

# HOW TO END A LOVE STORY

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HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

This paperback edition published in 2024

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 71659 8  
ebook ISBN 978 1 399 71658 1

Typeset in Janson Text LT Std by Diahann Sturge

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

## Author's Note

This story contains on-the-page discussions of complicated grief, suicide loss, and the death of a sibling.

# One

All things considered, her little sister's funeral is a pretty boring affair.

Helen Zhang (the good one, the smart one, the *boring one*, according to Michelle, may she rest in peace) sits in the front row between her grieving parents. If Michelle were here, she would be snickering at something inappropriate, like the accidentally phallic floral arrangement draped over her closed casket. If Michelle were here, she'd be restlessly tapping her foot, anxious to sneak a cigarette in the bathroom, already plotting her escape to an afterparty. If Michelle were here—*it wouldn't be so fucking quiet.*

Helen's mother shakes with silent, rolling sobs and grips her surviving daughter's right hand so hard, Helen lost feeling in it during the pastor's welcome remarks. Her father stares at the wooden easel holding Michelle's sophomore-year photo. His gaze drifts first to the bland church window blinds (not for the first time, Helen wishes they were Catholic, for the vibes), then to the shoes of the pastor. Dad looks everywhere there isn't someone with a face to look back at him.

Helen used up all her own tears in the first forty-eight hours, shaking and crying alone in her room like some dumb wounded animal until her eyes were puffy slits, pondering existential questions too big to be captured in pathetic words. The well has dried up, and all that's left is a growing pit of resentment that

threatens to swallow her whole. She hates the pastor's trite remarks trying to imbue Michelle's short life with *meaning*, hates Mom's tears, hates Dad's lack of them, maybe she even hates *herself*, but *why*? Really, if there's anyone she *should* be mad at, it's *Michelle*—

A door in the back of the church creaks open—a late mourner—and a sudden prickling at the back of Helen's neck says: it's *him*.

Hushed whispers dash up the aisle, and even though Helen tells herself not to turn her head, not to look—Mom isn't so lost in her grief as to miss the sudden shift of attention in the room. She turns and lets out a dramatic *wail* that Helen can't help feeling embarrassed by.

Helen turns around and her eyes confirm, it's *Grant Shepard*, *Grant Fucking Shepard*. *Class president, homecoming king, lover of parties and friends and teachers and football. And killer of my sister.*

That last part seems unlikely to hold up in a court of law—there were enough eyewitnesses to suggest sixteen-year-old Michelle Zhang darted in front of eighteen-year-old Grant Shepard's SUV shortly after two a.m. last Friday (and caused a grim traffic jam on Route 22) on purpose. There were enough “key search terms” in Michelle's internet history to confirm it. And the most humiliating blow for their parents: there was enough in the toxicology report to warrant the phrase *troubled youth* in the local news coverage.

About Michelle, not Grant.

Everyone felt bad for Grant: how sad, how tragic, how *selfish* that this girl—practically a stranger, some sophomore with a suicidal itch—would do something like this, forcing a bright young man like him to have to live with accidentally killing someone for the rest of his bright, promising life.

“*You*,” Mom says, standing in the middle of the aisle, her

mouth gasping for air like they're in a Greek tragedy.

Grant Shepard stands still, as if he exists just to be gasped at by grieving mothers and gawked at by middle-aged Chinese aunties and uncles.

He looks exactly the way Helen thinks of him—wearing a dark navy sweater over a crisp white button down, as if he's on his way to a student council meeting after this to discuss grad night themes. His tie is perfectly knotted and his dark brown hair is neatly brushed and he looks too good—too young and handsome and *alive*—to be allowed in this room.

Grant's soft brown eyes dart around the church. He knows he's made a mistake coming here, she can tell. He probably thought it'd be okay, that they would understand why he'd want to pay his respects, maybe—maybe he even thought they'd forgive him.

*What a supreme amount of ego it must have taken, to imagine his presence would be wanted here.*

"No," Helen's mom is saying, her lips white but forceful.

Grant's hands come up, almost placating. "I didn't mean to—"

"She wants you to leave," Helen finally says, her voice firm. "Now."

Grant's eyes land on Helen. He ducks his head in understanding. As he turns to leave, he adds a mumbling sort of "Sorry."

It's all so dramatic, Helen feels an itch to shout at his retreating back, *And don't you ever show your stupid face in here again!*

Like they're in a movie, instead of a Presbyterian church they haven't attended in over seven years.

But it doesn't seem worth it, when the Grant Shepards of the world are so unlikely to cross paths with the grieving Zhang families of the world—gasping mothers, avoiding fathers, gossiping aunties and uncles, and all—ever again.

