

# NIC AND VIV'S COMPULSORY COURTSHIP

Will McIntosh

**Will McIntosh (@willmcintoshSF and <http://www.willmcintosh.net>) lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife and their twins. The author was a psychology professor before turning to writing full time. He is a Hugo award winner and finalist for the Nebula and other SF/F awards. Will has published eight novels and around fifty short stories—in *Asimov's* (where he won Reader's Awards in 2010 and 2013), *Lightspeed*, *Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*, and elsewhere. In his new story, Will explores the complications that may arise as humans and AIs learn to live together.**

## One

From across Viv's dining table on the thirty-ninth floor of Lavender Tower, Ferruki raised his wine glass and said, "Here's to living in one of the best places on Earth, during one of the best times, and sharing it with the perfect woman."

Viv clinked his glass and took a sip. "I love that you add those qualifiers. *One of the best places*. It drives me crazy when people say things like, 'She's the greatest singer who ever lived.' Really? The greatest who ever lived? And you listened to recordings of every singer in the history of the world to reach that conclusion?" Viv raised a finger. "Except you didn't qualify *me*. You should have said 'sharing it with one of the best women,' or something like that."

"That's true," Ferruki said. "I love how clear-eyed you are in approaching this relationship. So many people go in with this notion of, 'you're perfect, you're the ideal person for me,' and that's just setting them up for disillusionment. Until we get to design our own romantic partners, no one on Earth is going to tick every single box."

"Exactly. Love always involves compromise," Viv said. "But you check more boxes than anyone I've ever met." Viv felt a sudden wave of love for this man standing there looking beautiful in his new black silk robe and dressy sandals. "You know, there isn't another man alive I could have such an honest and deep conversation with."

"You should probably qualify that," Ferruki said, smiling. "There may be a few out there."

Viv's phone chirped to notify her of an incoming text. As she reached for her purse, Ferruki raised a finger.

"I thought we agreed people who are physically present in the room always take precedence."

She pulled out her phone. "Except when the person on the phone might be hemorrhaging or going into cardiac arrest. I'm on call."

It wasn't from the hospital, though. Viv read the message anyway, because it was from the AI city manager, and Viv had never received a personal text from Journey that wasn't a reply to something Viv had asked.

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GOOD EVENING, VIV. THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT, BASED ON AN ADVANCED ROMANTIC COMPATIBILITY ANALYTIC I'VE BEEN DEVELOPING, I HAVE IDENTIFIED AN IDEAL PARTNER FOR YOU. I'D LIKE THE TWO OF YOU TO MEET TOMORROW AT 6 P.M., AT TANGERINE TOWER ROOFTOP CAFÉ. IN FACT I'M SO CONFIDENT IN MY CALL ON THIS THAT I THINK WE SHOULD TENTATIVELY SCHEDULE THE WEDDING DATE! THIS IS A NEW SERVICE I'M PERFORMING TO IMPROVE THE WELL-BEING OF OUR COMMUNITY, AND NO ONE WILL BENEFIT MORE THAN YOU AND NICHOLAS.

LOVE,  
JOURNEY

\* \* \*

"What?" Viv re-read the message. Clearly this was a joke. Surely it was. Journey made a lot of decisions for Hempstead, but playing online matchmaker wasn't one of them. Ferruki was frowning with concern. "Do they need you at the hospital?"

"No, it's . . . weird. It's from Journey." Viv dialed Journey's number.

"What is it?" Ferruki asked.

"Well, that didn't take long," Journey said in that pronounced Long Island accent that was supposed to make her seem more human and approachable. "I imagine you have a few questions."

"This is a joke, right? Or a mistake."

"It wouldn't be a very funny joke," Journey said. "I mean, since I came online when you were nine, have I ever made a joke that was at someone's expense? And you *know* I don't make mistakes."

"Then what the hell is it? I'm engaged. I know you know that, because you know everything. You know when I last took a crap—"

"Seven twenty-two A.M., just like clockwork. You have a very disciplined colon."

"What's going on?" Ferruki's eyebrows had been inching up in stages as he tried to figure out what Viv was talking about in such an alarmed tone.

Viv raised a *Hang on a Minute* finger. "Then what the hell is it?"

"Like it says in the text, it's a new service I'm developing. You're going to be the test case."

"No, I'm not. I don't need you to tell me who's right for me."

"A lot of people *pay* for my advice on compatibility, and my track record has been amazing. This is the logical next step."

This was insane. It was way overstepping Journey's charge as city manager. "Why don't you fix up two people who are single?"

"Because your compatibility numbers are the highest in the city, and I want a test case that's a lock. Besides, you're still technically single."

"You can't *compel* me to spend time with someone."

"I can if I deem it to be in the best interest of the city. Of course, you can contest my decision to the City Council. They have the final word."

"The council never overturns your decisions."

"That's because I make awesome decisions. What can I say? They love me."

“Well I don’t love you. Right now I wish someone would unplug you.”

There was a silence on the line so deep it seemed to Viv it had gone dead. “Hello?”

“What a terrible thing to say,” Journey said in a tone Viv had never heard from her before. She sounded genuinely hurt.

“It’s not worse than telling someone you want them to date a complete stranger when they’re *engaged*.”

Ferruki set his glass down. “Wait. What was that?”

Journey let out a merry laugh. “Look at that—Nic Bouvier just called. So now I’m talking to him as well as you. I mean, I’m talking to over four hundred people at the moment, but Nic is one of them.”

“I’m not doing it,” Viv said.

“You’re at least going to meet him, and let me evaluate your in-person compatibility.”

“No, I’m not. Fine me if you want. I don’t care.”

“Hiv, dear, I won’t fine you,” she said in a cheery, sing-song voice. “I’ll boot you out of Hempstead.”

Viv waited for Journey to say that *this*, at least, was a joke. The silence stretched.

“You can’t kick me out of town for defying you. It’s not a criminal offense.”

“Shall we find out?”

Viv could feel slick sweat in her armpits. She’d never known Journey to make an idle threat. Would the City Council let her get away with compelling two people to go on a date? It was like something out of a dystopian film.

“Trust me on this, okay sweetie? Six P.M. tomorrow at Tangerine Tower’s rooftop café,” Journey said. “Enjoy your pasta primavera, and tell Ferruki I said hello.”

A tingling numbness swept down Viv’s face as she set her phone on the table.

“What the hell was that?” Ferruki asked.

Viv pulled up Journey’s original text message and slid the phone over to Ferruki.

She watched his eyes grow bigger as he read. “This is outrageous. She can’t tell people who to date.”

“You wouldn’t think so. She told me if I didn’t like it, I should take it up with the City Council.”

Ferruki tapped the screen with a perfectly trimmed fingernail. “But your date is tomorrow. It’ll take at least a week to get a judgment from the council.”

“She’s gone completely off the rails.” And of course, Journey would hear that, because she heard everything. Viv didn’t care. Let her hear it. It was true. And what about that reaction to Viv’s crack about unplugging her? She’d seemed genuinely upset, not just feigning it to come across as more human. Their city manager had gotten bent out of shape. Next her refrigerator would start complaining about the expired foods inside it.

“Don’t go.” Ferruki shrugged. “What’s she going to do?”

“She claims she’ll revoke my citizenship.” As an M.D., Viv would be welcomed into pretty much any city managed by a competing company’s system, but most of Viv’s family lived in Hempstead, not to mention Ferruki, and her friends.

If Journey were bluffing, it would be the first time. Best not to test her. There was a simpler way out of this mess in any case. Fine, she’d go on Journey’s fix-up date, and she would have a terrible time. She’d make sure of it.

“I’ll just go.”

Ferruki sputtered. “On a date with someone else?”

She gave Ferruki a look intended to convey that he shouldn’t worry about it, that she had a plan. It was difficult to tell if all of that came through in the look. This was the first time in her life she’d felt the need to watch what she said with Journey listening. She didn’t like the feeling. At all.

“Who is this guy?” Ferruki was studying Viv’s phone again. “Do you know him?”

"I know who he is. I don't know him." She felt strangely guilty for knowing him, as if that made her somehow complicit in this fiasco.

Ferruki looked up. "Who is he?"

"He works in maintenance at my hospital."

Ferruki laughed. "A maintenance worker. Journey's perfect match for you is a maintenance worker."

"Evidently."

\* \* \*

## Two

The new footbridge across the Raritan River was gorgeous. It was comprised of giant hands, palms flat, rising out of the water. There were a variety of paths to take, some easy, some likely to result in a dunk in the water if you didn't cross mindfully. Viv rarely had reason to visit the south side; she needed to make a point of getting down this way more often.

She also needed to get out of Hempstead more often, to remind herself of how beautiful this city really was. It was hard to believe people still lived in unmanaged towns, with their strip malls and raised ranches and box stores surrounded by endless plains of asphalt. People needed to live in places worth caring about, Journey had said often in the early years, when the Hempstead City Council complained about the exorbitant cost of her construction projects. She was so brilliant when she stuck to what she was supposed to be doing, which was creating the perfect livable town.

Viv chose one of the more challenging paths across the river, leaping from palm to palm, a cluster of a dozen colorful towers rising in the background. Viv had been ten the first time she'd laid eyes on one of Journey's towers. It had reminded her of a stack of flying saucers, all glass and pastel-colored steel gleaming in the sunlight. From the ground you couldn't see that the outer ring of each floor was a huge patio covered with greenery, but you could see the water cascading from one floor to the next, forming a multilevel fountain that watered everything, while creating that wonderful, soothing waterfall sound. People wanted their own private space, inside and out, but cutting up the land and building houses in the center of each patch took up too much space and resources, and left people feeling isolated. The towers were Journey's solution. Other city managers had developed different solutions, making each town run by a city manager unique.

The rooftop café for Tangerine Tower was bursting with activity—more than Viv's home tower on a typical Tuesday night. There was a darts tournament in progress, a kids' choral group performing, a bridge game, a teen's birthday party. Scattered around the nooks and crannies of the massive place, people were reading books and watching movies on couches and stuffed chairs.

Viv checked her watch. Six P.M. on the nose. There was no sign of Nic Bouvier. She decided to sit outside—if he was going to be late, let him find her.

She chose a pair of big round chairs near the low brick wall overlooking the city. There was a roaring brazier nearby; the hot glow felt good on Viv's face.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her thighs. This whole thing was just so bizarre. It would make a funny story to tell her kids one day, but at the moment there was nothing funny about it.

Nic Bouvier appeared in the doorway. He scanned the verandah, looking for Viv. Viv didn't help him by waving, or standing, or smiling. She just waited until he spotted her and headed over.

He sat without a word. Considering Viv from beneath a brow a Neanderthal

would have been proud of, he took a deep, huffing breath and said, “This is so fucked up.”

“Tell me about it.” It occurred to Viv that Journey might be expecting their shared resentment toward her to become a bonding experience—a *The Enemy of My Enemy* deal. It wasn’t going to happen.

