

Praise for The Do-Over

“Painter plucks readers’ every heartstring, from writing a sweet love story between two teens with very different views on romance to honestly depicting how Emilie’s parents’ messy divorce has impacted her feelings of self-worth. Italicized confessions at the beginnings of various chapters prove there is a playful side to Emilie that is further brought out by Nick, whose constant teasing leads to flirty banter. . . . Unequivocally hilarious and delightful.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Throughout, Emilie struggles to navigate her parents’ acrimonious divorce, and the resulting financial precarity and blow to her self-worth. By combining these personal trials with a lighthearted love story, Painter delivers a thoughtfully elevated romantic jaunt.”

—*Publishers Weekly*



**Also by
Lynn Painter**

Better Than the Movies
Betting on You

THE DO- OVER



LYNN PAINTER

SIMON & SCHUSTER | BFYR

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Also available in a SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR hardcover edition

Interior design by Tom Daly

The text for this book was set in EB Garamond.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR paperback edition November 2023

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Painter, Lynn, author.

Title: The do-over / Lynn Painter.

Description: First edition. | New York : Simon & Schuster BFYR, [2022] |

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Emilie, stuck in a cosmic Groundhog/Valentine's Day
nightmare where she discovers her family is splitting up and her boyfriend is cheating
on her, decides to embark upon The Day of No Consequences, but when her repetitive
day suddenly ends, she must face the consequences of her actions.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022002446 (print) | LCCN 2022002447 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781534478862 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781534478879 (pbk) |

ISBN 9781534478886 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Dating (Social customs) Fiction. | Family problems—Fiction. |

Valentine's Day—Fiction. | LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.P352 Do 2022 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.P352 (ebook) |

DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022002446>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022002447>

For
The Lonely,
The Daydreamers,
The ones who find their friends
between the pages of books—

YOU MATTER, and your happy ending WILL come.
Sometimes the wait is just longer in real life than in fiction.

THE DO-OVER



PROLOGUE

Valentine's Day Eve

When Valentine's Day rears its sugary-sweet, heart-shaped head, there are two types of people who receive it.

First, you have the full-on lovers of the holiday, hopeless romantics obsessed with the idea of love itself. These individuals believe in fate and soul mates and the notion that the universe sends out winged, mostly naked babies to shoot arrows into select single people, thus infecting them with true love that may cause drowsiness and a massive happily-ever-after.

Then you have the cynics, those curmudgeonly souls who call it a "Hallmark holiday" and complain that if true love exists, its proclamations should be expressed spontaneously on any random day and without the expectation of gifts.

Well, I am neither—and both—of these people.

I *do* believe that Valentine's Day is an overcommercialized Hallmark holiday, but I also think there's nothing wrong with enjoying the materialistic side effects of the celebration. Bring

LYNN PAINTER

on the chocolates and flowers, and throw in a gift card to the local bookstore while you're at it.

And yes, I believe in the existence of true love. But I strongly suspect that fate and soul mates and love at first sight are concepts created by the same people still waiting for Santa to show up with that puppy they asked for when they were seven years old.

In other words, I *absolutely* expect love in my life, but there is no way I'm going to sit around and wait for fate to make it happen.

Fate is for suckers.

Love is for planners.

My parents got married on Valentine's Day after a month of dating. They fell passionately, wildly in love when they were eighteen. Immediately, and with zero consideration of real-world facts like compatibility and differing temperaments.

While this foolish behavior led to, well, *me*, it also led to years of disagreements and shouting matches that were the soundtrack of my childhood before their relationship devolved into a screaming breakup next to the tiny cherub fountain on our front lawn.

But their inability to use logic in the face of feelings gave me the gift of clarity, of learning from their mistakes. Instead of dating boys who make me swoon but are totally wrong for me, I only date boys who hit their marks on my pros-and-cons sheet. I only date boys who on paper (or an Excel spreadsheet) share at least five common interests with me, have a broad outline of their ten-year plan, and dress like they aren't prone to random outbursts of basketball.

Which was why Josh was boyfriend perfection.

He X'd every single box on my pre-boyfriend checklist the very first time we met, and he'd been overperforming every day for the entire three months we'd been together.

So, as I stood in front of my closet on that Valentine's Eve, selecting the perfect outfit for the following day, I was excited. Not about nude, armed infants or epic cosmic surprises, but about my plans. I had the entire day plotted out—the gift, the words I would say, the appropriate timing of both—and it was going to be exactly what I wanted it to be.