Instead, Helen leads her mother back to the pew. As she walks down the aisle, she makes eye contact with Michelle's smiling portrait.

*I bet you liked that, Helen thinks, daring her to respond. I bet that was your favorite part of your whole funeral.*

## Two

### *Thirteen Years Later*

When the phone rings on Tuesday morning, Helen already knows it's going to be good news. Her literary agent Chelsea Pierce sends bad news in sympathetic couplets over email—*they didn't go for it; fuck 'em*—but she picks up the phone for good news.

“I hope you hate your apartment because you're going to Hollywood!”

Helen laughs and immediately feels a rush of cautious energy flood her. *Don't get too excited, the paperwork isn't signed, everything could still fall apart.*

She's grown superstitious. When she published the first book in what would become the Ivy Papers series, she told herself, *Don't get ahead of yourself, people might hate it, or worse, maybe no one will even read it.* When it became a bestseller and the *New York Times* put her on a list of voices to watch in the young adult space, she admonished herself, *It doesn't really matter, the work is still the same as it was before it made the list, and what if they don't like the second book?*

Her entire career so far could be linked from cautious mental disclaimer to disclaimer, right up to the announcement that some fancy Hollywood people are turning her books about moody prep-school teens keeping dark, academic secrets into a



soapier, sexier TV show.

“What do you do about imposter syndrome?” she once asked a much more successful, senior author over a celebratory brunch.

“Well, at a certain point, it becomes unseemly,” he told her.

Six weeks later, as she opens the door to her new waterfront condo (all living expenses during prep and production paid for by the studio, plus per diem) across from the Santa Monica Pier—Helen thinks, perhaps, she’s reached *a certain point*.

The place comes furnished in expensive beiges and smells like a trendy hotel. Late-September sunshine filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto her private balcony, and it makes Helen wonder if she could become a totally different person here, the kind with morning routines and inner peace. There’s a shared common area on the top floor she can reserve for parties (Helen doesn’t know enough people in this city to throw a party, but she nods politely at the building manager anyway) and her kitchen window looks out onto the patio of her temporary neighbor, Academy Award–winner Frances McDormand.

“How very *LA*,” her East Coast friends say when she tells them.

“Who?” says her mom during their first bicoastal FaceTime.

“Frances McDormand, Mom,” Helen sighs as she unpacks the groceries. “She’s, like, an actress, you would know her. She’s in . . .”

Helen pauses, as her mind suddenly erases the entirety of Frances McDormand’s illustrious, award-winning career from existence. She was in *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, but Mom hasn’t seen that.

“I think she played the Queen in something. Oh, and she’s the mom in *Moonrise Kingdom*!”

“I don’t know her,” Mom says. “Never mind. What are you making for dinner?”

Helen dutifully recites her dinner menu—*just something easy, I still have to get more pots and pans, yes I’ll add something green, thanks Mom*—and is treated to another forty minutes of hand-wringing over the history of earthquakes in LA County.

“If the ground opens up, I’ll jump right in so it’ll be quick and painless,” Helen says as she finishes off her tomato and egg rice bowl. “Don’t worry so much. Love you, bye!”

She searches “moving into a new apartment in LA” on Spotify and puts on someone else’s well-curated playlist over the state-of-the-art Bluetooth speaker system.

Helen has never been cool enough to be “a music person.” She prefers leaving that up to strangers on the internet who’ve experienced the same specific soundtrack-worthy moments in life—“cozy October morning in the kitchen” or “driving toward my uncertain future”—and hoping they’ll tell her exactly what songs would bring those feelings out best, like a purple scarf for green eyes.

As Stevie Nicks croons about time making her bolder and children getting older, Helen hangs her clothes up in ascending length in the walk-in closet and thinks about the times when life files itself neatly into chapters.

*Travel is a way of turning the page*, Helen reminds herself, reciting her therapist’s counsel. *Maybe you’ll finally be able to write something new.*

Helen mentally strikes out that *maybe* with savage determination.

She hopes this chapter is a short, productive one.

WHEN THE PHONE rings on Wednesday, Grant already knows

it's going to be a shit conversation.

"Just take the meeting," his TV agent Fern wheedles. "What's the harm in taking a meeting?"

"I didn't like the book," he says, not untruthfully.

Prep-school teens and their sex lives aren't exactly his *area*, and Grant was hoping to break this unemployment streak with something more exciting, like a feature (which he's going to finish as soon as he has the time) or at least a development deal somewhere (it's not his fault he missed pilot season because his mom hired some shady contractors who did such a bad job he had to spend the entire summer back in New Jersey undoing and redoing her floors).

