,” I grumble. Why *wouldn’t* the college’s wealthy alumni have donated money to purchase paintball equipment for the students to check out for free? God forbid they’d donate it for something useful, like a science lab.

“Yeah,” Gavin says. “We *did* use the money on pizza. Well, most of it.” He holds up the remaining three cans of beer, dangling from the plastic rings of what was once a six-pack. “You wants? Only the best American-style lager for my womeⁿz.”

I feel a burning sensation. It has nothing to do with the paintball with which I was recently shot. “*Beer?* You bought *beer* with money I gave you for pizza?”

“It’s Pabst Blue Ribbon,” Gavin says, looking confused. “I thought cool girl singer-songwriters were supposed to love the PBR.”

Perhaps because she’s noticed my eyes narrow, Jamie walks over to give me a hug.

“Thanks so much for letting me stay here for the summer,

Heather,” she says. “If I’d have had to spend it at home with my parents in Rock Ridge, I’d have died? Really. You have no idea what you’ve done for me. You’ve given me the wings I needed to fly. You’re the best boss ever, Heather.”

I have a pretty good idea what I’ve given Jamie, and it’s not wings. It’s free room and board for twelve weeks in exchange for twenty hours of work a week forwarding the mail of the residents who’ve gone home for the summer and manning the front desk. Now, instead of having to commute into the city to see Gavin in secret (her parents don’t approve of him, since they think their daughter can do better than a scruffy-looking film major), Jamie can simply open her door, since he’s living right down the hall from her, as I’ve given him (unwisely, I’ve now decided) the same sweet deal.

“I’m pretty sure your parents wouldn’t agree I’m the best boss ever,” I say, resisting her hug. “I’m equally certain that if anyone in the Housing Office finds out about the paintball—and the beer—I’m not going to be anyone’s boss anymore.”

“What can they do to you?” Gavin asks, indignantly. “We’re in a building that’s shut down for the summer, that’s going to be completely painted anyway, and we’re all over twenty-one. No one’s doing anything illegal.”

“Sure,” I say, sarcastically. “That’s why I got a call from Protection, because no one’s doing anything illegal.”

Gavin makes a face that looks particularly ghoulish with the protective shield still pushed back over his hair. “Was it Sarah?” he asks. “She’s the one who called in the complaint, wasn’t she? She’s always telling us to shut up because she’s trying to get her thesis finished, or whatever. I *knew* she wasn’t going to be cool with this.”

I don't comment. I have no idea who ratted them out to the campus police. It could easily have been Sarah Rosenberg, Fischer Hall's live-in graduate assistant assigned to respond to overnight emergencies and assist the hall director with nightly operations. Unfortunately, since the last one's untimely demise, there's no hall director of Fischer Hall for Sarah to assist. She's been helping me supervise the student skeleton staff and waiting until Housing decides who our new hall director is going to be. I've already left one message for her—it's weird that Sarah didn't pick up, because she's taking classes this summer and so is usually in her room. She has nothing to do but study, although she did acquire, around the time that I got secretly engaged, her first ever serious boyfriend.

"Look," I say, taking out my cell phone to call Sarah again, "I didn't give you guys that money for beer, and you know it. If there really is someone passed out, we need to find them right away and make sure they're all right—"

"Oh, definitely," Jamie says, looking worried. "But they can't be passed out from drinking. We only bought two six-packs—"

"Well, the basketball team bought a bottle of vodka," Gavin admits, sheepishly.

"Gavin!" Jamie cries.

I feel as if I really *have* been shot, only this time in the head, not the spine, and with a real bullet. That's the size of the migraine blooming behind my left eyeball. "*What?*" I say.

"Well, it's not like I could stop 'em." Gavin's voice goes up an octave. "Have you seen how big they are? That one Rus-

sian kid, Magnus, is nearly seven feet tall. What was I going to say, ‘nyetski on the vodkaski?’”

Jamie thinks about this. “Wouldn’t it be ‘nyet’? And ‘vodka’? I think those are Russian words.”

“Fantastic,” I say, ignoring them as I press redial and call Sarah’s number again. “If any of those guys is the one who’s passed out, we’re not even going to be able to lift him onto a gurney. So where’s the basketball team right now?”

Gavin looks excited. He takes something from a pocket of his coveralls and goes to one of the casement windows. In the glow from the streetlamps outside, I see that he’s unfolding a floor plan of the building. It’s covered in mysterious notations made with red marker, presumably a plan for tonight’s battle. My headache stabs me even harder. I should be home having Chinese takeout and watching *Freaky Eaters* with my boyfriend, our Sunday night tradition, although for some reason Cooper fails to see the brilliance of *Freaky Eaters*, preferring to watch *60 Minutes*, or as I like to call it, “The Show That Is Never About Freaky Eaters.”