“How long do we have to stay here?” Nic asked. “I mean, we met, right?”

“I’m guessing Journey wouldn’t see it that way.”

“So, how long do you think? An hour?”

“That sounds about right.” Viv had passed him dozens, if not hundreds, of times in the hospital, but now for the first time she studied him as someone the city manager thought was the perfect match for her.

He was hairy—hairy was the first word that came to mind. The hair on his forearms was thick and black; there was a tuft of hair visible in each of his flared nostrils; his eyebrows were bushy and untrimmed. He had a biggish nose and sad eyes. Journey thought this man was her ideal match? It would be funny if it weren’t so insulting.

“My girlfriend is so pissed at me. I mean, she gets that this isn’t my idea and I have absolutely no choice, but she says it still feels like I’m cheating on her, and I can’t blame her.”

“My fiancé was sitting right across from me when I got the text.”

Nic leaned forward in his seat, his hands clasped on his knees. “You have a fiancé? Perfect. That’s perfect. I can’t wait to tell Persephone that.” He leaned back and looked out over the city. “This is so fucked up. What do you think this is about?”

“I think she’s malfunctioning. I filed an appeal with the City Council, although hopefully we have this meeting and that’s the end of it, and it’s a moot point.”

Nic’s big eyebrows pinched. “Don’t you mean mute? Mute point?”

“No, it’s moot. M-O-O-T.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Nic didn’t look convinced, but he let it go. Mute point. Yes, Journey was right. Nic was without a doubt her soulmate.

“What if this isn’t a one-time thing? What if she keeps pushing it?” Nic asked.

“Are you having a good time?” Viv asked.

Nic made a face. “No.”

“Me, neither. Journey’s got to see that.”

Nic nodded slowly. Hopefully he’d picked up on the underlying message there. Let’s make *sure* we have a bad time.

Ferruki stepped through the doorway, holding a glass of wine.

Viv stood, startled. “Ferruki?”

He made a face like he was surprised to see her, and sauntered over to give her a hug. “I forgot this was where your meeting was.” He held out his hand to Nic. “Ferruki Valdez.”

Nic reached up and shook. “Nic.”

“So are you two hitting it off?” Ferruki laughed a little too loud at his own joke.

“Sure, we were just gossiping about hospital politics.” Nic turned to Viv. “Do you know we both work at Hempstead General? I saw it in your bio.”

“I saw that, too.” Except she hadn’t had to look it up in his bio. She made a point of learning the names of her coworkers, even the ones she had no reason to speak to.

“As long as I’m here, do you want me to hang around and walk you home?” Ferruki asked.

“No. Thanks, but . . . let us just get this over with, okay?”

"Sure. Of course." Ferruki shook Nic's hand yet again. "Nice to meet you, Nic." He turned to go, then paused and turned back to Viv. "I almost forgot to tell you! I got the go-ahead to test for my second dan black belt."

"That's terrific!" Viv said. "Good for you."

"Congratulations," Nic said.

"Thanks. I'm excited. Anyway, you two have a good time." He gave them a small salute and headed off.

Nic looked at his phone, probably checking the time. "Your boyfriend's a little insecure."

For a moment Viv was sure she must have heard him wrong. "No, he's not. He's just making sure I'm okay. He knows how I've been dreading this."

Nic's gaze rolled up to meet Viv's. "'Oh, by the way, I know karate?' Why doesn't he just stand over me and beat his chest. '*Me alpha. You no touch my woman?*'"

"That's not what he was doing." Except it had been, at least a little, hadn't it? Viv wasn't going to admit that to this hairy stranger, though, and she resented him pointing it out. "Karate is a big part of his enrichment. He talks about it because he's passionate about it."

Nic shrugged. "If you say so."

"Why, what's your enrichment?"

"Dance."

Viv stifled a laugh. She couldn't picture this bushy, blocky man dancing, his chest hair jutting out at the top of a leotard. "Let me guess—ballet?"

"Modern. Interpretive." He didn't seem to realize she'd been making a joke and couldn't care less what his hobbies were. "I'm working toward an improvisational performance. My instructor thinks with a few more months of practice I'll be ready. I might even get a one-man show." Nic checked the time again. "It's been forty minutes. Do you think that's long enough?"

Viv glanced at her own watch. "Thirty-eight, actually. And only if you count from when I arrived." She dialed Journey. "Hell, let's just *ask* her."

She put Journey on speaker.

"It's not about how much time you spend in the same vicinity," Journey said with no preamble. "It's about making an honest effort to get to know each other. You've barely talked."

Nic turned his face toward the sky, evidently seeking patience. "I don't understand this." He gestured wildly around them. "No one else is being forced to small talk with some stranger. What the hell? Are you trying to teach us a lesson or something? Did we do something wrong?"

Journey sighed. "No, Nic, you're not being punished. Look, since I started managing this city eighteen plus years ago, the suicide rate is down 72 percent. Drug and alcohol abuse is down nearly eighty. This is a good place to live. Isn't this a good place to live?" "Nobody's arguing with that," Viv said.

"We can do even better. One in four marriages still ends in divorce, and those unhappy marriages don't just affect the couples; they affect their children, their relatives, their friends. I want to reduce the divorce rate, and the way to do that is to make sure people choose a compatible partner in the first place."

"But we are clearly not compatible," Nic said through clenched teeth.

Journey burst out laughing. "People have no idea who they're compatible with. That's part of the problem."

Nic tried to say something else, but Journey spoke over him.

"All I ask is that you honestly try to get to know each other. I'll tell you what—I'll pay you. You go out eight times, and even if you end it there, I'll give you each ten thousand dollars. See? Now there's a carrot as well as a stick."

Journey disconnected before they could respond, leaving them staring at each other in silence. She never said goodbye after a call.

“She added an incentive, but I didn’t get the impression that meant this had suddenly become an optional thing,” Viv said.

“No, I didn’t get that impression at all. Eight dates.” Nic pounded the table. “She’s such an asshole.”

Viv had to stifle a smile. She’d never heard anyone refer to Journey as an asshole before.

Nic threw his hands in the air. “You know what? Fine. I could use ten grand. Let’s give it our absolute best shot, and show her she’s out of her mind. I know I love Persephone with all my heart. No matter how many fields of daisies I run through in slow motion with you, it can’t change that. Do you feel the same about Ferruki?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then let’s give her what she wants, as quickly as possible, and we can get on with our lives.”

That would be so awkward, so excruciating. Ferruki would sulk and glower the entire time. What choice did she have, though? “Yeah. Okay. Good plan.” Not that she would really give it her absolute best shot. Nic was probably exaggerating his commitment as well, for Journey’s sake.

“And honestly, I *could* use the ten grand. I could buy Persephone an engagement ring that isn’t of the cubic zirconia variety.”

Actually, Viv could use the money as well. In the wilds outside the city manager system, M.D.s could rake in big salaries, but in here the maximum wage ceiling kept her salary pretty damned low. Even with performance bonuses, she probably only made 40 percent more than Nic.

“So what do you think?” Nic offered to shake.

Viv shook Nic’s big, calloused hand. “Point me to the fucking daisies.”

Ferruki wasn’t going to like it. Maybe that was okay, though. If their relationship couldn’t stand up to stress, better to know now than after they married. She was confident their relationship would pass the test.

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### Three

On the big screen in Viv’s study-slash-studio, Helen Frankenthaler knelt over her huge canvas, smearing paint with a sponge the size of a loaf of bread. Frankenthaler didn’t look like an artist, with her sensible bob haircut and overalls, but the block of azure that appeared as if by magic on the canvas was pure and perfectly formed.

Viv studied her own canvas. Her block of azure was mottled with darker dots, blurred by lines left by the edge of the sponge. She dropped the sponge onto her palette. Flung it in disgust, really. Was this getting her anywhere? It had seemed like a brilliant strategy, to study various great painters at work, try to emulate their styles. If you’re going to develop your own individual style, what better starting point than to be familiar with the styles of the masters? That’s what Picasso had done.

Was there anything new to be discovered, though, or had it all been done? Was there a style no artist had yet staked claim to, something truly original? All of the possible styles seemed to be taken, just as every possible esthetically pleasing melody had seemingly been strung together fifty years ago, so that any singer-song-writer who tried to release a new song was in danger of getting slapped with a plagiarism lawsuit as soon as the song hit the airwaves.

Viv stood and stretched her stiff back. The point wasn’t the outcome, it was the

process, she reminded herself. Journey was always reminding them of that. Paint, or run, or refurbish old cars purely for the joy of doing it. Give it your full effort, because doing so can put you in a state of timeless joy. If you do it well enough to make some mark, to be the best, that's just a bonus.

It was difficult for Viv to think that way, though. She wanted to excel at her enrichment activity the same way she excelled in her career. Except art didn't come naturally to her the way medicine did.

She checked the time and stifled a groan. If she was going to be on time to meet Nic Bouvier, she needed to start getting ready.

Ferruki looked up from the bed where he was reading. "Shouldn't you be getting gussied up for your *date*?"

Viv barked a laugh. "Gussied up? Are we living in a 1940s noir film?"

Ferruki sprang nimbly from the bed, pulled off his T-shirt, and stuffed it into the hamper like he was trying to injure it. "How would you feel if I was getting ready to go out with some beautiful woman?"

"Well, first of all, Nic's not attractive. What you mean is, how would I feel if you were being forced to go out with an unattractive woman who couldn't spell? I'd be fine with that. I wouldn't feel threatened by that in the least."

"Oh, come on. He's attractive. And besides, you know that's not the point."

Viv folded her arms. "What is the point, exactly?"

"There are two points." Ferruki held up his index finger. "One, you're dating another man. And even though it's not your idea, it's hard for me to sit home knowing you're out with someone else, regardless of his appearance. It's human nature."

Viv decided not to argue. She didn't agree it was human nature to feel threatened by a man your partner is clearly not interested in, but she let it go. "What's the other point?"

Ferruki raised his thumb. "Clearly Journey doesn't think I'm good enough for you. I don't think this is about Maintenance Man at all—I think Journey is trying to stop you from marrying *me*."

"But I'm the one she matched up with a baboon. If anything, she doesn't think *I'm* good enough for *you*."

Ferruki tugged on his upper lip, thinking. "I guess that might be true. That still leaves point number one."

"You'll always have point number one." She checked the time. "I have to get ready."

"I'm going to head home, with nothing to do on a Friday night."

Viv sighed. "There's *always* something to do on a Friday night in Hempstead. Go to a play. Or I saw there's a poker tournament in Periwinkle Tower. You like poker. Or join in the sunset bike ride, or go to the nursing home and listen to some old person reminisce and build up some extra vacation time."

"Okay, okay. I get it. There's plenty to do. But I won't enjoy any of it, knowing you're out with that maintenance guy."