"So you didn't respond to the material—that's nothing we haven't gotten over before," Fern says. "If anything, it means you're a better candidate than some loser who's obsessed with the books. You can see its flaws, you know how to fix it, blah, blah—"

"I went to high school with the author," he says finally.

"That's perfect—"

"No," Grant says grimly. "It's not. She didn't like me."

"Well, that's ridiculous, everyone likes you," Fern says, sounding a little maternally offended on his behalf. "Besides, she's not going to be in the meeting; it's just the showrunner and executive producers."

"I . . ." He takes a steadying breath—*exhale longer than you inhale*—and shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about this right now. There has to be something else. What about Jason's spin-off show? That was a good meeting, wasn't it?"

"They don't have the budget for a writer at your level," Fern says evenly. "And you're not taking a pay cut back down to co-producer when we've finally clawed our way up to co-EP."

Grant's IMDb profile succinctly condenses each rung of

his career so far into a one-line credit—*staff writer, story editor, executive story editor, co-producer, producer, co-executive producer*. Other writers he came up with never managed to make it past that first credit, and there really aren't many lines separating *him* from *them*. Grant knows he doesn't deserve the success he's had and it's always felt that much more precarious for it.

Grant downs an Advil and massages his temples. "What about features?"

"As soon as you've got a draft of that spec for me, I'm happy to read it. In the meantime, you're a TV writer. You make money for us both as a TV writer. And this is a straight-to-series, prestige"—he scoffs here, but Fern overrules him—"very *buzzy* TV show. The studio execs all loved your materials, the show-runner's already read your sample. Are you really going to make me tell them they wasted their time?"

Grant sighs. He knows, somehow, this is a mistake, even as he says, "Fine, I'll take the meeting."

That night he spends some time googling *Helen Zhang, YA author*. Her author photo comes up first and she looks more or less the way he remembers her, except older and more expensive. Her eyes are intelligent and assessing, her posture as straight as it was that day in the church at her sister's funeral. She's not smiling—Helen has never smiled in his memory, so that makes sense—and he can still see the stiff, serious editor-in-chief of the school paper in her, after all this time.

Their paths rarely crossed before the night that changed his life forever—Helen hung out with the nerdy, Ivy League-obsessed crowd and was not-so-secretly judgy about him and his friends on the football team and cheer squad, rolling her eyes at pep rallies and homecoming and everything that had given his life meaning when he was seventeen years old.

And afterward . . . afterward, Helen hadn't looked at him at

all. She looked through him whenever they were in the same room.

Grant considers what Fern would say if he told her he couldn't take this job for "mental health reasons." He laughs to himself—Fern would probably remind him of his mortgage (he shouldn't have bought the bungalow in Silver Lake, but he'd thought *The Guys* would have at least one more season before its untimely cancellation) and dangle attractive numbers in front of him (*minus ten percent*) and tell him therapy costs money.

When he gets the call a few days later that they want to offer him the job, he's past the point of putting up a fight. Therapy *does* cost money, and if Helen Zhang has a problem with him being on the writing staff of her TV show, well.

She can take that up with his entertainment lawyer.

## Three

Helen stretches in the parking lot at the foot of Fryman Canyon, the early morning chill still hanging over all the cars like a shadowy blanket.

“I’m stupidly overbooked on meetings, but I’d love for you to join me on my daily morning hike,” the email from Suraya, the showrunner, reads. “Fryman’s a pretty one if you’ve never done it, and it’s right up the street from my house.”

Helen looks up Suraya’s Studio City address on Zillow (purchased for a modest \$1.3 million nine years ago) and clicks through all the photos of the interior with nosey curiosity. Further research reveals Suraya’s partner is a “mixed media artist” and they have two darling elementary-school-aged children.

She thinks of texting these findings to her two closest author friends, Pallavi and Elyse. There was a time when she would have tossed that Zillow link into their group chat without a second thought, and they would have descended upon this new information like ants invited to a picnic.

Pallavi, Elyse, and Helen met when they were all young aspirings almost a decade ago, at an overcrowded bookstore event where it was impossible to hear the celebrated author’s answers from the back. Pallavi had a meager YouTube following of twenty thousand subscribers at the time and Elyse had already published a collection of short stories. Helen had been an assistant at a publishing house that specialized in academic

anthologies, fantasizing about the day when her bosses realized they had a literary genius crafting scheduling emails.

