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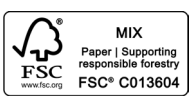
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For Emily

Prologue

The sand has turned everything orange. I blink but it doesn't shift. It's like the world has been coated with paint. It's in my mouth, my eyes. I force myself to concentrate on breathing. The air feels coarse and rough.

I half look back at him, but I can't…

He's dead. He must be dead.

Banging on the horn of the dune buggy again, I scream, 'Help! We're still here!'

They all left hours ago. And my phone is dead.

The wind howls like an animal. What kind of creatures haunt the desert at night? Snakes? I hate snakes. But that only matters if the storm slows, and it doesn't sound like it's going to any time soon. Buried alive in sand. Is that how it all stops?

All those dreams – big screens, movie premieres, big-dollar roles.

Does it all end in the desert, miles from anyone?

It's been three days since I got on the plane.

Four since I agreed to come.

It's cold now. All the heat has been sucked up. I'm sweating, but I shiver. Night arrives quickly here. From everything I've learnt about this place, this is hopeless.

But I can't give up.
'Help!' I bang again. I don't turn around and look at him.
All I've done, trying to save him. All in vain.

SUNDAY

DAY ONE

New York

1

The first time Phoebe suggests the swap I dismiss it out of hand. I don't even realise she means it. I laugh. Then I see her expression.

'Please, Ellie,' she says, her voice cracking a little. 'We'll swap places. You be me. I'll be you. It's the obvious answer. To what we both want.' She pauses. 'Well, what I need. I just can't…'

She doesn't finish. She picks up her drink – it's a minimum two-drink rule to sit at the table and we front loaded. She finishes it in one swallow and picks up the second.

The laughter around us is loud but I tune it out. She can't mean it? It's like someone's giving me a gift but chopping off their own arm to pass it over. The glow from the stage is bright and we're caught in the periphery of the halo. It's as close to the warmth of a New York stage as I've ever been. It's all I've ever wanted.

She wants me to take her role? Actual lines in a major Hollywood movie, directed by Freddie Asquith-Smith. I stare at her as the pull of the suggestion builds in strength. But no, the role is surely sealed. There's no way I could step in at this point. I don't even have an American accent.

Phoebe's caught in something. She looks like she's falling off a cliff.

'I love this table! These twins are here for it!' the comedian says, gesturing at us as Phoebe knocks back the second drink and the sweaty room roars; I wait a beat for the attention to shift away from us. The mention of twins often gets a second look. But we're not even related.

The first time I met Phoebe it was like looking in the mirror – almost. Enough to stop me in my tracks. They say everyone has a doppelganger. You never expect to meet yours. But here we are.

'Phoebe, you can't walk away from this role. That's the craziest thing I've ever heard!' I say, keeping my face neutral, but my tone is anything but. Something's going on with her. She's my friend, and I want to help her. She's been unwell for a few days and it's making her spiral. She's caught in some kind of rip tide. I need to stop her going under.

It's hard to speak to her at the table – I don't want to attract any more attention. We'll be kicked out if we talk through the show. Phoebe must be desperate to have raised this now. We're in a comedy club in Chelsea, New York. Front row and centre. Not the place to discuss life-changing plans.

Felix had given us two free tickets last minute, as he couldn't make it – the date of a lifetime had presented itself, he said. Felix has been the other part of our trio this summer. It's been just over four weeks since we met on the course, but I can't imagine my life without either of them now. My best friends.

What a summer it's been.

But Phoebe hasn't been the same this week. She's gone from the sunny, optimistic doppelganger I met four weeks ago to someone likely to fall down in a fit of tears, without any warning.

I'd discounted all the myths about doppelgangers when we'd met: ghostly, evil, demonic. But maybe there was some kind of bad luck that came with them after all. Felix had declared one night, soon after we'd all met, that one of us must be the evil

twin. He'd gone as far as to pull me aside, promise me he'd keep an eye on Phoebe. But now it's her who's crumbling.

She'd be throwing away a life-changing job by doing this, swapping places with me. It's impossible to consider – but impossible not to think about, just for a second. Acting is all I've ever wanted to do.

'More drinks?' The waitress appears on our right and I nod.

'Same again.'

We both need them. Phoebe's falling apart, and I'm trying to put her back together. Trying not to get excited about this role of a lifetime that she's offering up.

I look at the stage. A woman in dungarees is killing it. She cracks a joke about teaching her kids the modern ABC. The crowd is laughing, full belly laughs. I catch the end of B, and she says, 'And C is for Consent. Say it with mommy.'

I laugh, and look at Phoebe; she smiles weakly.

The drinks arrive and we finish those and order more. By the time the last act is on stage the room has softened to a place without edges and we're so drunk the sting has gone out of the conversation. The question's forgotten. I hug Phoebe during the applause.

'Best night ever!'