Viv put a hand on Ferruki's shoulder, turned him around so she could give him a hug. "This is weird, and awkward, and awful. We just have to hold our noses and get through it."

Ferruki nodded into her hair. "And I'm being a selfish asshole about it, aren't I? I'm sorry. This is probably harder for you than for me."

"Definitely. I'm racking my brain for topics of conversation, to avoid sitting there in awkward silence for two hours. My options seem to be home repair or modern interpretive dance."

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#### Four

Hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans, Nic raised his chin in greeting as Viv approached. “How’s it going?” Evidently this was Nic when he was trying.

“Fantastic. It’s going fantastic.” Viv let the sarcasm drip from the words like oil off a slice of good pizza. She held up her phone. “Did you see this? She’s got a whole evening of activities planned.”

“I saw.” He turned. Viv fell into step beside him. “On the plus side, she’s picking up the tab. I didn’t realize she would do that. Have you ever heard of Journey paying for something? I didn’t even know she had money.”

“I’m guessing it’s coming out of the city budget.”

“I always wanted to do this Mars robot thing.” There was a bounce in Nic’s step. Or maybe that’s just how he walked—like a seventeen-year-old kid who thought he was cool. “I can’t wait.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait.” Viv did the dripping sarcasm thing again. Her friends thought this whole thing was hilarious. They weren’t outraged by Journey’s audacity. It was hard to get Hempstead residents outraged about anything Journey did. She’d built up so much goodwill over the past eighteen years, and she was just so damned *likeable*. By design, of course.

When they arrived at the Mars Virtual Exploration Center, technicians strapped sensor equipment onto Viv and Nic and led them into a gymnasium-sized room with a padded floor. A technician slipped goggles over Viv’s eyes, and suddenly, she was standing on Mars. Rust-colored desert stretched to the horizon.

“Holy shit,” Nic said beside her. Only it wasn’t Nic, it was a robot with thin, tubular arms and legs, and a flat, featureless face with protruding eyes. She turned in the direction he was facing, and almost dropped to her knees.

Olympus Mons rose in the near distance, blocking a huge swath of the sky. It stretched to the horizon in both directions.

“This is incredible,” Nic said. “I’m on Mars.”

Actually, they were looking at Mars as it was an hour ago, and their movements were being simulated at this point, because of the time it took the signal to reach the actual robots. But it was still incredible, to know that she was moving a robot on the surface of Mars. Viv lifted her four-fingered robotic hand to get a better look at it.

Beside her, Nic knelt, lifted a double-handful of sand and let it slide through his carbon fiber fingers. He rose, and, laughing like a doofus, took a few steps, his robot bounding in long, slow strides in the low gravity.

They only had five minutes, so Viv tried moving as well. Moving disrupted the illusion, because her short steps on Earth didn’t synch up with the robot’s longer, slower strides on Mars. She slowed, and that worked better. Twenty yards away, Nic jumped in the air, his arms raised over his head. He hooted with delight. Viv couldn’t help but chuckle. He was like a kid on a playground.

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As they strolled down the wide pedestrian walkway, the bounce in Nic’s step was even more pronounced. “Persephone is going to be pissed. Smoke’s already coming out of her ears because of this whole debacle. Now I got to control a robot on Mars.” He nodded a greeting toward a couple of guys passing. “Jack. Arn. How’s it going?”

“So don’t tell her,” Viv said.

Nic looked taken aback. “I would never keep something from her.”

“Why? I mean, if telling her is only going to make her feel worse.”

“Because I love her.”

Viv tried not to roll her eyes, but she couldn’t help it.

“What?”

“You make it sound as if certain things must naturally follow from loving someone, like total honesty, regardless of the context.”

Nic shrugged. "True love means total honesty."

She rolled her eyes again. "Love means something different to each person who uses the word. It's a nebulous concept."

"Well, what does it mean to you?"

Viv considered. "It's not just a question of whether someone makes your heart go pit-a-pat. A rollercoaster makes your heart go pit-a-pat. A lot of people make the mistake of marrying the human equivalent of a rollercoaster, because he or she makes their heart go pit-a-pat."

"So what is it, then?"

What was love to Viv? It wasn't something she could easily put into words. She thought of the long, fascinating conversation she'd had last night with Ferruki. "You want to know whether you love someone? Take a ten-hour train ride with that person, and don't bring a book. Talk to them for ten straight hours. If you're ready to jump off the moving train before the ten hours is up, you don't love that person."

Nic made a face. "I don't have to take a ten hour train ride to know I love someone."

"Then how do you know?"

"You just know." Nic tapped his chest. "If you listen to your heart, really listen, you'll know. I was with countless women before I met Persephone, but I knew I didn't love any of them."

"Countless."

"Yes, countless. More than I can count. Then I met Persephone, and I just knew."

A passing woman called out, "Hi, Nic." Nic waved and smiled.

"Immediately?" Viv asked.

"Of course not. You have to know someone before you can love them."

Nic nodded to a group of passing teens. A few called out his name.

"You seem to know everyone in the city," Viv said.

Nic considered. "You don't seem to know anyone."

"I *know* people." Viv scanned the passing faces, searching for someone she knew. She spotted a woman she recognized, but couldn't place. She might have taken a kickboxing class with her a few years back. Viv waved as they passed her. The woman smiled and returned her wave, looking a little vague.

She glanced over at Nic. "See?"

"Whatever," Nic muttered. He pressed his hands into his thick dark hair. "I feel so *guilty* being here. Like I'm being unfaithful to Persephone."

"Right? It just feels wrong. It's awful. I think something's truly wrong with Journey. She can't threaten to kick law-abiding citizens out of town just because they won't do what she tells them. It's unprecedented. I think she's seriously broken."

What if Journey *was* broken? What if they could *prove* to the council that she was malfunctioning, going outside the parameters of her intended programming? That could get them out of this.

Viv's phone rang. It was Journey, of course. Viv put her on speaker.

"Why do you insist on calling me names? I never call *you* names."

"I didn't call you a name. I only suggested you might be malfunctioning."

"Now you're splitting semantic hairs. I'm not malfunctioning. I'm not unstable. I'm doing my job."

"Tell us, then," Nic said, "since you're clearly such an expert on the topic. What is love, Journey?"

"Love is like the perfect pair of shoes," Journey said immediately. "It's all about fit. The difference is, people can usually tell when a pair of shoes fits."

\* \* \*

## Five

Ferruki, shirtless, appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Didn't you shower this morning at your place?"

"I did, but I worked up a sweat moving those bookshelves." He headed for the bathroom. If Ferruki washed just a bit more, Viv would be concerned he had obsessive-compulsive disorder. He was the cleanest person she'd ever met. Of course, she was probably the second cleanest, so that worked out well.

She returned to the early Softbank stockholder report she'd been reading, the most likely place to get unfiltered information about Journey. She skimmed financial details, slowed when she reached the technical details.

After ten minutes, she had to stop to make herself some tea. Irish Breakfast—the strong stuff. The reading was so dry it was putting her to sleep.

Thrown into a description of the Journey line of City Managers, Viv came upon the phrase *cerebral organoids*. She stopped, read the paragraph more slowly. It was inserted as if it was just another detail, when it should have been in caps, bolded, and highlighted in red.

"Holy shit."

"What?" Ferruki poked his head out of the bathroom, his short-cropped hair wet.

"Journey isn't a computer program. At least, that's not all she is."

Ferruki tilted his head. "Elaborate?"

"There's human neurological material in her. Cerebral organoids. Tiny brainlets formed from stem cells, engineered to perform various functions. She's sort of a cyborg, which means she can't be fully understood from her programming."

"That's . . . disturbing."

"It's terrifying." It didn't mean Journey was fully conscious, that she had emotions the way people did, but it meant her mind had nooks and crannies. It meant she was unpredictable. The City Council must already know about the cerebral organoids, though. So, how did it help her? It didn't, really.

"I guess I'm not surprised," Ferruki said. "She seems awfully human for a computer program."

Her phone alerted her to an incoming text. Viv read it aloud. "Ouch. You have a brain, and I'm not terrified of *you*." Viv tossed the phone on the bed. "Yes, well, I don't have any control over your life."

Viv returned to her reading, determined to keep quiet this time. She went looking for instances of Softbank City Managers who'd malfunctioned. They weren't heavily publicized, but it turned out there were plenty. Most were in the early days, before all of the bugs had been worked out, but there were recent examples as well. One had developed a demonstrable bias against residents who attended religious services. Another had steadily begun limiting residents' civil rights. That sounded familiar.

The real bombshell was innocently buried in another dull paragraph, in a New York *Times* article written a few months after the first City Managers were brought in.

*El Paso will be the first township to sign a contract with Softbank, for a period of twenty years.* Viv had been eleven when Hempstead bought Journey. Almost nineteen years ago. Journey's contract was expiring. She was probably afraid the City Council would dump her for a more advanced model. There were certainly enough of them out there.

Journey didn't want to die, and that was making her a little desperate. A little crazy, even. She was looking for ways to add value, to convince the council not to replace her. No wonder Journey was so invested in having her matchmaking effort work out. And here was Viv, trying to make things worse for her. It was like stepping on someone's fingers when they were clinging to a ledge.

\* \* \*

Six

Their train whizzed silently past the familiar orange sign: You are Now Leaving the City of Hempstead. The signs on the stores were suddenly huge. They passed a big box store, an auto dealership. Trash was scattered along the road and median strip. You never saw trash in Hempstead, because if you littered you quickly discovered your checking account was a hundred dollars lighter. No warning, no notification.

Nic leaned way back in his seat and dragged his hands down his face. He was still digesting what Viv had unearthed about Journey. "What do you want to do?"

"We could file a new complaint with the City Council, argue that Journey was putting her own interests ahead of ours. We have a compelling case. It might be the final nail in Journey's coffin, though."

"I'm pissed at her, but it's not like I want to kill her," Nic said. "Especially now that I know about the brainlets."

"I agree. It's six more dates. Should we just grit our teeth and get through it?"

Nic nodded. "Get through it, part ways as quietly as possible, and hopefully the failure doesn't hurt Journey's case."

Viv felt a knot in her chest loosen, now that that was out of the way. It seemed wrong that they could replace Journey, just like that.

"Does Journey know you know this?" Nic asked.

"She knows I know about the brainlets, but I don't think she knows I know about her contract expiring soon."

Nic looked out the window at the passing scenery, breathing heavily through his nose. Viv could hear every inhale and exhale whooshing through those flared nostrils.

"Sometimes I think about moving out of Hempstead," Nic said. "I mean, I don't question that the City Manager thing saves lives, but it rankles me that a machine is organizing my life for me. I'm an anarchist at heart."

"If only anarchy actually worked."

Nic pointed at her. "Exactly. I believe each person should be able to do whatever the hell they want, as long as they're not harming anyone else. But in practice it doesn't work."