“We’ll probably need to split up to find them,” Gavin says, lifting his beer and taking a swift sip before pointing at a location on the floor plan. “We set up a bunker in the library because we can hear anybody coming up the stairs from the lobby or taking the service elevator. We estimate Team Paint Crew is holing up somewhere on the first floor, most likely the cafeteria. But they could be in the basement, possibly the game room. My idea is, we get down there, then take out *all* of them at once, and win the whole game—”

“Wait,” Jamie says. “Did you hear that?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Gavin says. “So here’s the plan.

Jamie, you go down the back stairwell to the caf. Heather, you go down the front stairwell and see if anyone is hiding out in the basement.”

“You’ve been breathing too many chemicals in the dark-room at your summer film classes,” I say. Sarah’s phone has gone to voice mail again. Frustrated, I hang up without leaving another message. “And anyway, I’m not playing.”

“Heather, Heather, Heather,” Gavin says, chidingly. “Film is all digital now, no one uses darkrooms or chemicals. And you most certainly are playing. We killed you, so you’re our prisoner. You have to do what we say.”

“Seriously,” Jamie says. “Didn’t you guys hear that?”

“If you killed me, that means I’m dead,” I say. “So I shouldn’t have to play.”

“Those aren’t the rules,” Gavin says. “The way we’ll take them is, we go in through the dining office, then hide behind the salad bar—”

“McGoren,” a deep, masculine voice says from the darkness of the hallway.

Gavin looks up.

“Nobody shoots Heather,” my fiancé Cooper emerges from the shadows to say, “and gets away with it.”

Then he fires.

Once in a While

Once in a while you regret the road not taken
Start giving up on the plans you made

Once in a while you feel so forsaken
Wondering why so many took, not gave

Once in a while you ask, how could this happen?
How did I end up in these shoes?

But once in a while you meet a special someone
Someone who chose the same path as you

And suddenly it stops feeling so lonely
Out on that road that you just had to choose

And that's when you know it all was worth it
Because once in a while dreams do come true

"Once in a While"
Written by Heather Wells



"I told you I heard something," Jamie says, laughing at Gavin's stupefied expression as he stares down at the bright green paint splotch on the front of his white coveralls.

"Uncool, man," Gavin says, forlornly. "You aren't even on an official team."

"Where'd you get that paintball gun?" I ask as Cooper comes over to wrap an arm around my neck.

"A nice young man at the front desk handed it to me when

I asked where you were,” he says. “He told me I was going to need it in order to defend myself.”

I realize belatedly that Mark, the resident assistant working at the front desk, was calling out to me as I raced up the stairs. I’d been in too much of a hurry to listen.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Cooper as he kisses the top of my head. “I told you I’d be right back.”

“Yes, that’s what you say every time you get dragged over here on a weekend,” Cooper says dryly. “Then it’s three hours before I see you again. I figured this time I’d hurry things along. You don’t make enough money at this job to be at their beck and call twenty-four hours a day, Heather.”

“Don’t I know it,” I say. My annual salary actually puts me at the U.S. poverty level, after the IRS and NYS take their cuts. Fortunately, New York City College’s health care and benefits package is excellent, and I pay zero rent thanks to my second job doing data entry for my landlord, who’s untwined his arm from around my neck and is reloading his paint gun.

I’m not going to lie: though I disapprove of gunplay in the residence hall where I work, the effect is undeniably sexy. Of course, Cooper had to familiarize himself with firearms in order to pass the New York State Private Investigator Exam. He doesn’t actually own a gun, however, and has assured me that in real life being a private detective is nothing like it is on TV shows and movies. He mostly sits around in his car taking photos of people who are cheating on their spouses.

It’s a relief to know this, since I’d worry if I thought he was out there getting shot at and then returning fire. I do wonder, though, how Cooper can shovel down as much fast food as he does on those stakeouts—the floor of his car is

literally carpeted with burger wrappers—and not weigh as much as the people I’ve seen on *My Six-Hundred-Pound Life*.

I used to have that kind of metabolism, but that didn’t mean I was happy.

“This time it’s serious,” I tell him. “Campus police got a report of an unauthorized party—”

“You don’t say,” Cooper says, eyeing the beer.

“—and someone unconscious,” I add. “No one seems to know who called in the report. Sarah isn’t picking up, and everybody else is spread out across the building, playing paintball war.” I don’t want to seem ineffectual at my job in front of the residents, but the truth is, I’m not entirely sure how to handle the situation. I’m only an *assistant* residence hall director, after all.