'Yes,' she says, and whatever had set her off earlier seems forgotten. 'Ellie, *you* are the best! I can't believe how lucky I got when I met you!'

'BFFs,' I say, and we link arms as we stumble out into the hot, dark night of the New York streets. A grate smokes nearby and a rat runs across the pavement as we approach the Flatiron building. Someone sends a wolf whistle our way from a passing car, and despite it being close to midnight, the lights from the city are bright and I'm not ready to go to bed.

A tuk tuk passes us, singing about a New York State of Mind,

and I remind myself I'm really here: The Big Apple, the city that never sleeps. So good they named it twice.

'Let's get more drinks!' I say, and I pull Phoebe to me as I wobble on my new shoes. She smells of the expensive perfume we'd spritzed ourselves with from the samples in Saks this afternoon, of deodorant, of the fancy dark ginger shampoo she'd promised her brother she wouldn't touch, and yet we'd both almost finished. She smells of tequila, of the moisturiser I'd loaned her, of sweat from the club, of this intense summer heat. She smells like the best four weeks of my life. Here. Now. It's due to end tomorrow and I can't face it. My heart literally breaks in two. A dagger, right through me.

'Tonight's on me,' I say, feeling like I could fly, as we head into the reception of a fancy hotel and we duck through a blue velvet curtain to a small cocktail bar with panelled walls and rude waiters, smartly dressed.

'We can't afford this!' she whispers and, already drunk, I stumble again and swallow a laugh as I grab her arm.

She starts giggling and I can't help it; my stomach cramps with the effort of not losing it and luckily the music in the bar turns up a notch otherwise we'd be in danger of being thrown out before we sit down.

The air-con is on high and we're dressed for the steamy streets. I shiver. Goosebumps rise up on my arms and legs. We're wearing almost identical dresses we'd picked up in a thrift store that afternoon. Hers is pale blue with mini daisies; mine is yellow. They're short and strappy, and we wear wedge heels from Target. What we don't own we imitate – four weeks of an acting class for out-of-work actors at a top New York school. It's a course you dream to get on. I still can't believe I made it – that I'm really here.

I sit up, feigning money and class. I glance around, checking

out the bar and say, 'Top drawer,' in my best Upper East Side drawl.

Phoebe explodes in laughter, choking on the water the waiter had put down before us.

'Whadda you two, like twins or something?' A slurring man in a suit leans over. There are four of them at the table and I feel their eyes on my legs, on my chest. I'm not the most covered up.

C is for Consent, fuckers, I think, as Phoebe says, 'We're not looking for any attention.'

'Well you two got the genes. I mean, you are both—'

'Cut it out, Jack,' the friend to his left snaps. 'You're drunk and they've asked to be left alone.'

I look the friend up and down. Dark hair, expensive suit. *C is for Cute*, but I turn away from him. Tonight isn't about men. It's about us.

The four-week acting class is something I'd gone out on a limb to do. I'd arrived planning to stay at the nearest YHA after registering. I'd gone to the school straight from the plane. But I'd met Phoebe on the first day as we'd filled in forms, and she'd offered me the sofa in her tiny studio, loaned by her brother who was working away.

We'd been pulled together by looking almost identical. There'd been no choice. Once we met, it had been like a pact.

Phoebe had offered up her brother's apartment the first day I'd met her. 'I'm literally paying him just cents. We'll split it. More for food and drinks!'

We'd survived on bowls of beans and pasta, and there was free coffee in the common room. We'd bonded quickly. It wasn't just a physical likeness – we liked the same music, films, had the same sense of humour.

Our budget allowed for drinks, but I felt like blowing it all tonight. What were credit cards for? Phoebe had woken sobbing

a few mornings ago and she just couldn't seem to get a handle on anything. She was days away from the job of her dreams. Is the pressure making her crack? I thought a celebratory night out could put her back in the zone and it seems to be working. The course is done. Certificates tomorrow and I'm due to start work in a diner.

With Phoebe off to shoot a few lines in her first film, I'd needed something to do. A diner off Broadway paid waiting-staff-wages to actors hoping for their first big break on stage. Phoebe and I could both sing. I'd auditioned for the job for waiting tables, and I'd get to perform with the others a few times a day. The idea was that someone would spot us. It had happened a few times. The diner was pretty famous. And pretty famous was what I hoped to be in a few years. It wasn't as good as Phoebe's Hollywood film. But it was a start.

And now she's suggesting we swap roles. She would wait tables and sing for supper, and I would go and film in Abu Dhabi, in a role people would kill for.

I want her to get it together. I need her to. She can't give this up.

We order, and then as though she can read my thoughts, her head droops and her shoulders sag as the waiter brings over the cocktails. Whatever is bothering her hits again.

'Phoebe, come on… You've dreamt of this – I mean, your first few lines in a major film! And acting with Hanneghan. He's movie-star royalty.' I push the cocktail towards her and take a gulp of mine while grabbing her hand. 'Don't lose it now, Pheebs, don't let it get to you!' I know her agent is on her back. He'd screamed at her yesterday when she'd called and said she felt sick. *If you're not on that fucking plane then don't call me again. Do you even know how embarrassing that would be for me? You're nothing yet*. She'd sobbed again when he'd hung up.

She shakes her head and her hand trembles in mine. 'I don't know what's wrong with me. I just feel so… so fucking fragile. If I get on the plane and fly there then fuck it up, my agent will drop me in a flash. And he'll do the same if I don't go at all… I know you said you don't want to, but please, take the role, do it for me. We look so similar, they'll never—'

I push my forehead with the heel of my other hand. 'I can't. I can't take your place. This is your role. You got it, not me.' It's not that I don't want it. I'd kill for it.

Her hand tightens on mine and she pulls me in, hugging me. Her voice is fierce in my ear. 'Ellie, please. I'll fall apart. I've never felt this much pressure. We look the same. Everyone says so. Pretend to be me. I can't lose this agent.' She pulls away, shakes her head, tears in her eyes. 'They're flying to Abu Dhabi on a private plane. The rest of the crew and cast are flying from LA, but there's an awards thing here, in New York, tonight, so it's just a small plane leaving tomorrow. I don't think they worry about advance passenger lists on those jets. You can travel on your passport and just give my name as your acting name. You'll look like the headshot they have of me. You can have the money, and you can get your name on the credits. When it's all done, I'll get my agent to change the name to yours. I'll say it's my new acting name or something. No one will care, as long as the paperwork is right and someone turns up who looks like me, and can act. And I've seen you act. You'll be amazing! Then I'll work out whatever the fuck is wrong with my head, and when the pay comes, I'll send it to you. It's two weeks. I *can't* piss off my agent. I need to turn up for this. Someone they think is me, needs to turn up for this. I've signed the contract. You just need to do the scenes. I mean, whoever thought I'd find my doppelganger?'

I take a breath.

My last-ditch attempt to sway her. 'I don't have an American accent.'

'You can do one. You'll just work hard at it. For two weeks you can hold it down.' She looks desperate and I can feel myself relenting. But it's terrifying.

'What if they find out?' I whisper this bit, because it scares me, the whole thing.

'They won't.' She leans in. 'Please, Ellie. For me.'

This is when I steal from her, cheat her out of everything she's worked for.

I say, 'Half of it – you keep the other half. You landed the role.' I can't believe I'm saying it. I can't believe I'm agreeing. 'Just give me half of the money. If it means that much to you, I can't say no.'

Her arms tighten again round me and she swallows a sob.

'One thousand dollars.' The man at the next table takes a seat.

'What?' I say, sitting up. I don't let go of Phoebe's hand.

'One thousand dollars.' He puts down an unopened bottle of Laurent-Perrier. 'Here, I've bought this. The waiter's bringing glasses. One thousand dollars on the table now, if you'll kiss. For thirty seconds. One thousand dollars for a bit of tongue.'

For someone talking of tongues he's practically panting. I stare at Phoebe. Then I stand.

'C is for Cunt,' I say as loudly and as clearly as I can, wobbling again on my wedges, my voice scratchy with the tequila. One strap of my dress has fallen down on a shoulder and I pull it up, feeling the man's eyes on me like I'm made of fucking chocolate. I lean in, and raise my voice. 'Now fuck the fuck off! Before I call the police.'

Before he has time to react, his friend stands between us, the cute one. 'Keep the champagne, your bill is paid for the night. I'm sorry, ladies. I'll get him home. Have a good evening.'

As they leave, all the eyes in the bar follow them. One woman much older than us, who I'd written off as priggish, claps silently in our direction.

The waiter puts down two crystal champagne glasses and I sit back down as he opens the bottle with a flourish. 'Your bill has been paid, and there's extra on there. The kitchen closes in half an hour. May I suggest some dessert?'

Phoebe looks as though she's bathed in relief, like she's still swimming in it. The heaviness around her eyes, which she'd carried these last few days, is gone.

She lifts her glass and smiles. 'To new beginnings, *Phoebe Thomas*! Congratulations on your new role. The birth of a superstar.' She holds out a champagne glass and I pick up mine.

'Are you sure?' I whisper, though no one has a clue what we're talking about. The mere idea of pretending to be her, and daring to undertake a role in a film … but to *be* in a film! 'Are you really sure?'

'Ellie, you're literally saving my life. And my career.'

'To the future, then.' I clink.

Hanneghan. I'll get to act alongside Hanneghan. Lights spark up in my future like a landing strip. I've arrived. I've navigated this far and soon I get to breathe out.

A spark of fear lights up too. This could all go badly, badly wrong.