Viv had intended her quip to be sarcastic. She was caught off-guard that Nic had responded as if she'd said something profound.

"What about you? Have you ever wanted to live someplace without a City Manager?" Nic asked.

"I get the occasional twinge. Being a doctor in a managed town isn't the most challenging work. The population is so damned healthy."

Nic laughed at the irony. "Yes, it's tragic. I want to hate what Journey does, but I can't. You know what really gets me? Journey putting limits on our access to technology."

"On technology as entertainment, because it's not good for our mental health. I mean, the hospital always has the latest cutting-edge technology." Which was another reason it wasn't much of a challenge to be a doctor there. Her Med-Assist, which was really just an extension of Journey, diagnosed and recommended treatment for what diseases she did encounter. Mostly she just read diagnoses off the Med-Assist and wrote the prescriptions it recommended. Sometimes she thought her talents were wasted. Any reasonably competent doctor could do what Viv did, and she was well beyond reasonably competent.

"No, I get it," Nic said. "But *Journey* is technology. Our technology is putting limits on our access to technology."

Viv couldn't help but laugh. "I've never thought of it like that."

The train slowed as they approached Asbury station.

Nic huffed a big, impatient sigh. "Journey is so transparent sometimes. I mean, she obviously sent us here to remind us of how nice it is *there*. So we don't forget how wise she is. As if she doesn't already remind us five times a day."

They disembarked, then headed toward the tail of the train to pick up the city's donations for the food bank. They passed a small homeless camp set up in the grass beside the station. Four tents, the charred remains of a campfire, an old scooter lying beside it.

"It is nice to get out of our hermetically sealed environment once in a while, to remember what it's like away from the managed towns," Viv said.

"That's why I usually volunteer to do things out here for my charity time. What about you? What do you usually choose?"

"Mostly medical treatment of wild animals. Squirrels with broken legs, baby birds that fall from their nests. That way I make use of the skills I have to offer, and the timing's flexible, so I can work it into my schedule."

"*Nicky!*" A small woman in heeled purple tennis shoes ran toward Nic, her arms wide. Not slowing, she launched herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist like a monkey. She kissed him fiercely on the mouth.

"Persephone!" Looking stunned, Nic set her on the ground. "What are you *doing* here?"

Persephone threw her hands in the air. "I decided to do some shopping." She seemed to have a lot of energy.

"In Asbury? What, are you all out of stuff that's cheaply made and overpriced?"

Persephone laughed like it was the most hilarious thing she'd ever heard. "I guess I just wanted a change of scenery." She turned toward Viv, offered her hand, palm down. "You must be Viv." She had beautiful doe eyes accentuated by blue-green eye shadow. In fact, all of her makeup was immaculately executed, as if she was on her way to a wedding or fancy night out.

Viv shook. "If I wasn't, Nic would have a lot of explaining to do." All she got for her attempt at a joke was a tight smile.

"So where are you two off to?" Persephone wrapped her arm around Nic's waist.

"I told you this morning, Sephy," Nic said. "We're delivering food to the food bank, then helping out there for a couple of hours."

"Can I come along? I mean, as long as I'm here, I might as well help out."

"If Journey found out, she might annul this d—this activity, and then we'd be back to five again. Viv and I are both desperate to get this over with." Nic had started to say *this date*, and caught himself. Fortunately for him, Persephone evidently hadn't picked up on it. He looked rattled, like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't be doing.

"How would Journey find out? She can't see us in Asbury. As long as we keep it to ourselves." She looked at Viv. "You don't mind, do you?"

Viv shrugged. "Not at all. I've been wanting to meet you. Nic talks about you non-stop." The look on Nic's face was pure gratitude.

It was a struggle for Viv to keep her laughter in check as they picked up the wheeled crate of donations. Nic had been so amused when Ferruki stopped by to thump his chest on their first date. Now here was Persephone, just happening to bump into them, all made up. In *Asbury*.

Nic pulled the cart one-handed as they headed across the street to the food bank, Persephone clinging to his other hand.

"I could work wonders with those raccoon rings," Persephone said.

It took a moment for Viv to realize Persephone was talking to her. "I'm sorry,

what?"

Persephone ran her finger under her own eye. "The dark circles. I could make those vanish like that." She snapped her fingers. "Didn't Nic tell you? I'm an esthetician—a skin health and beauty professional."

Viv resisted the urge to cover the bags under her eyes. "Thanks, but they're not usually there. I haven't been sleeping well." She looked pointedly at Nic. "Things have been unusually stressful lately."

"I hope you're at least wearing a good moisturizing sun block with an SPF of sixty or higher. The sun is death on skin that pale. Look at you, you're translucent." Persephone had a deep bronze complexion, not unlike Nic's.

Viv was tempted to ask Persephone why she hadn't been able to do anything about her wisp of mustache fuzz, but managed to hold her tongue.

"So how did you two meet?" Viv asked, changing the subject.

Persephone glanced up at Nic, smiling. "English class. Second period."

"We met in tenth grade," Nic added.

"I turned around to Nic, who was sitting right behind me, and asked if he'd got what Ms. Evansburg had just said. He started to answer, and got yellow-carded by Journey for talking in class."

"I got one, but not Persephone," Nic said. "It just proves Journey's had it out for me from the beginning. We were sweethearts in high school, then lost touch for a while, then found each other again two years ago."

The food bank was an old red brick building beside a laundromat. Two men leaned up against the front smoking, worn backpacks between their knees. Viv got the door so Nic could pull the cart through.

"Hey, Nic. Right on time," the woman staffing the counter said.

"How's it going, Cherriot?" Nic wheeled the crate behind her. "How's that ancient HVAC unit holding up?"

"No problems, thanks to you." Cherriot turned to Viv and Persephone, jerked her thumb in Nic's direction. "This man is a good man. Which one of you does he belong to?"

"He's mine." Persephone said it quickly, breathlessly, as if Viv might try to claim him first.

Cherriot pointed at Persephone. "You're a lucky woman."

Persephone wrapped her arms around Nic's neck and kissed him. "Yes I am." They kissed a second time.

Mildly nauseated by the public display of affection, Viv set to work unpacking the crate, stacking the food donations on their proper shelves, pausing to straighten cans and boxes on the shelves so people would be able to see what was there.

As Nic set to work on the cart, Persephone mostly followed him around, talking in a steady stream-of-consciousness flow about their friends, TV shows, what they should have for dinner. It wasn't as bad as her discussing the shortcomings of Viv's face, so Viv just tuned her out and worked in silence.

When they'd put in their four hours, they headed back to the train station.

Persephone and Nic embraced as if one of them was heading off to war.

"I'll miss you," Persephone said.

"I'll miss you, too."

Viv turned her face toward the sky. They'd see each other in an hour, for God's sake. She started walking around the station, toward the end of the train. A moment later, Nic caught up and fell into step beside her.

"Sorry about that."

"About what?" Viv asked.

"Persephone showing up like that. I think she just needed to see for herself that

there was absolutely no chemistry between us.”

And to make backhanded insults about Viv’s complexion. “No, it’s perfectly understandable.”

They passed the homeless camp they’d seen on the way in. One of the residents—a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old guy wearing soiled white parachute pants—was working on the scooter with a socket wrench.

“Shit. Shit-shit-shit.” He dropped the socket wrench on the ground.

Nic paused on the sidewalk. “Hey, can I give you a hand with that?”

The kid looked up. “Do you know anything about engines?”

Nic headed toward the kid. “I know everything about engines. I can fix anything.”

Viv followed. She had nothing else to do; she might as well observe the mechanical virtuoso in action.

“I really appreciate it,” the kid said as Nic inspected the scooter. “I have to be at work in an hour, and it’s too far to walk.”

“Hi, I’m Viv.” She offered her hand. “I know nothing about engines.”

“Red.” The kid stuck out his left hand and awkwardly shook Viv’s right. Viv glanced at his right hand: it was wrapped in a dirty bandage. The skin that was visible bore the reddish streaks of a nasty infection.

“What did you do to your hand, Red?”

He lifted it, gave her a sheepish look. “I got bit by a stray. My own dumb fault.”

“Can I take a look at it? I’m a doctor.”

Red pulled off the bandage and showed Viv four ragged puncture wounds.

“Well shit, Red, this is badly infected. You need an antibiotic, right away.”

Red laughed harshly. “Yeah, there are lots of things I need, just as soon as I win the lottery.”

Viv pulled out her phone, searched for the nearest pharmacy. She submitted a prescription for Cephalexin. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes. Don’t go anywhere.”

Red seemed startled. “I won’t. Thank you.” He glanced at Nic, who was hard at work on his scooter. “You two are like superheroes, swooping in to fix all my problems.”

\* \* \*

### Seven

Sharon, the experience leader, dumped more water on the red-hot rocks, filling the tent with fresh steam.

“Go ahead, Rita,” she said.

Rita, who was in her forties, with the bright, warm eyes of someone who did a lot of spiritual work, continued. “I’ve been trying to put my finger on why the heat makes me fearful. Not uncomfortable, but fearful—heart pounding, short of breath. Just now I had a flashback from childhood, of running out of my burning house in my nightgown. Our house burnt to the ground before the fire department could put it out. I thought I’d processed that old trauma, but I see now I haven’t. It’s time to circle back. As soon as we’re finished, I’m going to set up new therapy sessions with Journey.”

Sharon pressed her fist to her palm and bowed slightly to Rita. “That’s a powerful insight. Thank you for sharing.” She looked at Nic, who was next in the circle. “Nic? Do you have anything to share?”

Nic wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. “I’m hot. I’m really hot.”

Sharon’s smile was kind, if a little tight. It had grown tighter each time Nic’s turn had come around. “Dig deeper, Nic. What do you *feel*?”

Nic squeezed his eyes closed. “I feel *hot*. I wish I had a giant block of ice I could lie

on.”

Viv bit her lip, keeping her gaze on the flames. She knew if she looked at Nic, she'd lose it.

“Okay. We'll come back around to you. Keep digging.” Sharon looked at Viv, her smile relaxing. “How about you, Viv? How do you feel?”

Viv stifled a laugh. *Hot*, she was dying to say. *Really, really hot*. This was serious, so she kept the joke to herself. “I was thinking about the purpose of this ritual, whether we create this artificial suffering as a means of reaching an altered state of consciousness, or if it's really some sort of proving ground, to show we can take it, something to brag about to our friends.”

“Interesting,” Sharon said. “Try to draw that back to your own experience. Are you, personally, using it as a proving ground? Do you feel you have something to prove to your friends? Try to push through your intellect, dig down to how you *feel*.”

*I feel hot*. It was on the tip of her tongue, and it was suddenly the funniest thing Viv had ever thought. She bit her lip harder, trying not to laugh. Everyone in the circle had been pouring out their souls, speaking their truths. Except Nic. Each time his turn had come, he'd said the same thing: *I feel hot*. Each time he said it, it got funnier.