They weren't the type of friends who met up every weekend for brunch. Elyse thought Pallavi was kind of desperate. Pallavi thought Elyse was too judgmental. Helen was sure they both found her too serious to be any fun. But they all got their first book deals within months of each other—a coincidence that felt like fate in their early twenties, and theirs became a strategic sisterhood. They met up several times a month for “scheming sessions,” where they swapped information on the details of their budding careers and answered each other's questions (*which author photo makes me look the most intriguing, would you actually pick up my book if it had this godawful cover*) with the honesty of young strivers who respected each other's grand ambitions.

These sessions grew fewer and further between over the last few years, but they still celebrated each other's book launches in person and on social media, they shared laughing texts over *this ridiculous thing* some mutual acquaintance said in an interview, they debated screenshots of emails (*am I crazy or does my new editor hate me*), and they found time at least once per tax quarter to get together for drinks.

“That's the mark of friendship in adulthood,” Pallavi said at their last meetup in April. “Do I make time to see you at least twice a year in person? We're close friends. More than twice? We're basically family.” They all laughed, and Helen had felt some relief—*this is just what adulthood feels like*.

But she's been less certain since the book-to-screen news came out. She texted them both in July when the deal first closed and received a short *Congrats! That's amazing!* from Pallavi and a confetti emoji from Elyse. She watched them get drinks without her on Instagram several times after that and

wondered if she'd missed something obvious and if she could ask for an explanation without seeming pathetically needy (*no*, she concluded). She proposed getting drinks as a trio, but schedules never managed to align in the months preceding her departure for LA.

Helen has the sinking feeling that if she stopped texting Pal-lavi and Elyse, she'd never hear from them again.

She thinks this is the kind of thing she'd talk to a sister about—a *real one*, not the forced found-family type. The type of sister who grows up alongside you and understands without explanations *why* your faulty brain can't seem to process the subtly shifting dynamics of a social circle without a dramatic sense of tragic despair. But then, Helen suspects she wouldn't feel the loss of these friends as acutely if she *did* still have a sister to talk to, and she forces her thoughts in another direction before she can follow them down a dangerous old corridor.

*New chapter, new problems.*

When Helen sees Suraya the showrunner approaching across the lot ("Finally! Zooms really don't capture a person's *essence*, do they?"), it's hard not to feel starstruck and flattered that this busy and important woman wants to be in charge of her show. Suraya's shorter in person, which makes it all the more impressive how difficult it is to keep pace with her.

"You're the genius creative, obviously—forty weeks on the bestseller list speaks for itself," Suraya says as they pass a well-outfitted gaggle of young influencers on the trail path. "And we're so lucky to have you in the writers room."

Helen had requested a place in the writers room during her initial producer meetings, thinking the answer would be *no*—her agent told horror stories of authors getting into screaming matches with their adapting screenwriters, of projects falling apart because an author hadn't *stayed in their lane* and let the



experts handle things. “We can ask, but I wouldn’t press,” Chelsea advised delicately. “It can be rough to watch a room full of screenwriters rewrite you.”

Helen had been surprised when Suraya immediately said yes, they would love to have her in the room.

“I’ve been reading all the screenwriting books you recommended,” Helen says now, eager to show she’s done her homework. “And I know things are going to change from the books. I won’t be super precious or annoying about it, I swear.”

Suraya waves a hand. “Be precious and annoying if it’s important to you, that’s your role in the room. Protect the book when we’ve gone too far off the rails. It’s no good to us if we put in all this work and your readers hate everything we’ve done.”

Helen nods. “Of course. They won’t though. I trust you.”

Suraya laughs as she looks sideways at Helen. “That’s such a nice thing to say,” she says. “I wouldn’t go throwing that around casually in this town if I were you though.”

“Is LA so bad?” Helen knows she’s coming across as a guileless bumpkin. But people will assume that of her anyway, so she might as well use it.

“It’s an industry town, which if you’re as obsessed with work as I am, that’s a good thing,” Suraya explains. “It’s just that people have a way of being very friendly from the jump, and sometimes you forget your interests aren’t necessarily perfectly aligned, and then all of a sudden you’re in *Deadline*—it’s an industry trade, if you don’t read it, you should—because your project’s fallen apart over ‘creative differences.’”

“Oh,” Helen says, unsure what to add.

Suraya looks at her shrewdly. “We both want this show to be good. Remember that, when the things we’re saying in the room make you feel crazy.”

“I will. But that won’t happen. I feel lucky just to be here,”

Helen insists, and finds she means it.

“Aww, it will though,” Suraya laughs as they reach a peak in the hike. “I’m a very annoying person when you spend too many hours with me, which you will. And that’s just me. We have six other writers in the room, and that’s too many people *not* to have some interpersonal flare-ups in the next twenty weeks.”

“I look forward to meeting them all,” Helen says.

“They’re great.” Suraya waves a hand. “My assistant’s setting up a dinner and drinks before the room starts so you’re not going in cold. Are you excited? Are you nervous?”

Helen nods. “All the feelings. Like the first day of school.”

She’s pretty sure this is an honest response, though she isn’t sure *feelings* is the best categorization for the tangled threads of thoughts in her head. She *needs* this to go well. She *needs* to prove this was a good decision, abandoning her life in New York for a Hollywood sabbatical. She *needs* to fix this uninvited mental block that has her starting and scrapping book proposals for new high-concept YA series with a frequency so alarming, she brought it up to her therapist. *What if I don’t have any other stories?* she had asked, all the while wondering (stupidly, embarrassingly), *Who am I, if not a successful writer?*

Suraya smiles. “My youngest just started kindergarten last year. She was so excited, and then she spent the entire first day crying for us to pick her up because she didn’t like the other kids.”

“That won’t happen to me,” Helen promises.

“Of course it won’t. That wasn’t a metaphor; we’re just talking about my kids now,” Suraya laughs.

“Oh.” Helen is slightly embarrassed.

“Occupational hazard,” Suraya says. “We overshare and mine our personal lives for work, and inevitably some useless information ends up on the table and you’ll walk around LA for

the next decade knowing some random detail about someone else's kids."

"Haha," Helen says, like an idiot.

"You'll get used to it." Suraya lightly taps Helen's shoulder. "Oh, if you look up there, it's George Clooney's house."

GRANT CHANGES HIS shirt three times before the dinner and feels stupid every time he does it.

He finally lands on a plain black T-shirt under a varsity crew jacket he bought at the Melrose flea market a few years ago with an ex-girlfriend. He never rowed crew in high school or college, but Karina had assured him that didn't actually matter. "*It'll look cool when you wear it on set.*" And it did. She never steered him wrong in wardrobe, at least.

He's spent the last week and a half debating if he should reach out to Helen before the writers' room starts, then puts it off until it's too late and he's in an Uber en route to a seafood restaurant on the west side wondering if the varsity jacket was a mistake.

Maybe this whole thing was a mistake, but it's too late to back down now.

When he gets to the reserved table and Helen isn't there, he feels a gnawing sense of dread instead of relief. *Something's* going to happen—he can feel the cosmic scales tipping against him—and he'd rather get it over with.

"Good, you're finally here," Suraya says, a mini-crab cake in hand. "Everyone, this is Grant, my number two."

It's a roll call of the usual suspects, Soapy Teen Drama Writers Room™ edition—the husband-and-wife writing team, the smart-funny-mean twenty-somethings, and the mini-Suraya (her name is Saskia) who clearly reminds the showrunner of

herself twenty years ago.

Suraya glances up and beams. “And here’s our guest of honor, Helen Zhang.”

The table cheers rowdily and Grant looks up.

*It’s her.*

Helen Zhang, in the present tense. She looks—good. Her hair is swept back in a messy knot, the dark blue knit dress she’s wearing flashes a hint of light blue pleating with every step that brings her closer. She looks intimidating, put-together and *grown up* and he suddenly feels inadequately prepared in every way for this moment.

Helen smiles tentatively as she looks around the table and her eyes drift past him conveniently—he can’t tell if this is on purpose or if she simply hasn’t registered him.

“Helen, we’ve got Tom, Eve, Owen, Saskia, Nicole, and Grant.”

Helen’s gaze snaps to Grant immediately and he feels like an insect pinned to paper.

“We’ve met,” she says neatly. There’s a sharpness to her voice that suddenly calls to mind an image of dispassionate scissors, cleanly snipping away any thread of destiny that has the gall to show up right now. “Grant and I went to high school together.”

SHE HAD NOTICED him immediately, standing next to Suraya like a cosmic joke. He still towers over everyone else in the room, though Grant Shepard’s build has leaned out since his high school football days. *Is he wearing a letterman jacket?* For a wild moment, Helen wonders if this is some kind of messed up prank.

The showrunner’s brows lift and she throws Grant (*Grant!*) a bemused look. “You never mentioned that in your interview.”

Grant shucks the jacket off and sips his water in an obvious bid for time. He watches her over the rim of his glass. She's per-versely fascinated by what he could possibly say next and stares at the muscles of his throat (when's the last time she thought about *Grant Shepard's* throat?) working in anticipation. Finally, he swallows and sets the glass down lightly.

"Didn't feel like a fair thing to do. The school in the books is nothing like the school we went to," Grant says casually, his gaze flitting away from hers like it was never anything important. "Besides, I wanted to get the job because of how much you believed in me as a writer, Suraya."

"Kiss-ass." Suraya rolls her eyes. "He's the number two," she adds to Helen. "If I'm not in the room, Grant's in charge of running things in the writers room."

"Ah," says Helen.

Her mouth is dry and her pulse pounds violently in her head from the effort of *act normal, whatever that means here*. Grant looks up at her then.

*Come on*, his expression seems to suggest, *this doesn't have to be weird if we don't let it*.

It's as though he's using the kind of psychic connection that's only created by thirteen years of trying to forget the same thing, and she thinks she might be sick.

"You'll have to tell us embarrassing stories about Grant later," Suraya smiles.

"What are we eating?" Helen says instead.

And even as she feels with every fiber of her being that this is wrong, *that this can't possibly be happening*, that maybe there should even be *laws* to prevent this from ever happening again—she finds herself sharing endless appetizers and politely laughing at everyone's icebreaker jokes with *Grant Shepard* from opposite ends of the same table.

It becomes a silent game, who can seem more *normal* about this—maybe they’ll even make it the full twenty weeks exchanging only polite, respectful glances across a table and no one will ever bring up Helen’s dead sister or how she died.

*Sometimes I wish you weren’t my sister.*

When Suraya suggests they relocate to the rooftop for after-dinner drinks, Helen goes up first to claim a spot while everyone else freshens up and makes phone calls to friends and babysitters. Grant reappears first, two drinks in hand—margaritas, which feel inappropriately festive. There’s an air of slight hesitation in his stance that she finds to be *unlike him* and is suddenly infuriated by the thought.

“Is one of those for me?” she asks.

“If you want it to be.” He sets it down.

Their natural lives should have taken them far, far away from each other, never to meet or think about each other again after graduation. Helen takes the drink and knows she’s going to lose whatever game they’re playing first.

“I think you should quit,” she says abruptly.

Grant lifts his brows, then sips his drink coolly.

“Do you,” he says, sounding bored.

She immediately hates how he does that, the way nothing she says or does seems to faze him, when she feels nothing but *affected*. She’s vibrating from a sensation both familiar and strange—being in unexpectedly close proximity to *him*. Her heart slams against her chest in an impressive effort to meet the wooden deck floor, or perhaps to tackle her sister’s murderer. *Not legally true*, she reminds herself. *It wasn’t his fault*. Her wounded heart still tries to punch him through her chest.

“Yes. It’s wildly inappropriate, not to mention *cruel*, for you to be here right now.”

Helen is aware that she’s doing that thing where she sounds

weirdly formal, like she was raised by Victorian ghosts or something, and immediately regrets saying anything at all.

“That’s taking it a bit far, isn’t it?” he says, like a jerk.

“No, it’s not. How—how did this even happen?”

“They sent me your book, I took a meeting, Suraya’s great, she thinks I’m great, here we are.”

“You never should have taken the meeting,” Helen says. She can feel her cheeks flushing from a heady mix of alcohol and anger. “You should have said no. Found something else. Anything else.”

“Yeah,” he laughs. “Well.”

“Don’t you feel like, like a terrible person taking this job?” she asks.

“No, actually, I don’t,” he says, knocking back the rest of his drink. “I have a mortgage and bills to pay and contrary to what someone who lucked into a cushy screenwriting job *two seconds* after landing in LA might think, jobs don’t just fall out of the sky for the rest of us.”

*How dare you!* the Victorian ghosts in her mind decry.

“I didn’t *luck* into this job—this is *my* book,” she says acidly. “And if you’re having a hard time, that’s too bad, but it’s not really my problem, is it?”

Grant exhales and shuts his eyes tightly, pushing a finger against his temple. He looks like he’s in pain, and she thinks, *Good*. When he finally speaks, his voice is controlled and quiet, and his eyes are on her.

“Helen, I didn’t want to kill your sister and I’ve had to live with that every day since, and I’m not asking you to forgive me but you know just as well as I do, it could have been anyone’s car she jumped in front of; it just happened to be *mine*.”

Helen can’t quite believe she’s heard him right. She thinks she glimpses something desperate in his eyes, and bizarrely

finds herself wondering what's happened in Grant Shepard's life since she last saw him.

"I don't *care*," she hisses. "It was *your* car. It was *you* driving."

Grant flinches and she feels a bloodthirsty kind of satisfaction. This night was supposed to be the start of a new chapter, a career highlight. The fact that she's thinking about *Grant Fucking Shepard* tonight seems like a cruel prank of the universe—that even from beyond the grave, little sisters have a talent for inserting themselves into places where *they weren't invited*.

"I don't want *you* on this show," Helen finishes.

She feels an itch to punctuate her words with a jab at his chest, but she thinks touching Grant Shepard might be the most inappropriate thing conceivable right now.

"Well, I'm not quitting," Grant says, his eyes full of cold, hard *nothing*. "So if you want to get rid of me, take it up with Suraya."

The sound of a small herd of TV writers clambering up the deck pulls them both out of the conversation. Grant slips on a mask of polite indifference as they approach. *What a monster*, Helen thinks automatically.

"I'm heading out early," he says to Tom, the husband in the married-couple writing team. "Great seeing you guys again. Everyone else, looking forward to working with you all."

He salutes Helen with a bitter twist of a smile and a glass of water, then heads downstairs.

The small Asian writer who looks like she's just out of school—Saskia—takes the spot Grant vacated and smiles at Helen in a hesitant, hopeful kind of way.

"It's so great to meet you," she says in a rush of energy, the most she's spoken all night. "I hope you don't mind me saying, I'm such a big fan. It's my first staffing job. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to even get an interview."



*New scene.* Helen clicks over to a fresh mental page and forces a smile back at Saskia. “It’s my first TV job too,” she admits. “I feel like I got thrown in the deep end.”

“We can look out for each other, then,” Saskia says eagerly. “I can’t believe how young you are, to have accomplished so much.”

Helen finds something familiar in this sentence. In the last few years, she’s grown used to being approached by other young, female, Asian writers—at events, in her DMs, in her email inbox occasionally, when the intrepid ones manage to find a cracked door. They look up to her, they tell her. They want to know how she did it, they’re proud of her, and maybe they’re a little bit envious too. She used to respond to every request for advice—she was flattered, she was eager to help, and maybe it was a safe passage to channel some neglected guilt too. *I’m a good role model, she told herself with every carefully crafted response. I’m a good citizen in my community. I leave roadmaps and signposts for the ones coming after me.* But eventually it became too much—more success yielded a deluge—and she felt more guilt to push aside with every unanswered message.

She looks at Saskia now and tries to see something like a little sister.

*Michelle would have hated you.* The vicious thought comes unbidden. *Too desperate.*

Across the deck, Suraya gives Helen a *you good?* kind of look. Helen swallows. *I am not good.*

The thought pings through her heart and her mind and then her *entire body* insistently, and she imagines saying it out loud. She imagines how Suraya would look at her if Helen started tearing up her carefully selected, apparently beloved writing staff before they even started day one in the writers room. She imagines quitting and going back to Manhattan, tail between

her legs—*turns out if you make it here, you can't actually make it "anywhere."*

She straightens her shoulders. She can handle this.

She's not going to give *Grant Shepard* the satisfaction.

Helen nods at Suraya and smiles. She's *great*.

GRANT MANAGES TO stave off the panic attack the entire forty-five-minute Uber ride back from the west side to Silver Lake. As soon as his home security system *beeps*, it all falls apart.

His vision is spotty and there's a faint ringing in his ears and there's not enough *air* in the room as he stumbles into the kitchen. He pulls out his cell phone with shaking hands and thumbs through his contacts list clumsily—he could call his therapist, but it's late and she has kids. Fern, his agent, is dismissed immediately. She's allergic to feelings.

He scrolls past more contacts—other TV writers, people he's poured his heart out to in closed, professional settings when they were all on the clock and opening personal veins while panning for story gold. None of them are personally invested enough to talk Grant through a panic attack at almost eleven o'clock on a Friday night.

Finally, his thumb swipes past the wet drops—*fuck, he's crying*—and lands on “Karina, wardrobe.”

She picks up on the third ring.

“I have five minutes, then I have to go back to set. What's up?” she asks.

“I, uh, I'm . . . I'm having a panic attack,” Grant says through the phone.

“Shit,” she says. “Is there anyone with you?”

“No,” he says, and feels like a loser.

“Breathe,” she instructs him. “Longer exhales than inhales.”

One . . . two . . . three . . .”

She keeps counting on the phone with him till ten and his breathing is regular again.

“Thanks,” he says. “Sorry to bother you at work. It’s just . . . I have no one else to call.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” she asks.

“Um.” He thinks about how unfair this is to her, how they broke up five months ago, how he still has to return some of her vinyl records. “No. It’s not important. You should get back to set.”

There’s a pause on the other side of the line.

Then she sighs, “You should find someone you can talk to, Grant. Not me, obviously, but . . . someone.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Have a good night,” she says, and hangs up.

Grant knows he could probably find *someone to talk to* easily enough. There’s his therapist, for a start, and he’s probably due for a session. But there was also a time when he might have thought eleven o’clock wasn’t so late and he could have found himself at a bar, beside a pretty face with a sympathetic ear, before midnight. *Everyone likes you*, his agent had said and it’s true, for the most part. He’s easy to look at and just sad enough to be interesting.