Cooper has no such reservations.

“Fine,” he says and levels his paint gun at Gavin and Jamie. “New game plan. You’re all my prisoners, which means you have to do what I say.”

I can’t help letting out a tiny gasp. I used to fantasize about becoming Cooper Cartwright’s prisoner and him forcing me to do what he said. Full confession: wrist restraints were involved.

Now my fantasy is coming true! Well, sort of. It’s typical of my luck lately that there are a bunch of undergraduates hanging around, ruining it.

“Let’s go round up the rest of the players,” Cooper says, “and make sure they’re all accounted for. Then I’ll take anyone who’s interested out for Thai food.”

Gavin and Jamie groan, which I think is quite rude, considering my boyfriend has offered to buy them dinner. What

is wrong with kids today? Who would rather run around shooting at one another with paint than eat delicious pad thai?

“Are you serious?” Gavin demands. “Right when we were about to demolish the basketball team?”

“Yes, I can see you were mere moments from accomplishing that,” Cooper says, one corner of his mouth sloping up sarcastically. “But my understanding is that Heather likes this job, and I don’t think she should get herself fired for fraternizing after work hours with students firing paintball rifles while intoxicated.”

I stare at my husband-to-be in the half-light. I think I’ve just fallen in love with him a little bit more. Maybe he *would* have known what to do with my dolls.

I’m turning back to my cell phone—really, where *is* Sarah? It’s completely unlike her not to call me back right away—thinking about how I’m going to repay Cooper as soon as we get home (wrist restraints will *definitely* be involved), when we hear footsteps in the hallway. From the sound of them, they’re masculine. And insistent.

“That’s them,” Gavin whispers. He grabs his reloader. “The *pansies*. . . .”

He isn’t being offensive. The Pansies are the name of New York College’s basketball team. Once known as the Cougars, a cheating scandal in the 1950s resulted in their being demoted from Division I, the highest college ranking, to Division III, the lowest, and their being renamed after a flower.

One would think this would have taught the college a lesson, but no. Just this past spring “Page Six” got hold of a memo from the office of the president of New York Col-

lege, Phillip Allington, written to my boss, Stan Jessup, head of the Housing Department, telling Stan to make sure that each of the school's basketball team players received free room and board for the summer, as some of the Pansies lived as far away as Soviet Georgia and the cost of the flight home was too crushing an expense for their families to bear.

That's how Fischer Hall ended up with a dozen Pansy "painters" living here for the summer.

Since current NCAA regulations strictly forbid providing players with cash or gifts—and Division III players in particular from receiving athletic scholarships of any kind—this memo from President Allington's office launched what had become known as Pansygate . . . though personally I don't see how exchanging free room and board for painting nearly three hundred dorm rooms can be considered a "gift."

"Those bonehead jocks can't have figured out we're in here," Gavin whispers. "Please lemme shoot 'em."

Jamie adds a heartfelt "*Please?*"

Cooper shakes his head. "*No—*"

It's too late. As the door to the library swings open, Gavin lifts his paintball gun and shoots at . . .

. . . Simon Hague, the director of Wasser Hall, Fischer Hall's bitterest rival, and my own personal workplace nemesis.

Simon shrieks at the Day-Glo burst that's appeared on the front of his stylish black polo. His companion—a campus protection officer, from the outline of his hat—doesn't appear too happy about the bright yellow paint that's splashed onto the front of his blue uniform either.

Jamie, realizing her boyfriend's mistake first, gasps in

horror, then says almost the exact same thing to them that she'd said to me: "It comes out in warm water!"

A part of me wants to burst out laughing. Another part longs to disappear on the spot. Simon, I remember belatedly, is the residence hall director on duty this weekend, which means he must have gotten the same message I did about the unauthorized party and unconscious student.

If I wasn't dead before, I am now, at least career-wise.

"What," Simon demands, fumbling along the wood paneling for a light switch, "is going on here?"

Hide the beer, I silently pray. Someone hide the beer, quick.

"Hi," I say, stepping forward. "Simon, it's me, Heather. We were just doing a team-building exercise. I'm so sorry about this—"

"Team-building exercise?" Simon sputters, still trying to find the light switch amid all the cherry wood grape leaves—many of which have had curse words carved into them over the years, one of the reasons the Housing Office insists on our calling the dormitories "residence halls," hoping this will evoke more of a sense of community pride and cut down on the vandalism. "This building is supposed to be *empty* for the summer. What kind of team could you possibly be building, and on a Sunday night?"