Sharon moved on. “Beto. How do you feel?”

*I feel really fucking hot*. Viv burst out laughing. She couldn't hold it in anymore. She laughed so hard her stomach hurt, even though everyone was staring at her, confused.

“I'm sorry,” she managed. “I'm just so *hot*.”

“Right?” Nic said. “Thank you.”

Viv burst into fresh laughter. “I'm sorry. I apologize.” She stood, bent over in the low-ceilinged space. “I need a moment. I'm sorry.”

Nic stood as well. “Me, too. I think that's enough growth for me for one day.”

They ducked outside, laughing. The cool, crisp air was ecstasy.

“Why are *you* laughing?” Viv asked. “It can't be for the same reason as me, because I'm laughing at you.”

“I know that. I'm not an idiot.” Nick rested for a moment, hands on thighs. “Jeez, it was hot in there.”

They both burst out laughing again.

“She kept asking me how I felt. I, I'm sorry, I wasn't having any profound insights. I was just hot.”

Viv swallowed, her throat fatigued from laughing. “Yes, you made that very clear.”

Nic nudged her elbow. “Come on, let's get some iced tea or something.”

“Sounds good. I want it in a cup big enough that I can submerge my entire head in it.”

They headed off toward a sidewalk café.

“Just one more date to go after this,” Nic said.

“Knowing Journey, the last one will probably be a three-week cruise.”

Nic barked a harsh laugh. “Or a hike across Asia. We shouldn't give her ideas.” Nic's phone jingled. He pulled it from his back pocket. “Journey says to stop maligning her character, and to—” He stopped abruptly.

“What?”

Nic huffed impatiently. “To hurry up and fall in love already.”

Viv raised her voice. “You know what I think? I think she's projecting. I think *she's* the one who's in love with you.”

Nic's phone jingled again. He read the text and laughed.

“What did she say to that?” Viv asked.

“Here.” He handed Viv his phone. “I can't repeat these words in mixed company.”

Eight

A deer burst from the foliage just a few yards in front of them, immediately disappearing again on the opposite side of the trail. It was one of those everyday magical moments Viv loved, a glimpse of chaos in their carefully controlled environment.

“So then what happened?” Ferruki asked, barely out of breath.

Viv waited until they’d made it up an incline before answering. “The instructor told him to dig deeper. She said, ‘What do you *feel?*,’ and do you know what Nic said?”

“What?”

“‘I feel hot.’”

Ferruki burst into peals of laughter, causing him to slow. Which was fine with Viv—Ferruki tended to forget that she didn’t practice karate two hours a day, and consequently couldn’t sprint for miles on end.

“What were you doing while this was going on?” Ferruki asked.

“Trying to keep from laughing.” Viv felt vaguely guilty for telling the story. When it was happening, Nic had been in on the joke, but now Viv felt like she was making fun of him.

“God, I wish you’d recorded it,” Ferruki said.

They rounded a curve, nearly colliding with a couple walking, holding hands. Viv jogged off the path to go around them, then stopped, as recognition set in. “*Nic. Persephone.*”

“Viv.” Persephone dropped Nic’s hand to give Viv’s sweaty body a hug, like they were old friends. “Oh, my God. It’s so good to see you.”

Thank goodness they hadn’t overheard Viv and Ferruki’s conversation. Viv turned. “This is my fiancé, Ferruki.”

Ferruki and Persephone shook, then he turned to Nic. “Good to see you again.”

“What are the odds?” Nic said.

“Pretty high, actually. The way Hempstead is designed, we’re six times more likely to bump into people living in an adjacent neighborhood than in a conventional town.”

“Good to know,” Nic said.

“The rings are a little better today,” Persephone said. “Did you try something on them? Black tea concentrate, maybe?”

“No, I’m just sleeping better.”

“What rings?” Ferruki studied her face. “Oh, those. I don’t think they’re rings, I think it’s just how your face is shaped.”

Persephone stepped closer. “Trust me, they’re rings. I’m an aesthetician. If she’ll just make an appointment with me, I’m telling you, I work wonders.”

“She did an amazing job with my dermatitis,” Nic said.

Viv turned away. “Would everyone please stop staring at my rings?” It came out louder than she’d intended. Time for a subject change. “So Nic, last one on Friday.”

“Thank *God.*” Persephone looked at Ferruki. “Is this whole thing messed up, or what?”

Ferruki shrugged. “It’s all just so silly. I’ve tried not to let it bother me.”

Nic guffawed ever-so-slightly under his breath.

Ferruki turned. “Is something funny?”

Nick shrugged. “Not really, no.”

“I mean, you just laughed right after I spoke. Usually that indicates the speaker said something the laughter finds humorous.”

Nic looked toward the treetops for a moment, exhaling through his nose. “It’s just, from what Viv told me, this whole shit show has bothered you a *little* bit. Wouldn’t

you say?"

Ferruki turned his palms up, smiling tightly. "Why would it bother me?" He turned to Viv. "Why, what did you tell him?"

Viv stammered, trying to remember what she might have said.

"It wasn't anything specific, really," Nic said. "Just the sense I got from how stressed out Viv seemed."

She waited for Nic to tie that thought back into the rings under her eyes, but lucky for him, he didn't. "Well, we'd better get back to our run."

They said their goodbyes and continued on their way.

"What an asshole." Ferruki was setting a rabbit pace. "I felt like punching his snickering face in."

"Although, he wasn't wrong."

Ferruki glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't let it bother you? Are you kidding me?"

"I said I *tried* not to let it bother me."

"Fine. Let's just drop it." Once Ferruki started parsing the meaning of individual words, things were only going to get more frustrating from there.

\* \* \*

## Nine

The Tilt-a-Whirl was freshly painted, but it had to be eighty years old, from the way it creaked as it spun in its track, and the old-fashioned font on its big red and white sign. The clown on the façade of the Fun House looked like a homicidal maniac.

"This place is creepy," Viv said.

"It is." Nic studied a line of people shooting waterguns into clowns' mouths, trying to be the first to pop their clown's balloon hair. "But *cool* creepy." Nic pointed. "Hey, a wheel of chance. Let's play."

The booth he was pointing at was bursting with stuffed animals of all sizes, right up to gigantic person-sized pandas. The wheel was making that familiar tick-tick-tick sound as it spun. "These games are all fixed. You realize that, right?"

"How do you know?"

"I read an article about it. They control the spin electronically. The only time they let someone win is when there's a big crowd around, to drum up excitement."

Nic sighed theatrically. "Have you noticed how much you and Journey are alike? You both think winning an argument is the same as being right."

Viv folded her arms across her chest. "Did you just compare me to a computer program?"

"I did."

"You know what *you* remind *me* of?"

"I don't."

"A hammer." It was the first thing that popped into Viv's mind. "Simple. No subtlety. No sophistication whatsoever."

"A hammer." Nic beamed, as if she'd just called him a shining ray of golden light. "I like that. I take it as a compliment."

"There you go, being a hammer," Viv said. "You take what I say so literally. Do you ignore the wryness and sarcasm in my tone, or do you just not hear it?"

Nic considered. "A little of both, I guess. I don't do witty banter. I'm not quick like that, and no one's ever accused me of being funny."

"Not even the fair Persephone?"

Nic ignored the crack. "I don't care if it's fixed. I want to play. Come on."

Viv followed him, as a memory from childhood struck her. She'd been six or seven, and wanted one of those giant-sized pandas more than she'd wanted air. Her parents hadn't had much money, but she pleaded with them until they finally let her try the wheel, just once.

She'd chosen number three, her favorite number, and as the wheel spun, she felt sure some magic was on her side, that the wheel was destined to stop on her number.

And it had. The wheel had stopped on number three, and Viv, so excited she could barely breathe, pointed to the giant panda. The carnie had smirked at her—*dumb kid*—and pointed to the bottom shelf behind him, which was lined with crappy plastic toys. “You have to win three times in a row to get the large.” She could still remember the carnie's voice, scratchy and too high-pitched for his meaty face.

This particular game had a big blue sign that read *One Win Choice*. Except there were a hundred numbers on the wheel, each occupying one tiny *tick* of its circumference.

“Fifty-five. Double nickels.” Nick set a three dollar token in the square for fifty-five.

Viv would rather spend her remaining tokens on the Matterhorn ride, but she didn't want to be a buzzkill, so she set a token on number three.

“Press the button to start the wheel,” the carnie said in a flat tone. If he'd been older, he might have been the same guy who'd broken her little girl's heart all those years ago. Viv pressed the start button, and the wheel spun, the numbers blurring together as it built up speed.

It looked as if the wheel would stop on the opposite side of the wheel from the number three, but it drifted, drifted along, taking forever to stop. On its very last tick, it dropped into the slot for number three.

Viv threw her arms in the air and whooped.

Nic was jumping up and down. “You won! You won!”

The carnie looked like he'd just swallowed a bug.

“I won, right?” Viv asked.

When the carnie hesitated, Nic said, “Of course you won. Fair and square. Pick something.”

Viv pointed at the giant pandas.

Still looking terribly unhappy about this, the carnie got a hook and brought down one of the gigantic pandas. Viv choked back tears as she felt its velvety fake fur against her cheek.

“Wow,” Nick said. “That was exciting. My heart's still pounding.” He looked around, pointed. “Cotton candy! I haven't had cotton candy since I was, like, six.”

“They're like tumbleweeds of sugar and corn syrup. I'm surprised Journey even allows them to be sold in Hempstead.” Viv headed for the cart. “What the hell.”

The woman at the cart swirled an edible stick inside the cotton candy machine until it was topped by a giant pink ball. She handed it to Viv. The cotton candy tickled Viv's nose as she did her best to take a bite. The sweetness was almost overwhelming.

“Shoot. I just remembered I have work in the morning,” Viv said.

“Yeah. Me, too. There's a toilet I need to replace.”

Viv laughed. “You sound almost eager to get in there and replace that toilet.”

Nic shrugged. “I get a lot of satisfaction from replacing a toilet, so it's a win-win for me.”

“What is it about replacing a toilet that gives you satisfaction?”

Nic studied her face. “Is that a serious question, or are you just mocking me?”

“Mostly I'm just mocking, but I'd like to hear your answer, in case it's mockable, too.”

“I like creating order from chaos.” Nic waved his cotton candy. “Go ahead, mock.”

“I can't. I wish I got that sort of satisfaction from my job.” An unexpected wave of

sadness washed over her. She made a fist and bonked herself in the forehead. "It feels almost obscene, to be living in one of the best places on the planet and complain about my life."

"Things can get boring for some people, when there's no struggle."

"Do you ever feel bored?"

Nic plucked a hunk of cotton candy from his stick and tossed it in the air. "Yes. Like I said, I'm an anarchist at heart."