Perfection.

Why would I wait for fate to lend a hand, when I had two perfectly capable hands of my own?

CONFESSION #1

When I was ten, I started putting confession strips into a box in my closet so that if anything happened to me, people would know that I was more than just the quiet girl who followed the rules.

THE FIRST VALENTINE'S DAY

When my alarm went off on Valentine's Day, I was smiling. To start with, I actually had a boyfriend, and he wasn't just a *meh* boyfriend, either. Josh was smart and handsome and arguably the most likely student at Hazelwood High to succeed in a big way. Every time we studied together and he put on his Ivy League tortoiseshell glasses, I swore that my heart actually folded over on itself, causing the sweet pinching feeling that shot warmth through each and every one of my nerve endings.

In hindsight, that feeling was probably some sort of atrial defect caused by my steady diet of black coffee and energy drinks. But I didn't know that yet.

I pushed back the covers and climbed out of bed, ignoring the sound of Logan's open-mouthed sleep-breathing from the other

side of the mattress. My three-year-old stepbrother liked to sneak into my room and sleep with me because he pretty much thought I was amazing.

And he was right. Because as I walked over to where my planner sat open on my desk, I *felt* amazing. I hummed “*Lover*” as I put on my glasses and consulted the day’s list.

To-Do List—February 14

Reorganize scholarship planning binder

Study for Lit test

Remind Mom to email copy of insurance card to office

Remind Dad of parent-teacher conferences and make sure
he puts it on his calendar

Send email to internship adviser

Exchange gifts with Josh

Say “I love you” to Josh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I lingered on the last one, picking up my pen and doodling hearts around it. I’d never said *those* words romantically before, and since our three-month anniversary happened to fall on THE day, it was almost as if the universe had scheduled it *for* me.

Filled with buzzy excitement, I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As I stuck my hand under the stream of water to test the temperature, I heard:

“Em, are you almost done in there?”

Ugh. I rolled my eyes and stepped under the water. “I just got in here.”

LYNN PAINTER

“Joel needs to go potty.” Lisa, my dad’s wife, sounded like her mouth was planted on the door. “Bad.”

“Can’t he go upstairs?” I poured shampoo into my hand and rubbed it on my head. I adored the twins, but living with toddlers sucked sometimes.

“Your dad’s in there.”

Sighing, I said, “Give me two minutes.” I rushed through the rest of the shower, refusing to let the disruption ruin my mood. After toweling off and throwing on my robe, I ran past Lisa and a squirmy Joel, back to my basement bedroom. I breezed through blowing out my too-curly hair—still humming love songs—before plugging in the iron and steaming out the pesky crease on the right sleeve of my dress. I knew my best friend, Chris, would roll his eyes and tell me I was being hyper-anal, but why leave the crease when it takes a mere two minutes to get it out?

I got dressed and ran upstairs to scarf a protein bar before leaving for school. As I ripped open the wrapper, my eyes wandered over to the pie pan that was sitting beside the microwave like temptation incarnate. Yes, the leftover piece of French silk pie would taste amazing, I thought as I took a big bite of peanut butter and whey, but a slice of sugar and carbs was no way to start the day.

I looked away from the chocolate dessert and focused on chewing the dry protein bar.

“Good Lord, slow down.” My dad was sitting at the table, reading the paper and drinking coffee like he had every single day of my life. His hair was flame-red, the potent original to my watered-down coppery-brown version. He gave me a smart-ass

smile and said, “No one here knows the Heimlich.”

“Isn’t that, like, a parental requirement or something? How do you and Lisa have kids and no Heimlich-ing skills?”

He stared directly at my overfilled mouth. “We foolishly assumed our offspring wouldn’t suck down food like sows.”

“You know what happens when you assume, right?”

“Yeah.” He winked and went back to the paper. “Someone’s an ass.”

“Oh, come on, you guys.” Lisa came into the kitchen with Logan on one hip, Joel on the other. “Can we please not swear around the babies?”

“They weren’t in here,” I said through a mouthful of bar, “when he said it.”

“And technically,” my dad said, throwing me another wink, “‘ass’ isn’t a bad word. It’s a donkey.” I grinned while Lisa looked at me as if she wished I would disappear.