The problem for Grant has never been beginnings. It’s that none of his relationships ever seem to survive a second act. Dating him, living with him, loving him becomes *too sad*, he needs you *too much*, and he always seems to be attracted to beautiful, complicated women who are smart enough to eventually recognize *it’s not their responsibility to fix him, though they truly hope he heals someday*.

As he brushes the taste of the failed evening out of his teeth,

Grant wonders if Helen's told Suraya yet. He wonders how that conversation would go.

*Do you know you've employed a murderer?*

Suraya would gasp, she'd assure Helen she had no idea, she'd call Grant's agency and salt the earth with them for putting her in such a terrible position without disclosing it. He'd be dropped and unemployed not just on this show but for good, and everyone he's ever worked with would whisper, *We knew it, we knew there was something wrong with him, we all sensed it.*

He knows he's catastrophizing, that it's technically unhealthy, but somehow it makes him feel better. Imagining his past finally catching up to him, the day he's been dreading for so long finally here at last. He cycles through all possible worst-case scenarios until he reaches the oldest of his most suppressed thoughts, buried deep under years of therapy and friends' reassurances he doesn't believe nearly as much as the truth—*he could have stopped it from happening, if he'd only hit the brakes faster, if he'd been paying more attention.*









Grant knows he's right to feel guilty, that he should probably feel a little guilty forever—and it's not such a terrible price to pay, in the relative balance of things.

He should have apologized to Helen when he had the chance. He would have if he'd been in his right mind. He thinks maybe if he apologizes to her, he can salvage this. He decides he'll email her tomorrow.

This calms him enough to fall asleep, his last thought a hazy memory of Helen Zhang staring at him with coolly demanding eyes, first as a teenager, then as an adult, telling him firmly each time what he's always secretly known—that his presence isn't wanted, that he should leave before he offends everyone even more.

*I know, he tells Helen in his dream-memory. When will you stop reminding me?*

HELEN CAN'T SLEEP, so she gets out of bed and does what she always does when she can't sleep and doesn't love herself enough to stop. She retrieves her suitcase from under the bed, unzips an inner compartment, and pulls out an old (*haunted*, her teenage self always adds) hard drive. She plugs the haunted hard drive into her laptop and starts picking at an old emotional scab that never quite scarred over.

- Files ▾  Michelle is Working
  -  AP Bio
  -  AP English
  -  Latin 2
  -  Pre-Calculus
  -  Phys. Ed.
  -  Photography
  -  World Cultures

Helen studies the files, the digital summation of her little sister's final semester of life. She clicks through the familiar folders. Michelle kept a diary for only a few days into seventh grade before Helen had admonished her, "Why on *earth* would you leave a written record of evidence for Mom and Dad to find?"

Helen will never forgive her fourteen-year-old self for that.

Instead of a diary, she's been left with a hard drive full of old essays and math assignments. Helen once had the romantic notion that it might be possible to understand her little sister better in death, that she would learn something new from the margins of Michelle's essay fragments on Dust Bowl-era pho-

tography and the lives of the Brontë sisters.

They hadn't been close enough to confide in each other after middle school—Helen had found her younger sister's existence slightly embarrassing to her new friends at her new high school, and Michelle, it seemed, had decided the feeling was entirely mutual by eighth grade.

In Helen's memory, Michelle is perpetually a surly teenage girl slipping behind the door of her cave-like bedroom, which always smelled vaguely of overripe fruit, in a towering mood across the hall over some perceived injustice enacted by her family, her teachers, or the world.

Secretly, Helen always hoped she'd eventually make the discovery of a lifetime in her archeological tours of her sister's old hard drive—something that would unlock the mystery of Michelle's last few years, in Michelle's own words: an early outline of a novel perhaps, or sketches of original poems, *or even a half-finished draft of a suicide letter.*

But nothing ever materialized and Helen abandoned the effort as a profoundly *stupid* version of self-harm that she was too smart to engage with. So smart, in fact, she wrote this search for lost letters into her own books—her books about brilliant, academic teens on the quest for long-lost academic secrets, in the wake of a tragic car accident that took the life of the protagonist's little sister. *And those books are getting turned into a TV show*, Helen reminds herself. She has spun this particular personal wound into gold many times over and it's time to let it go, its purpose as grist for the creative mill long since fulfilled.

*Find a new emotional scab to pick—this is boring*, Helen admonishes herself. *Tell a new story.*

But still, she sits in front of her laptop, and she clicks.

*Maybe there'll be something she missed in the next folder.*