"Well, we're not really empty," I say. I hear movement behind me and am relieved to notice out of the corner of my eye that Gavin is discreetly shifting the six-packs of PBR behind the couch. "Dr. Jessup wanted us to keep the front desk open, so of course there's the student desk staff and the mail forwarding staff and a few resident assistants, because of the—"

—*basketball team*, I was going to say. Conscious that the college president's favorite students were living in the building for the summer, the head of Housing had asked me to make sure that the team—who are, after all, students first, athletes second—had plenty of supervision, so I'd provided it, in the form of seven RAs, who were also receiving free housing for the summer in exchange for working a few hours in my office or at the desk, but also keeping an eye on the Pansies.

Simon cuts me off before I can finish. "Mail-forwarding staff?" He sounds incensed. I remember belatedly that during one staff meeting at which we were asked to brainstorm ways the college might save money, Simon had suggested cutting all the assistant residence hall director positions—*my* position.

He finally finds the light switch, and suddenly we're bathed in a harsh, fluorescent glow.

Simon doesn't look so good. I can't imagine I look any better, though. Then I recognize the campus protection officer, who looks the worst of all three of us.

"Oh," I say, surprised. "Hi, Pete. You're working night shifts now?"

Pete, who normally mans Fischer Hall's security desk, is trying to wipe the Day-Glo off his silver badge.

"Yeah," he says, glumly. "I picked up a few extra shifts. The girls are going to sleepaway camp this summer. Those places are expensive. The good ones anyway."

It's clear from Pete's expression that he's regretting his decision to take on the extra shifts.

“You have students living here for free in exchange for *forwarding the mail*?” Simon demands, a dog with a bone he refuses to drop.

I forgot that Wasser Hall is across the park, in a different zip code than Fischer Hall, and serviced by a different post office. They’re also in a new building where they don’t have to worry about asbestos being exposed and the ceiling of the room below collapsing whenever a toilet floods. No one refers to Wasser Hall as Death Dorm. They think they’re so great because of this.

“Yeah,” I say. “Our post office won’t forward Fischer Hall’s mail, because it considers dormitories transient housing. So that’s what Jamie and Gavin are doing in exchange for free housing, in addition to shifts at the desk.”

I’ll admit I’ve been playing pretty fast and loose with the rules, basically running the building like—as Cooper refers to it—my own “Island of Misfit Toys,” thanks to the kids I’ve hired to staff it all having nowhere else to go, due to either financial or family pressures. I’m pretty sure *nothing* I’ve been doing would meet with Simon’s approval, and that if he knew the full extent of it, it would only confirm his conviction that I *and* my job should both be eliminated immediately.

“Free housing,” Simon echoes in a cold voice. Outside, a distant siren begins to sound much closer. The casement windows are cranked as far open as they can go—which is only two inches, thanks to the mandatory window-“guard” policy that the college instituted after a few too many Fischer Hall students were pushed to their deaths this past year—so

every catcall and car horn can be heard with perfect clarity. Although Fischer Hall has air-conditioning, the system is antiquated.

“Free housing in exchange for forwarding the mail?” Simon’s face is a perfect mask of incredulity. “And you’re conducting *team-building* exercises for these mail-forwarders? At night?”

“Um,” I say. “Yes.” Out of all the hall directors who could have been on call the night I found my summer staff misbehaving so badly, why did *Simon* have to be the one on duty? Anyone else—Tom Snelling, for instance, who runs Waverly Hall, which houses the fraternities—would have confiscated the beer and paintball guns and kept quiet to the administration.

But no, it had to be fussy, overbearing Simon. Could things possibly get any worse?

Yes. Because I’m standing close enough to the casement windows to determine that the siren I heard belongs to an ambulance, and I can see it turning onto Washington Square West.

Of course, Fischer Hall is one of many buildings along Washington Square. The ambulance could be going to any one of them.

But what are the chances?

Simon glares at Cooper. “And who’s *this*?” he demands, with a sneer. “Surely he’s a little old to be one of your *mail-forwarding staff*.”

“Cooper Cartwright,” Cooper says, stepping forward with his right hand extended. I’m relieved to see that he’s hidden the paintball gun. “Safety consultant. Heather asked me to

be here to make sure all the necessary security precautions were in place for tonight's team-building exercise."

Safety consultant? I feel my stomach sink. No way is Simon going to fall for that one.

"I wasn't aware," Simon says, shaking Cooper's hand, "Fischer Hall had enough money in its budget to hire a safety consultant—"

"Well," Cooper says, giving Simon a knowing wink. "What with all the tragedies that occurred here this past year, I was more than happy to waive my fee. We can't have kids calling this place Death Dorm forever, can we?"

I see Simon's face change. Although normally I hate it when anyone says the words "Death Dorm," Cooper made the right call bringing it up. Fischer Hall had the highest number of deaths of any residence hall in the entire nation last year, including a semester-at-sea cruise ship that experienced a freak norovirus outbreak, killing three. (Only one was a student. The other two were faculty. No one in residence life cares about faculty, really, but technically their deaths do count.)

Still, the number of students entering New York College as freshmen who asked for a transfer to "anything other than Death Dorm" after finding out they'd been assigned there has been quite high . . . nearly 97 percent. That's part of the reason why Fischer Hall is being shut down for the summer for a makeover, so the kids who don't get their requested transfer—which will be all of them, there being no other halls to transfer them to because all the savvy entering freshmen requested Wasser Hall—will at least have nice white walls when they check in to their room at Death Dorm.

It's starting to look like our longest streak at being accident-free is coming to an end: the ambulance outside pulls up in front of Fischer Hall.

I am in a perfect position to see not only the ambulance but also the person who darts through Fischer Hall's front doors—directly beneath the proudly waving blue-and-gold New York College banners above those doors—to greet the ambulance.

It isn't anyone on the Fischer Hall staff, but it *is* someone with whom I'm more than a little familiar, *and* someone who I'm certain wouldn't want Simon Hague poking into his business.

Simon is standing too close to the second-floor library door to see out the windows, and all his attention is focused on what's happening inside, not outside. He seems to have softened a bit since Cooper brought up the Death Dorm thing. Simon is, after all, in this for the children, as he points out so frequently during staff meetings that Tom and I have begun keeping a running tally.

"I understand," he says, raising his voice so he can be heard over the siren—so ubiquitous in this neighborhood that he doesn't even pause to ask what it is or wonder if it might have anything to do with our current situation—"but if this is a programming activity, what's with this report Protection received about an unauthorized party with an unconscious student?"

"That's a good question," I say. Though it's one I completely understand now that I recognize the tall, lanky frame and handsome features of the person speaking with

the EMTs in the bright security lights that flood the front entrance. “Maybe it has something to do with the basketball team?”

Simon goes pale behind his neatly trimmed mustache. “You mean . . . *the Pansies*?” His voice falls into a hushed whisper. Since the siren has abruptly been shut off, his next words sound absurdly loud. “You think *they’re* involved?”

“I can’t think who else it could be.” I keep my gaze averted from Cooper’s as he crosses the room to stand beside me, even when I see him glancing curiously out the window. “The paintball war is student desk staff against the student paint staff . . . the basketball team. I thought I mentioned that before—”

“You didn’t,” Simon interrupts, tersely. “Where are they?”

“The Pansies are in the cafeteria.” Gavin is suddenly being very helpful . . . not because he thinks any of the basketball players are in trouble, but because he’s seen a way for his paintball game to continue. “Want us to show you?”

“Yes, of course,” Simon replies, spinning toward the door. “It’s nice that *someone* around here knows what’s going on. . . .”

Gavin throws me a mischievous smile, then he and Jamie follow Simon toward the door. Since Simon’s back is to Gavin, he doesn’t see the paintball rifle in Gavin’s hand.

But Pete does. He snatches the guns from both Gavin’s and Jamie’s hands, giving them each a baleful look as he does so. They slink out, looking disappointed. As soon as they’re safely out of earshot, Pete glares at me.

“Really?” he asks. “I’m supposed to follow those knuckle-

heads down there and let myself get sprayed a second time?"

"Well," Cooper says, "you're armed now. Just spray them back."

"The ballplayers are good guys," I say quickly, seeing the look Pete throws my boyfriend. "They'll put down their weapons if they hear you say you're with campus police."

Pete tosses the paint guns onto the couch, not seeming very reassured. "Who they loading into the meat wagon?" he asks, nodding toward the windows.

I'm not surprised he's figured out that the siren belonged to an ambulance and that the ambulance has stopped in front of Fischer Hall. Pete's worked for New York College a long time. His intention is to stay until he can collect his benefits package and retire to his family's casita in Puerto Rico.

"Someone from the penthouse," I say.

Pete looks even more displeased. "What're *they* doing here? I thought they spend summers at their place in the Hamptons. That way she can get soused on Long Island iced teas without everyone on campus knowing about it."

Pete's right: Mrs. Allington, President Allington's wife, is a woman who has been known to over-imbibe. This has made living in the penthouse of a building in which they have to take the same elevator as seven hundred undergraduates an occasional challenge.

Mrs. Allington is also a woman who keeps a cool head in emergencies . . . enough so that she once saved my life. Not that she's recognized me ever since. Still, there are few things I wouldn't do in order to preserve her privacy and reputation.

This, however, is one occasion when she has no need of my discretion.

“I don’t think it’s Mrs. Allington this time,” I say.

Pete looks puzzled. “The president came into the city without her? That’s not like him.”

“No,” I say. “I’m pretty sure the Allingtons aren’t the ones having the unauthorized party.”

“Then who is?” Cooper asks.

“Their son.”

Bank Card Lover

In the club, bodies tight
Think I may, think I might
See your face across the floor
That's when you tell me the score

Late at night, lobby light
Press my code, away we go
Hours pass, you make it last,
Just so long as I've got the cash

He's a bank card lover
Girls warned me about him
Just a bank card lover
Don't let him under your skin

Club is closed, money's tight
I'm going home alone tonight
I don't even know his name
But I'm not feeling any shame

I know he's just a bank card lover
The other girls were right
Just a bank card lover
Gave me the ride of my life
(Dance break, repeat)

"Bank Card Lover"
Performed by Tania Trace
So Sue Me album
Cartwright Records
Three consecutive weeks
in the Top 10 Billboard Hot 100



“Why are we doing this again?” Cooper asks.

We’re alone in one of Fischer Hall’s ancient elevators as it wheezes its way to the penthouse. Pete’s left us to go make sure Simon doesn’t get completely soaked under a hail of paintballs.

“Because Christopher Allington hasn’t exercised the best judgment in the past,” I explain. “I want to make sure he’s not up to his old tricks. That ambulance better be for his mom and not some young girl he roofied.”

Cooper shakes his head. “You always think the best about people, don’t you? That’s what I love most about you, your boundless optimism and faith in the goodness of mankind.”

I narrow my eyes at him . . . but I can’t deny it. There are few people I’ve met since coming to work at Fischer Hall—a job I lucked into after getting kicked off the Cartwright Record label, and then out of my former boyfriend’s bed—whom I *haven’t* suspected of murder. It’s surprising how often I’ve been right.

Possibly this is an instinct I honed during the years I spent working in the entertainment business. Not that a lot of musicians are murderers, but many of them *are* damaged in one way or another. Maybe this is what draws them to the profession in the first place. Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll are all ways to exorcise your inner demons . . .

Which is how I ended up moving in with Cooper Cartwright. After I found my live-in boyfriend, Jordan—Cooper’s brother and lead singer of Easy Street—*exorcising some of his inner demons with Cartwright Records’ newest rising star, Tania Trace, in our bed, I had nowhere else to go.*

Cooper and I came to a very businesslike arrangement: He rented me a floor of his downtown brownstone in exchange for my doing his client billing.

How we managed to keep it businesslike for nearly a year, I have no idea, especially given that in the past three months since we revealed our true feelings to each another we've managed to boink in every room of the house too many times to count (except for the basement, due to spiders).

"Well," I say, in my own defense, "the last time he and I talked, Christopher said he was starting a dance club or nightclub or something. Isn't that what guys like him do? Roofie girls' drinks?"

The son of the college president and I are not friends, to say the least, mostly because for a while he was not only *actually* sleeping with every Fischer Hall resident he could lure into his bed, I also suspected him of murdering them. The fact that he was proved to be innocent of the latter is beside the point. The former was still true.

"Why would a budding nightclub mogul who likes to sleep with young girls live with his parents?" Cooper asks.

"I'm pretty sure Christopher's got his own place in Williamsburg," I say. "He crashes here when his parents aren't in town."

Or so I've inferred when I've seen him slinking from the elevator across from my office early in the morning to sign out an overnight guest. It's always highly noticeable when anyone in Fischer Hall steps off the elevators before ten, since very few students at New York College schedule their classes prior to eleven, but it's especially noticeable when

it's the president's son and a blond woman in her late twenties wearing business attire, Louboutins, and a \$20,000 gold Rolex. Although I suppose it's nice that Christopher's found a friend his own age for a change.

"Williamsburg," Cooper says, with a grunt. "Of course. Where else would any self-respecting young roofier be residing these days but the current hub for indie rock and hipster culture?"

I give him a sour look. "Considering they've all been priced out of the Village by this college, celebrities, and trust fund babies like you," I say, pointedly, as the numbers on the dial above our heads reach 20, "where else are they supposed to live?"