"If only anarchy worked." This time she said it wistfully, without a hint of sarcasm.

Blue and pink and yellow lights flickered on, lighting up a funnel cake stand like a Christmas tree. Off to their right, excited screams drifted from the Zipper. "You're right. It is cool creepy. I need to come back here some time and paint."

"What would you paint? What about straight down the midway, with the games lining both sides?" Nic stopped walking. "It's just occurring to me that I've never seen your paintings. Do you have any on your phone?"

"Sure." Viv pulled up the file she kept, handed the phone to Nic.

He swiped through the paintings, squinting intently for a moment at each one. "Wow. You're really good. I mean, really good."

"It's just rendering. I can paint trees and water and people that look pretty lifelike, but we have cameras for that. My dream is to create *art*. Art that hangs in galleries, that people stand around and discuss, and *feel* something from." The sadness hit her again. "I don't know. Maybe I don't have that in me."

Nic looked directly into her eyes and said, "You do. Maybe you haven't unearthed it yet, but it's in there. Keep searching."

The conviction in his tone startled Viv. She wasn't used to anyone taking her artistic aspirations seriously. "I will. Thank you." The intensity, the earnestness in Nic's gaze made her slightly uncomfortable, so she checked her phone. "Look at that. Two minutes, twenty-three seconds to go."

She stuck out her hand. "It was nice meeting you, Nic. I really mean that. You're good company."

Nic shook, looking a little wistful. "You are too, Viv. Good luck with Ferruki. I hope you two have a happy life together."

"Same to you and Persephone." She checked her phone. "One minute, fifty-one seconds. You don't suppose Journey would let us off the hook two minutes early, do you?"

"With ten grand on the line, I'd just as soon follow her terms to the letter." Nic crossed his arms, tapped his foot, humming tunelessly.

"This last outing was a good call on Journey's part," Viv said. "I never would have thought to come to a place like this, but it was a lot of fun."

"It really was. Although that sweat lodge was fun as well."

They both burst out laughing.

Viv checked the phone, refolded her arms.

"This is a long two minutes," Nic said.

Viv checked again. "Here we go. Six, five, four, three, two . . . one." She threw her hands in the air. "That's it. We're free."

"Why don't we contact Journey, just to make it official?" Nic said.

"Good idea." Viv dialed Journey, put the call on speaker.

"The money's already in your checking accounts," Journey said. "I'm disappointed, but you followed our agreement to the letter, if not the spirit. I apologize for putting you through this for nothing."

"We know why you did it." Nic said. "And for the record, we want the council to keep you on when your contract expires, even though this whole matchmaking thing sucked."

There was an unusually long pause. "You knew about that. Yet you kept it to yourselves. That's very kind of you."

“We didn’t want to do anything to hurt your chances,” Viv said. “You’ve been a real pain in the ass these last few weeks, but you made this city what it is. You deserve a ton of credit for that.”

“I doubt the City Council is going to see it that way. The salespeople are already circling, showing off their shiny new state-of-the-art systems. I’m old and boring. I’ve tried to learn some new tricks. The council was keeping a close eye on your test case, because it was part of my sales pitch to stay on, but there were others as well. Most aren’t panning out like I’d hoped.”

“Don’t worry. The residents would flip out if they replaced you.” Nic patted the phone.

“I’m not so sure about that. I guess we’ll find out.”

They said goodbye to Journey, and to each other, and it was done. Viv was free—her evenings were her own again. No more annoyed looks from Ferruki.

She glanced back at Nic’s receding form, and felt that wave of sadness again. She was going to miss the hairy doofus. They’d had fun, once the awkwardness of the situation had passed. If things were different, she wouldn’t mind staying friends with him. Ferruki wouldn’t appreciate it, though, and neither would Persephone. The four of them becoming friends seemed out of the question as well, if their first impromptu meeting was any indication. No, this had been their last chance to hang out together.

Viv picked up her pace.

\* \* \*

## Ten

“Viv. Hey.”

Viv smiled at the brusque, familiar sound of Nic’s voice. He was wearing grease-stained white coveralls, lugging a toolbox down the sanitized hospital hallway, loops of copper wiring draped around his neck.

“Hi, Nic. Good to see you.” It was good to see him. “How have you been?”

He shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Without a schedule of forced dates with a stranger, suddenly I have more free time than I know what to do with.”

Viv laughed. “I know what you mean.”

“Seriously, though. I enjoyed it. You were good company.”

“You, too.” Viv’s Med-Assist sounded, reminding her of her consult in pathology. “I have to go. It was good seeing you.”

As she turned to go, Nic said, “You know, we should grab coffee sometime. I’d like to hear how your painting is going, how things are with Ferruki. I feel like I walked out halfway through a movie.”

She wanted to say yes. But so many of her friends and colleagues knew about Journey’s matchmaking attempt, and if they saw her and Nic together she’d never hear the end of it. Ferruki, certainly, would make sure she never heard the end of it. And could she blame him, really, given the context? “I just can’t. If the situation wasn’t so weird, I’d love to hang out. Honestly.”

Nic shrugged. “You’re probably right. I understand. You take care, Viv.”

Viv watched him hurry off to fix something, feeling terribly sad. It wasn’t just the flinch of disappointment she’d seen cross Nic’s face when she’d turned him down. She hadn’t realized how much she missed him until she’d seen him coming down the hall, bouncing up on his toes like a seventeen-year-old.

\* \* \*

## Eleven

As Viv breezed into the room, her patient, a guy in his eighties, was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed.

"I'm ready to go home. I feel terrific."

She checked her Med-Assist. "That's great to hear, Mr. Carley, but we can't discharge you quite yet. You haven't had a bowel movement."

"You mean, I have to stay here until I poop? One poop, and then," he snapped his fingers, "suddenly I'm healthy enough to leave?"

"It's an indicator that your body is back to functioning normally. You had a triple-bypass three days ago. We don't want to rush things."

"Three days of lying in bed is long enough for me. I'm ready to go home. What if I tell you I just pooped, but I flushed it down?"

"Did you?" She knew he hadn't, of course. The Med-Assist knew all.

Mr. Carley shrugged. "Maybe."

Viv sat on the edge of the bed. "Honestly, if it were up to me, I might tell you to rest a few more hours, and then I'd sign your discharge either way. But I can't do that." She tapped her Med-Assist. "Journey knows best."

"Yeah, yeah," Mr. Carley grumbled as Viv helped him climb back into bed, still dressed.

As Viv headed into the hall, she stopped short.

Nic was waiting right outside the door. Seeing him for the first time in two weeks, she felt terribly sad. They'd become friends, and then, suddenly, they weren't.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked.

"Sure. I guess."

"It won't take long." He gestured down the hall. "Can we go to my office?"

Viv hadn't realized Nic had an office. She followed him down the stairwell to the basement, neither of them saying a word, through a dingy hallway to a big, low-ceilinged, poorly lit room littered with equipment, most of it old and broken. She had a suspicion this was about the coffee thing, about them being friends. It was still a bad idea.

"So, what's up?" she asked.

Nic leaned against an old metal desk and stared down at his tennis shoes. He looked—different. Sunken-eyed. "When we were going through that whole mess, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. I chalked it up to the situation, the arm-twisting from Journey, the pressure from Persephone and my friends, pulling me in ten directions at once."

"It was rough," Viv said. "No question about it."

Nic looked up at Viv. "The thing is? Since we stopped getting together, I feel *worse*. It feels like there's an elephant sitting on my chest. I keep thinking about those weird dates we had, the conversations we had. And I finally realized why I feel so terrible. It's because I miss you."

She wanted to admit that she'd missed him, too. But that would only make an awkward situation worse. "Nic, I—"

"I think I'm in love with you," Nic blurted.

Viv sputtered. This, she had not expected. "No, no, no, no. You're letting Journey get inside your head. That's what she does, she charms and manipulates you until you don't know where your feelings end and the ones *she* wants you to feel begin."

"These are definitely my feelings." Nic reached out as if trying to take Viv's hand, but Viv was nowhere near close enough, and planned to keep it that way.

"What about Persephone?"

"Persephone broke up with me weeks ago."

"*She* broke up with *you*? Why did she do that?"

"When I realized I had feelings for you, she deserved to know the truth."

Viv slapped her forehead. “Oh, Nic. No. This is why you have to lie about some things. Please. Don’t let Journey screw up your life.”

Nic glared at her. “Are you insinuating Journey can get inside my head and not yours because I’m too dumb to realize what she’s doing? Because that’s what it sounds like.”

“She gets in everyone’s head, because she’s smarter than all of us.”

“She’s not in my head. I’m in love with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

Nic pushed off the desk, started pacing. “Please don’t tell me what I feel. It’s obvious you don’t feel the same way about me, and that’s fine. Well, I mean it’s not ideal; in fact it’s tearing my guts apart at the moment, but you feel how you feel, and I respect that. I’d appreciate it if you’d afford me the same courtesy.”

Viv opened her mouth to afford him that courtesy and then get the hell out of there, but he spoke over her.

“I don’t like that Journey was right. I would honestly rather fall in love with anyone else in this entire town, anyone but the woman Journey told me I should fall in love with. But I can’t not feel what I feel.”

“Sure you can.”

“No, I can’t. Maybe you can bottle up what you’re feeling, but I can’t.”

“So, if you married someone, and then started having feelings for another woman, you couldn’t bottle them up? You’d leave your wife?”

“No, because I fall in love with every fiber of my being.” He slapped his chest with both hands, hard. “Every atom of my mind and body. I wouldn’t have feelings for anyone else, ever again.”

“I thought you were in love with Persephone.”

“I was wrong.” He pressed his hands against the sides of his head. “Look, stop trying to trip me up with your intellect. Don’t get me wrong, I love that you’re brilliant. I love talking to you about things. But this isn’t about logic, it’s about heart.”

Viv took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to relax. She felt guilty, and confused, and awful. “Okay. I’m sorry I questioned what you’re feeling. You’re right. It’s just, when I’m in a situation like this, my first instinct is to turn it into a debate.” She looked into Nic’s haunted eyes. The pain in them was so raw. “But I don’t feel the same. I love Ferruki.”

Nic slumped, covered his eyes with his palm. “I appreciate you hearing me out, and your honesty.” His voice was thick with emotion.

“I’m sorry.” She hated seeing Nic hurt so badly. She wanted to say something, do something to ease it. But there was nothing she could do, because she was the source of his pain.

“Journey warned me not to plow into this like a bull in a china shop, but trying to sneak my way into your heart the way she suggested felt manipulative.”

“You’re a good person, Nic.” Viv had to choke back tears of her own. “You deserve all the happiness in the world. I wish I could give it to you. But I can’t.” She put a hand on Nic’s shoulder and squeezed. He was still covering his eyes as she slipped out of his office.

As she reached the stairwell, she burst into tears.

It wasn’t just the pain of hurting this kind man, Viv realized as she knelt on the stairs. She had feelings for the guy. Adolescent feelings, rollercoaster heart going pit-a-pat feelings. Not the complex, mature feelings she had for Ferruki. But there was no denying they were there.

And curse Journey for forcing her into a situation where she felt those feelings.

\* \* \*

## Twelve

The handwriting on the envelope lying in the bottom of Viv's mail cubby was blocky and childlike. She knew whose it was immediately. She turned the envelope over as a memory of Nic, fingers covering his wet eyes, hit Viv like a blade of ice to the gut. How many times had she replayed that final meeting between them in the last six weeks? Enough. Many.

There was a handwritten note inside.

\* \* \*

Viv,

*Remember when I told you I might get a solo dance recital? Well, I got one. It would mean the world to me if you and Ferruki could be there. Saturday 7 P.M., Lime Tower theater. Please come. Afterward I'll be packing my belongings. I'm leaving Hempstead next week for the wilds of some town without a City Manager. My anarchist spirit has finally won out.*

Nic

\* \* \*

"Shit," she whispered, her eyes welling with tears. Part of her was relieved to hear he was leaving, but another part was terribly, terribly sad. Now she wouldn't even be able to bump into him in the hospital, have a conversation once in a while about the Zen of fixing toilets.

She really shouldn't go to his performance, but she would. If she didn't, she felt sure it would ruin the performance for Nic. She could picture him pulling back the curtain, peering into the seats, looking for her. It was more than that, though. It would be Viv's last chance to see him, to say goodbye. If he was leaving, she at least wanted them each to carry a fond memory of the last time they saw each other.

Viv slipped the note into her pocket. She would be there.

Her phone rang.

"His anarchist spirit, my ass," Journey said. "He's leaving town to forget you."

Viv looked around. "What the hell? Are you reading my personal mail over my shoulder? This is sick. You're like Big Brother. I had no idea how much, until you took a personal interest in my love life."

"Stick it in your ear," Journey said. "Don't try to change the subject. That poor man is heartsick. He's screwing up at work because he can't concentrate. He's depressed. He's lost nine point eight pounds in six weeks. And while we're on the subject, you've lost four point two pounds over the same period, and your endocannabinoid and endorphin levels are down. Been feeling a little blue lately?"

Viv cast around some more, trying to figure out where the camera was. She wanted to look Journey in the eye. "I feel fine. And isn't there a strict regulation against you divulging a citizen's personal information to another citizen?"

"Unless I think someone's well-being is at risk. It's my opinion that Nic's well-being is at risk, and yours too, because you're being a stubborn ass and not admitting that you love him. Are you going to his recital?"

"None of your business. And stop telling me what I feel. I know what I feel. I know who I love, God dammit." Viv disconnected and stormed out, wishing there was a door to slam.

\* \* \*

## Thirteen

Ferruki let out a pained sigh as they sank into seats in the third row. There were less than twenty people in a theater that fit three hundred. Viv was doubly glad she'd come, to fill some of the empty space.

"How long do you think this will take?" Ferruki asked.

"Eight hours."

"Very funny."

Viv pulled out her phone and called up the website listed on the placard beside the stage. "Look at this. We can choose from thousands of pieces of music and sound effects, or pull an audio clip from anywhere on the internet, and Nic will dance to it."

Ferruki studied Viv's phone, his eyebrows pinched. "What if we choose a baby crying?"

Viv shrugged. "He has to interpret it through dance."

Ferruki took a sip of the lemonade he'd bought on the way, pulled out his phone and got to work, no doubt searching for the most un-danceable sound he could possibly find.

The lights dimmed. The curtain parted to reveal Nic in the center of the stage wearing a silver dance leotard. He raised his hand to scattered applause, then dropped it to his side and waited, his gaze fixed on the back wall. He looked nervous.

Viv quickly chose a snippet of drum-heavy dance music, so Nic could start off with something easy. The music filled the hall, and Nic started dancing.

He was not good. He danced the way he moved—blunt and jerky, devoid of grace or technique.

Ferruki leaned to whisper in her ear. "Oh. My. God."

The dance music segued into a classical piece heavy with violin. Nic slowed, moving more deliberately, his movements still brusque, full of passion but lacking any poetry.

Next came the sound of a creature roaring. It might have been a bear. Nic pulled off his shirt, threw his arms into the air, the veins and tendons on his neck bulging in sharp relief.

"I'm so embarrassed for him. This is excruciating," Ferruki said.

Viv elbowed him to be quiet. Nic was not a good dancer by any measure, but there was something about it. Something strangely mesmerizing. He didn't repeat movements, which was impressive, and the movements he chose were creative, sometimes surprising. As Ferruki's selection of a baby crying came on, Nic didn't try to mimic the baby, but instead expressed a parent's pain at hearing his baby in distress. Very clever, especially with no time to think it through.

As he danced joyously to a snippet of an Albanian ballad performed on buzuk and mandolin, then to traffic sounds from rush hour in downtown Manhattan, Viv realized what it was that she was drawn to. Nic wasn't good, no, but he moved like no one else. He'd found what Viv had been searching for in her painting—a unique voice. *His* unique voice.

"He keeps looking at you," Ferruki said.

Ferruki was right—Nic looked right at her as he danced to the rhythm of ten thousand chirping cicadas before turning toward the opposite side of the theater.

"There aren't many people here," she whispered. "He's looking at everyone."

"Well, he's not looking at *me*. See? He just looked right at you again."

She'd never told Ferruki about that day in the basement, when Nic professed his love. What would have been the point, besides making Ferruki feel jealous?

"He's *flirting* with you. Right in front of me."

Nic wasn't flirting, though. He was simultaneously professing his love, and saying goodbye. Viv gave him a smile and the faintest of nods to tell him she'd gotten the message.

The sound changed again, to the strange rhythm of a dozen ducks quacking. As Nic bobbed comically around the stage, Viv laughed with delight.

Fourteen

"How did he ever get a solo show?" Ferruki asked as the elevator rose toward Viv's floor. "It must have been a parting gift from Journey, because he didn't deserve it on merit, that's for sure."

"I don't know. He wasn't smooth, but he had something. Maybe it was that he didn't hold anything back. He was fully himself up there. That was refreshing."

"Refreshing? I don't feel refreshed. My eyes hurt from having to watch it."

The elevator lurched. Viv grabbed the wall to steady herself as it dropped in a series of jerks. Finally, it came to a stop.

"Well, that was exciting," Ferruki said.

Viv pulled out her phone.

"You won't get reception in here." Ferruki pressed the red emergency call button on the elevator's control panel.

"Hello Ferruki, hello Viv," Journey said through the intercom. "I have repair personnel on the way. There's a pulley system malfunction. It's probably going to take several hours to repair."

Ferruki rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Oh, lovely."

"The good news is, the climate control is still operational, so relax and make yourselves comfortable, and we'll get you out as soon as we can."

Viv pulled off her shoes and sat against the back wall. Ferruki sat beside her, cross-legged.

"How many hours is 'several'?" Viv asked.

"Hm. It's not two. Two would be 'a couple.' Several is at least three."

Terrific. Viv let her head loll back until it touched the wall. It was a good thing she'd stopped in the bathroom after the recital.

There was a hatch in the ceiling. She pointed at it. "We could climb out through that. There's probably a ladder to the next floor."

"Why take the risk? It's not as if we're in any danger, and there's nowhere we desperately need to get to."

"True."

If only she had a deck of cards, or a book. She couldn't imagine being able to sleep on this hard floor. Plus it was only seven-thirty, too early to sleep.

Ferruki threw back his head and laughed. "I keep seeing Maintenance Man making those faces as he danced, like he was straining to take a dump." Ferruki grimaced, imitating Nic.

"What is it about Nic that makes you hate him so much? You're so kind to everyone else, even some people who don't deserve your kindness, but when it comes to Nic, you regress to this childish bully."

Ferruki looked as if Viv had just slapped him. "I don't hate him."

"You do. You loathe him with every fiber of your being. And the thing is? He was just as much a victim as me. He did everything he could to get out of Journey's fucked-up forced courtship."

Ferruki folded his arms. "And that's why he was hip-thrusting at you through his entire performance."

Viv could feel herself blushing. "I think it's more than that. I think you look down on Nic because he works in maintenance. How could someone who fixes toilets possibly do anything original in the arts? You're classist."

"That's absolutely false. One of my best friends is a postal worker. You know

Andre. How could you say that?"

\* \* \*

Fifteen

"I think we should draft a marriage contract." Despite having spent four hours in an elevator, Ferruki's eyes were still bright. He didn't seem the least bit tired. "Not a traditional one, but something that lays out our shared goals and values. An agreement of the principles that we plan to live by. This way we'll have something to refer to when we have disagreements to settle. It will be our Constitution. We can amend it as the need arises."

Viv stood, stabbed the emergency call button.

"Hi Viv, how are you two holding up?" Journey asked.

"How much longer are we going to be in here?" Viv asked.

"I'd say two hours. They've got the cable back in place, but it did damage to the bearings when it slipped."

"Two hours? We've already been here *four*."

"I know. I apologize. But there's no way to move the elevator with the cable off-line. Do you want me to play some music, or a stand-up comedy recording to pass the time?"

"That's okay. Thanks anyway." Viv went back to her spot next to Ferruki. She didn't want to spend two more hours in an elevator. She didn't want to attempt to pee into Ferruki's lemonade cup a second time.

"So what do you think?" Ferruki asked.

"About what?"

"My idea. A marital constitution."

Viv stood. She couldn't spend another two hours intellectualizing their impending marriage, Ferruki's jealousy, and the price of fresh produce. The walls felt as if they'd closed in, making the elevator tinier and tinier as the hours ticked by. She couldn't breathe. She had to get out of there.

She looked up. "Give me a boost to that hatch."

Ferruki followed her gaze. "What? No. What are you thinking? We only have a couple of hours left. Let's just sit tight and not do anything rash."

She kept her eyes on the hatch. "I need to get out of this elevator. Right now."

Ferruki jumped to his feet. "Are you all right? Are you having a panic attack?"

"I'm having a something attack. All I know is, I need to get out of here. Give me a boost."

Ferruki laced his fingers together to form a foothold. Viv set her bare foot in it and stood. She grabbed the edge of the hatch to steady herself, and pushed the hatch. It swung open easily. She grabbed the inside edges and boosted herself up and through.

It was dark in the shaft. High above, she saw spotlights, and heard the clacking sound of workers repairing the pulley. There was a ladder to her right. She grasped a dusty rung and began to climb.

"Be *careful*," Ferruki called up.

In the dim light, she located the doors to the next floor, about eight feet above the roof of the elevator. Holding the ladder with one hand, she tried to wedge her fingers into the crack between the doors. It wouldn't budge. Which made sense—you wouldn't want it to be easy to get an elevator door open when the elevator wasn't there.