I’d been splitting time between my mom’s and my dad’s since they divorced when I was in elementary school, but I was still just a nomad in the way. At both of their houses. To be fair, Lisa wasn’t the stereotypical evil stepmother. She taught kindergarten, made my dad happy, and she was a really good mom to the boys. I just always felt like I was in her way.

I grabbed my backpack and my car keys, threw out a goodbye, and ran for the door.

The sun was bright even though the air was freezing, and we’d gotten a dusting of snow overnight, but it looked like my dad had already scraped my windows. I heard my phone from the depths

LYNN PAINTER

of my bag, and pulled it out just in time to see that Chris was FaceTiming me.

I answered and there were my two closest friends, smiling at me from in front of the red lockers of the junior hallway. I smiled at my phone's cracked screen, at my favorite faces in the whole world.

Roxane had dark brown skin, cheekbones for days, and the kind of eyelashes that suburban moms tried to emulate with extensions, and Chris had heavy-lidded brown eyes, flawless porcelain skin, and curly black hair that stuck up in the most perfect way. If they weren't genuinely amazing humans, it'd be hard not to hate them for their good looks.

"You're at school already?" I asked.

"Yes, and guess what we just saw?" Chris asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"I want to tell," Rox said, moving in front of him on the screen.

"I saw, so I tell." Chris nudged her out of the way. "Josh is already here and I saw him put a gift bag in his locker."

I screeched and tiny-clapped before hopping into the old Astro van that my dad insisted "had character." "Big or small?"

"Medium," Chris said, and then Rox chimed in with, "Which is good because too big just means a crappy stuffed animal, and too small means a coupon for free hugs. Medium is good. Medium is the dream."

I laughed. Their enthusiasm made me happy because up until lately, they'd been anti-Josh. They said he acted like he was better than everyone else, but I knew it was only because they didn't

really *know* know him. He was just so smart and confident that it was sometimes *misconstrued* as arrogance.

Hopefully this meant that they were reconsidering their opinions.

Rox's boyfriend, Trey, popped up in the background and waved. I waved back before I ended the call, dropped the phone, started the van, and sped toward school. Finneas crooned sweetly out of the speakers, and I sang along at full volume to every single word of "Let's Fall in Love for the Night."

I couldn't wait to see Josh. He'd refused to give me a hint as to what my present was, so I had no idea what to expect. Flowers? Jewelry? Even though it'd taken two full coffee shop paychecks, I bought him the Coach band he wanted for his watch. Yes, I was broke now, but seeing his face light up when he opened it would make it worth it.

My phone buzzed on the passenger seat and at the first red light I glanced over.

Josh: Happy VD. Are you here yet? And what do you want first—poem or gift?

Poem, definitely.

I smiled, and the light turned to green. As I cruised through our suburban neighborhood, the song on the radio (my antiquated van didn't even have Bluetooth capability) switched to something screamy and metal, so I started scanning for a tune worthy of the momentous day.

Billy Joel? Nope.

LYNN PAINTER

Green Day? Negative.

Adele? Hmmm . . . that might just work—

I glanced down at the dashboard to turn up the volume, then looked up just in time to see that the truck in front of me had stopped suddenly. I stood on the brake, but instead of stopping, my tires locked and I began sliding. *Shit, shit, shit!*

There was nothing I could do. I slammed into the back of the truck. Hard. I braced myself for the car behind me to hit, but it thankfully stopped in time.

Barely breathing, I looked through the windshield to see my hood was totally crumpled. But the person driving the truck was stepping out, which hopefully meant they were okay. I grabbed my phone, opened the door, and got out to see the damage.

“You were texting, weren’t you?”

“What?” I looked up, and there was Nick Stark, my Chemistry lab partner. “Of course not!”

His eyes dipped down to my hand, to my phone, and he raised an eyebrow.

What were the odds that I would’ve hit someone I knew? And not just someone I knew, but someone who’d never really seemed to like me. I mean, technically he’d never been a jerk to me, but he hadn’t ever been friendly, either.

On the first day of Chem, when I’d introduced myself, instead of saying *Nice to meet you* or *I’m Nick*, he’d just looked at me for a few seconds before saying “Okay” and going back to looking at his phone. When I’d accidentally spilled my energy drink on our lab table a few months ago, instead of saying *It’s okay* like a normal

human when I'd apologized, Nick Stark had stared right at me and, without smiling, said, "Maybe you should lay off the caffeine."

The guy was kind of an enigma. I'd never seen him around outside of school, and he didn't really have a clique or friend group that I was aware of. