

{ BONUS SCENE BY KATHERINE CENTER }

THE ROM-COMMERS

-CHARLIE-

At first, I thought she wasn't home.
But then I saw her through the window.
Out back.

On the high dive. For God's sake.

Emma. All the way out at the edge of the board, seeming to float in the night sky above—gloriously fearless, on tiptoe, wisps of curls escaping her braid . . . and bouncing in slow-motion in a positively voluminous dress that was somehow all undulating fabric and sheer nakedness at the same time.

A hell of a sight.

Enough to shutter my brain for a second.

It could've been the dress that held me spellbound, or those unclothed shoulders looking so pale against the empty night sky . . . but I really think, in the end, it was the rage.

The rage that lit her eyes when she saw me, and kept burning as I walked to the edge of the water.

"You stood me up!" she shouted to the sky.

But I hadn't stood her up! Had I?

I had only . . . abandoned her.

I looked over at the set patio table, and the candles, and the napkins folded like little birds.

And then my chest sank.

I *had* stood her up.

Emma had made me dinner tonight.

And I'd missed it.

Who—honestly, *who*—falls for an undeserving idiot like me and then, after that undeserving idiot fully rejects her . . . *makes him dinner, anyway?*

Emma.

That's who.

Emma, who always did the kind thing. Emma who doggedly refused to give up on hope. Emma, who, I realized like a sudden gasp, was infinitely more than a writing partner, or a colleague, or a distraction, or a crush, or even an infatuation.

Emma . . . *who I was in love with.*

She'd made me dinner, and she'd braided her hair, and she'd put on a dress—all things, if I'm not mistaken, that women do when they want you to love them.

There it was: Emma wanted me to love her. She wanted me to, and I did.

But I'd never tell her that. For her sake. And it might be the only noble thing I'd ever do.

Up on the board, Emma bounced a little harder.

She also, apparently, had guzzled down a whole bottle of champagne like it was a Big Gulp. The bottle lay sideways on the ground. And now here she was, pointing down at me with that long, naked arm, saying, "You stood me up—to serenade a rodent."

"Emma, please come down."

Shit, she was drunk. What if I hadn't come home in time? What if I'd stayed out all night—driving aimlessly, keeping myself at a distance? What if she were up there alone right now, bouncing at the edge of catastrophe without me?

Not that I could do that much anyway.

The thought of it pressed into my chest: How fast it can all disappear.

I had to get her off that diving board.

Should I reason with her? Cajole her?

Demand compliance?

But Emma wasn't a big fan of compliance.

"You're so drunk," I said. "Please come down."

"Make me."

I sighed. Fine.

I positioned myself at the base of the ladder, all aluminum and cold to the touch. My feet clanged as I worked my way up, and I wondered if it was the ladder shaking—or me.

I reached the top, and she seemed surprised I'd made it.

Then she tried to convince me to go back down, and we somehow wound up adjudicating the question of whether or not I was qualified to be up there with her.

"That's not the issue," I said.

"What is the issue?"

"The issue is how drunk you are."

"Or how scared *you* are."

How do you even reason with someone who chugged a whole bottle of champagne like it was a 2-liter soda? But it wasn't lost on me that we were each looking out for the other. In our cattywompus ways. Also: I couldn't concentrate. One of the straps of Emma's dress had slid down and just draped itself over the fall of her shoulder.

I'd written a movie about hostage negotiators once—and done weeks of research on their

techniques for getting compliance. I should be acing this moment. Instead, I was white-knuckling the railing with one hand and reaching for Emma with the other. Begging.

But I guess the begging worked.

She studied my trembling hand and decided to give in. Almost like she was doing me a favor.

Which she was.

“Thank you,” I said—but too soon.

Not two steps toward me, she tripped—and instead of settling herself into my waiting arms, she pitched sideways off the board.

I saw it all in slow motion: her hitch of surprise as she jolted to the side—throwing her hands out like she might catch herself.

But of course, there was nothing below her but water—ten feet down.

I lurched out toward her—but only closed the distance in time to see the endless fabric of that dress billowing against gravity as she plunged down.

And then the sound: a smack like concrete as she hit the surface.

Dammit—I’d *told* her! Hadn’t I told her?

This was exactly what I’d been warning her about! She’d mocked me over and over—and now here she was, dragging me into my worst fear.

And possibly drowning herself.

I’d already decided to save her. She’d been so fearless about the high dive—so disdainful of all my warnings. She thought it was so funny that that I was “afraid of swimming pools”—in the way things are funny when you think they don’t matter.

Before you know what it’s like to drown.

It seemed inevitable, honestly. Like she was just begging fate to teach her a lesson. And so I’d lain awake at nights worrying: visualizing the moment when I’d have to force myself to save her. I’d pictured lots of different scenarios, but the truth of it is, in every single one of them, I wasn’t afraid.

Unlike now.

In every plan I’d made for every variation of this moment, I was a courageous movie hero—springing into action so fast that I didn’t even have time for fear.

But I guess there’s always time for fear.

And maybe I didn’t even know what courageous really meant.

Emma hit the water—an impact so intense, I felt spray on my face—and it was like that moment after your first stub your toe—all frozen anticipation waiting for the pain to hit.

There was no way to avoid it.

I was going to have to do the one thing in this life I was most terrified of . . . and jump in after her.

For a second, I felt a familiar hitch—an internal clamp of “fuck, no” that rendered me completely still, watching the water slosh back over her as it swallowed her down.

As the terror of it all shocked through me, I wasn’t actually sure I’d have the courage I needed. I wasn’t an action hero, after all. I was just a guy afraid of swimming pools.

Even an hour before, I’d have bet all my money on the pool.

But here’s what I didn’t see coming: The fear was big, but how I felt about Emma was *bigger*.

Was I angry at Emma for drinking all that champagne? And for making me a dinner I didn’t deserve? And for liking me in the first place? And for tripping?

Like you wouldn’t believe.

But it wasn’t anger that was going to get me down into that water.

It was love.

In that moment, as Emma *didn’t surface*, I had two choices: watch her drown, or go in after her. They say that courage isn’t *not feeling the fear*—it’s feeling the fear, and doing it anyway.

Until this moment, I didn’t know what courage even was. I’d written it, but I’d never felt it.

Turns out, courage isn’t about battles, or swords, or brute force. It’s just about knowing what really matters—and then acting accordingly.

I’ll tell you this: My whole job was to imagine other possibilities, and other realities, and other worlds . . . but I could not imagine a world without Emma in it.

It was just suddenly a thing I knew—not despite the fear, but from within it: I would save Emma from drowning if it killed me.

Because *she* was what really mattered.

A world without me was sub-optimal, but a world without Emma was impossible.

Even just that idea made anything else I’d ever been scared of seem tiny.

After that, it was simple.

I got hijacked by the most overwhelming, electric, paralyzing fear of my life.

And then I jumped in, anyway.