"Touché," he says with a grin. "But all I inherited was the brownstone, not a trust fund. *You're* the only celebrity in this neighborhood. What I wonder is why—"

The doors slide open before he can finish his question or I can protest—I was a celebrity back when the Taco Bell Chihuahua was popular, and I'm about as widely recognized now as that deceased canine—and we see that the EMTs are in the hallway outside the Allingtons' penthouse.

Christopher Allington is standing in his parents' doorway, holding a clipboard and a pen and saying, "Sorry to be such a pain, but if you guys could just sign these waivers before you come in, that'd be super."

The two uniformed ambulance attendants, holding their heavy kits beneath their arms, are looking pissed off.

"What kind of waiver?" the female EMT wants to know.

"It's a quick release stating that we can use your—" Chris-

topher breaks off when he sees me and Cooper in the hallway. “Oh hey,” he says, his expression going from one of cordial welcome to one of complete disdain.

Then, just as quickly, the cordiality is back again. But there’s an undeniable coldness in his voice as he stares at us. Who can blame him for being touchy, really, considering the murder thing?

“What brings you folks up here?” he asks.

“The ambulance parked in front of my building,” I say, just as coldly.

“*Your* building?” I can tell that Christopher means for his laugh to sound casual, but there’s a hard edge to it. “I believe this building belongs to New York College, of which my father is the president. So it’s not really *your* building, is it?”

Christopher is wearing a blue dress shirt, white trousers, and a white jacket. He’s sweated profusely through the shirt. I won’t deny that it’s hot in the hallway, which, unlike the rest of the building, is elegantly carpeted and painted a subtle olive green, in deference to the floor’s high-prestige—and only—residents. There’s a gilt-frame mirror across from the elevators in which I can see my reflection. I’m perspiring too, enough so that tendrils from my blond ponytail are sticking to the back of my neck. But I can feel cold air coming out from the apartment behind Christopher. He’s got the air conditioning on full blast in there.

Skipping the niceties, Cooper asks, “What’s that all over your suit?” He doesn’t mean the sweat stains either. Christopher has dark brown flecks all over his otherwise pure white linen suit. I know I’m not one to talk, with the big glob of

Day-Glo paint I have on my back. So far as I know, Christopher wasn't on either of the paintball war teams downstairs.

"Oh this?" he says, swiping at some of the larger stains on his jacket, smiling like it's nothing. "Well, yes, this is from an unfortunate situation that arose earlier in the evening, but I can assure you that everything is—"

The female ambulance attendant turns to me and Cooper. "I know when I see blood, and that's blood," she says flatly. "Either one of you in charge? 'Cause we got a call about an unconscious woman at this address. This gentleman"—she uses the word "gentleman" sarcastically—"says she's conscious now, but he's denying us entry unless we sign some kind of waiver."

"Well," I say, because between the spots on Christopher's suit and the EMT's mention of a woman being unconscious, I'm ready to take *total* charge. Roofies is all I can think. Roofies and blood. "I'm the assistant director of this building. This man doesn't even live here. He has no authority to require anyone to sign anything. So I say you can go on in."

A male voice calls my name from a room in the apartment behind Christopher, apparently having overheard my little speech.

"Heather? Is that you?"

Cooper is past the EMTs like a gunshot, shoving Christopher roughly out of the doorway. "*Jordan?*" he says in a tone of disbelief.

I don't blame him. Cooper's little brother Jordan is one of the last people I'd expect to find in a New York College residence hall, even in the president's cushy apartment, and

especially one in which roofies and blood are apparently present. Cooper and Jordan have never exactly been close, and not only because Cooper, unlike Jordan, refused to become a member of Easy Street when their father, Grant Cartwright, CEO of Cartwright Records, thought it up. There's also the fact that Cooper's extremely wealthy—and equally eccentric—grandfather, Arthur Cartwright, left Cooper his pink townhouse in the West Village, now estimated to be worth in the high seven figures.

The way Jordan broke up with me could also be a contributing factor to Cooper's dislike of him, but I don't want to make assumptions.

Still, Cooper practically flattens Christopher in his effort to come to what he believes is his brother's aid. It's touching, really, although not everyone finds it so.

"Do you mind?" Christopher calls after Cooper, testily, adjusting his lapels. "This suit is Armani. And this is private property. I could call the cops."

"Go ahead," I say to Christopher as I lead the EMTs past him. "I'll tell them you're trespassing. Your parents aren't here, are they?"

"They're in the Hamptons," Christopher replies, sullenly. "But seriously, you guys are disrupting a very important scene. They can check her afterward. She's feeling better now anyway."

"Scene?" I echo, my heart sinking. An unconscious woman, blood, and *cameras*? Has Christopher talked Jordan into making a *porno*? The sad part is, it wouldn't surprise me.