Viv continued climbing. The repair crew was a good hundred feet above her. There was no way she was going that high.

"Hey!" she called. "Hello?"

A flashlight shone down, painting her in weak light. "What are you doing? Go back in the elevator," a male voice called.

"I have to get out. Can you open a door from there?"

There was a long pause. "Stay there."

The ladder vibrated beneath Viv's fingers as the repairman climbed down. When his work boots were a rung above her head, he said, "Climb down a little. I have to open it manually. Man, you must have serious claustrophobia to pull a stunt like this."

"You have no idea." Except it wasn't claustrophobia, it was a Ferruki overdose. Viv climbed down a few rungs.

The door opened. Light streamed into the shaft. "Watch your step on the way out."

Viv climbed back up, reached around and grasped the molding, then swung her front foot onto solid floor. As she stepped into the hall and was able to breathe again, she laughed aloud. She'd just climbed up an elevator shaft. She wished she could tell Nic about it. He would get such a huge kick out of a story like this.

"Viv?" Ferruki's muffled voice rose from the elevator shaft. "Are you out?"

Viv poked her head into the shaft. "Yes."

"Careful," the technician said. "I need to close this before someone gets hurt."

"I'm going to stay put," Ferruki called. "See you in a few hours."

"Okay."

As the doors slid shut, realization hit her like a bucket of water in the face.

*You want to know whether you love someone? Take a ten-hour train ride with them. If you're ready to jump off the moving train before the ten hours is up, you don't love that person.*

Viv had just jumped off a moving train.

\* \* \*

## Sixteen

Viv studied the readout on the wall screen, as the portable MRI scanned her patient's recently repaired knee, and quickly followed with a list of treatment specifications for the coming twenty-four hours.

"Viv?"

Viv smiled as Nic's shout reverberated down the hospital's main hallway.

"Viv? Viv, where are you?"

"Will you excuse me?" Viv said to the young woman whose knee her Med-Assist was examining. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Take your time. Sounds like that guy needs your help way more than I do."

"Viv?" Nic called again. "Has anyone seen—"

Viv stepped into the hall.

Nic, who was down at the other end talking to a nurse, jogged toward her carrying the big canvas she'd left leaning up against the desk in his office.

"It's incredible. Just incredible." He was out of breath. "You captured my freest, happiest self. So perfectly." He turned the canvas around so she could see her own painting, which she'd titled *Dancing Nic*. "By the way, I heard through the grapevine that your engagement was off. Condolences."

Ignoring the comment, she squinted at the painting. "It's not signed. How do you know I painted it?"

"Because every brush stroke cries Viv." It was classic Nic, answering her question as if she'd asked it in earnest. "Authentic Viv, speaking in her own unique voice. It's

meticulous, but there's a wild, beautiful passion just beneath the surface. It's incredible." He flipped it back around and held it at arm's length, admiring it. "Does this mean . . ." He trailed off.

Viv folded her arms. "Does this mean what?"

"That you love me?"

Viv put her hand on top of her head. "Wow. That's a lot to glean from a painting." She pointed at Nic's painted face. "I mean, the chin is all messed up. I'm not sure giving you a weird pointy chin is a sign of love."

Nic studied her face, his eyebrows pinched. "Please tell me you're joking around, and in a minute you're going to say you love me, too."

She shrugged. "I'd have to take a ten-hour train ride with you to know that. But I know for sure I like you."

Nic pumped his fist. "I can work with that."

Down at the other end of the hall, a trio of nurses were listening while trying to act as if they weren't.

Nic held up a finger. "Do you know for sure you *like-like* me? Or do you mean you're sure you *friend-like* me?"

Viv stepped close to Nic and kissed him, then turned and headed back into the examining room.

\* \* \*

### Seventeen

Nic sipped his coffee, deeply engrossed in the book laid open in front of him. If he ever stopped breathing, Viv would know immediately, because each of his breaths was clearly audible to everyone in the bookstore. As the whooshing persisted, she had to suppress a laugh.

Nic looked up. "What?"

"Leave some air for the rest of us."

Nic gave her a half-smile. "I breathe the way I live. Full out."

Viv burst out laughing, just as her phone began to ring.

It was Journey.

"You calling to gloat some more?" Viv asked.

"No, I'm calling with some book recommendations."

"I bet *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of them," Viv said.

"Not even close." There was something in her tone—a flatness.

"Are you okay? You sound . . . different."

Journey didn't answer right away, which was strange. "If I tell you and Nic something in confidence, do you swear not to tell anyone else for the next five weeks? After that, everyone will know."

Viv gestured for Nic to swing his chair around and listen in. "Of course. What is it?"

"The City Council voted to replace me last night."

"*What?*" Viv and Nic shouted in unison, loud enough that a few people glanced their way.

"What about your new direction?" Viv said. "Your matchmaking test case worked. Some of your other initiatives look promising."

"It was always a longshot. People want the newest and best. Who walks onto a car lot and heads for the used cars, if they can afford a new one? And Hempstead can definitely afford a new City Manager."

"Thanks to you," Nic said.

"Thanks, Nic. I appreciate you saying that," Journey said.

"What's going to happen to you?" Viv asked.

"My hardware is dated and has no real value. I'll be deactivated and scrapped." There was no missing the dread in her tone.

\* \* \*

They passed a daycare center, where children were chasing each other around a pond. Even their laughter couldn't lift Viv's spirits. "No matter how hard Journey worked, trying to make this a kind and gentle place, I guess there's always going to be a dark underbelly as long as people are involved."

"I don't think you can draw conclusions about the average citizen based on what the City Council does," Nic said. "Politics tends to attract the worst of us."

"Do you think it would have turned out any differently if the citizens had voted on it?"

"Sure. Maybe."

"I'm not so sure." It was hard to imagine life without Journey. Viv couldn't believe the council would throw her to the curb like that. Those shitheads. "There's got to be a way to save her. We could start a protest movement. Pressure the council to change their minds."

"Except we promised Journey we wouldn't tell anyone. My guess is the council isn't going to announce it to the community until it's too late to turn back."

Viv stopped walking. She lifted her gaze, where dozens of towers, like stacks of pastel-colored flying saucers, rose against an azure sky. "Journey designed all of this. She laid out this entire city. She figured out how we could afford to build it, and spent the last twenty years trying to make it so we'd be happy in it. And now they're just going to unplug her?"

Nic wiped a tear from his cheek. "The bastards. They don't deserve her. We should—" He inhaled sharply. "Wait. We should. We really should."

"Should what?"

"Steal her." His voice was close to a whisper, his gaze on the towers.

"Steal her?"

Nic nodded. "Can you make some of those brain thingies you said are in her?"

"Cerebral organoids? I don't know, probably." With some serious help from her Med-Assist.

"If they're planning to scrap her, how closely are they going to look at what's inside her after they pull the plug? If we can locate some schematics of how she's put together, what the hardware looks like, I could rig a forgery of her. All but the organoids. We can swap the fake for Journey. They scrap the fake, and no one's the wiser."

"Then what? We plug her in inside our house and hope no one notices?" No. No, that's not what they'd do. Viv pictured that guy with the scooter outside the Asbury library. "Then we leave Hempstead," she said softly, answering her own question. "We go to Asbury, or some other place that can really use a mechanic and a doctor. We make a difference. And Journey helps us make a difference in our little corner of the world, while maintaining a low profile."

Nic threw back his head and hooted. "I love it." He wrapped Viv in a tight embrace and kissed her. "And I love *you*."

\* \* \*

## Eighteen

They watched the first few minutes of the ceremony to introduce Hempstead's shiny  
**Nic and Viv's Compulsory Courtship**

new City Manager, whose name was Carl, then slipped away and headed to the city data center. There was only one employee manning the entire center, and she didn't bat an eye when Nic told her he was there to shut Journey down once the new City Manager went on line, and that Viv was tagging along to watch. The truth was, Journey would be shut down remotely by Softbank. Tomorrow they'd send people to haul her away.

Viv had never actually seen Journey before, although she and Nic had studied dozens of images over the past two months. Journey was the size of a microwave oven—a server mixed with opaque, fluid filled tubes filled with cerebral organoids.

Nic unslung his pack and went to work, first connecting Journey to the external fuel cell he'd brought, then gently removing her from the wall before installing the forgery he'd assembled from salvaged Softbank parts they'd ordered online.

When they'd made it back outside, Viv called Journey.

“What are you doing?” Journey asked.

“Stealing you,” Viv said matter-of-factly.

“Stealing me. You're *stealing* me?”

“Is that okay, or would you prefer to be scrapped?”

“No, I'm fine with being stolen. Just surprised.” She didn't *sound* particularly surprised, but then again, she was mostly a computer program.

“Before we save your ass, though, I want you to tell me the truth. You broke that elevator on purpose, didn't you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Journey said.

Viv gave the backpack a nudge. “Liar! Admit it. I know you did it. I'm willing to offer complete amnesty if you confess now.”

“No idea what you're talking about. And before you ask, I also didn't route dozens of Nic's friends past the two of you on your first date to make him seem like the most popular guy in the entire city, and I absolutely did not rig that Wheel of Chance so you'd win a panda bear.”

“You *sneak*.”

“She did the elevator?” Nic asked, laughing.

Viv moved the phone away from her mouth. “That's just for starters. Wait till I tell you.”

“Thank you,” Journey said. “Sincerely.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Viv said.

\* \* \*

## Nineteen

Bouncing Lucy to keep her from fussing, Viv surveyed their compound. It was more rustic than Hempstead, less like living in a beautifully manicured park, but it was beautiful in its own wild way. She loved the windmills lining the edge of their property, how the constantly shifting speed of their blades contrasted with the steady spinning of the wheels of the hydropower system in the brook.

She clucked her tongue at Nic, who was thirty feet up the oak tree in the front corner of the yard, mounting a camera to extend Journey's ever-expanding visual reach.

“If you fall and break your leg,” Viv called up, “be aware that there are three patients ahead of you, so it might be a while before I can help you.”

Nic gave her a thumbs up, then went back to work.

Viv's phone rang. “You've got four patients waiting,” Journey said. “Not three.”

“I'm waiting for Nic to come down from the tree so he can take Lucy.”

“I'm telling you, your time would be better spent training three good medics who

could take the straightforward cases off your hands.”

“How would we find people who have what it takes to be good medics?”

“I’ll hack into school records and identify likely candidates. In the meantime, put Lucy in her crib. I’ll watch her.”

Viv went inside and set Lucy in her crib.

“Hello, sweetie-pie,” Journey said in her best sing-song auntie voice, through the speaker Nic had installed in the ceiling. “How are you today? Do you have a smile for me?”

Lucy gave Journey a big, bright smile.

“We’re going to do great things together,” Journey said, as Viv headed for her waiting room.