As I turn the corner from the penthouse's elegant foyer, I

see exactly what Christopher means by scene, however, and also why Cooper has stopped short so abruptly in front of me that I run right into him.

“Cooper?” Jordan Cartwright is sitting on an overstuffed couch clutching the hand of his new—and extremely pretty—young wife, best-selling recording artist of the year Tania Trace. Jordan looks even more astonished to see us than we are to see him, and that’s saying a lot. “What on earth are *you* doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” Cooper stares at his brother, then broadens his gaze to include the group gathered around his brother and the couch on which his brother is sitting under the glow of two enormous lights set on tripods. “I think the more appropriate question is, what are *you* doing here? And why are you covered in blood?”

“Am I?” Jordan looks down at himself, surprised. He’s dressed similarly to Christopher, only his suit is a pale beige, and his shirt is pink. Like Christopher, he’s sweating profusely. And like Christopher, there are droplets of blood flicked all over him. “Oh shit, I didn’t notice. Why didn’t you guys tell me?” Jordan glares at the film crew, all of whom are dressed in cargo shorts and T-shirts with various band logos emblazoned across them. Even though the air conditioning is on full blast, the lights make it blazingly hot in the room, so they’re all sweating too.

“The blood’s good. It makes it more real, man,” a guy with a pair of headphones, holding a boom—one of those long microphones with a fuzzy thing over the end—assures Jordan.

The guy holding the camera says, peering through the

lens, “Blood’s barely tracking because it’s so dark in here. Could somebody adjust that scrim like I asked, or am I talking to myself here?”

A young woman with her hair tucked into tiny braids to keep it off her neck hurries over to one of the tripods and pulls a mesh screen from in front of the light bank. A second later, the white-hot glare on Jordan and Tania increases about a hundredfold and the temperature in the Allingtons’ living room seems to go up another ten degrees.

“Perfect,” the cameraman says, in a satisfied voice. “*Now* I can see the blood.”

Tania, who’s wearing a metallic gold minidress—and I use the word “mini” loosely, since the dress is barely large enough to cover her nipples and lower extremities—lifts a limp brown arm over her eyes, turning her exquisitely featured face away from the searing light.

“I can’t do this,” she murmurs weakly.

“Sure you can, Tania honey,” says a woman I haven’t noticed before. She’s standing off to the side in the shadows, but not deep enough into the shadows that I can’t see her Louboutins or the glint of gold around her wrist. It’s the woman I’ve noticed so often lately exiting the elevator in the morning with Christopher. “Put your arm down and tell us how it felt when you saw a man get shot right in front of you.”

“I don’t want to.” Tania keeps her arm where it is. From what little I can see of it, her face seems to have gone as olive green as the walls in the hallway outside the elevator.

“Keep it together, baby,” Jordan says, putting his own arm

around his wife's diminutive frame and looking down at her tenderly, though the only part of her he can possibly see from where he's sitting is her elbow and maybe her knees. "I know what we went through tonight was ugly. But you heard what they said at the ER. With time and our prayers, Bear's going to be all right. And until then, *I'll* protect you. And the baby too, when she comes. I'll never let anything happen to either of you, I swear it. Not while there's a breath left in my body."

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. Someone named Bear was shot in front of Tania? And they're making her talk about it on camera, in the penthouse of Fischer Hall? *Why?*

"That's good, Jordan," Gold Rolex says, from the shadows. I can see by the glint of her watch that she's holding a cell phone to her ear. "But can you do it again, and this time, Tania, can you take your arm down and look at Jordan?"

The bulbs in both tripods go out, plunging the room into darkness. Someone screams.

The room isn't plunged into *total* darkness. Numerous Tiffany lamps belonging to Mrs. Allington continue to blaze on side tables, and there are fairy lights sparkling outside on the terrace, so there is *some* light to see by.

But the sudden contrast in lighting is startling, and it takes a moment for everyone's vision to adjust.

"What the—" cries Christopher.

"I thought that take was really good," Jordan says, commenting on his own performance in front of the camera. "Are you guys going to be able to use any of it?"

No one is paying any attention to him. Everyone is run-

ning around, trying to figure out what happened. The production assistant is swearing at the camera operator.

“I told you we should’ve gone with the softbox,” she says. “These light banks throw a fuse every time in these crappy old buildings.”

“Excuse me,” I say, again and again, my voice rising in pitch and volume until finally I have the full attention of everyone present. Then I hold up the extension cord I’ve pulled from the wall outlet. “It wasn’t the fuse. It was me. I believe the appropriate phrase is . . . cut.”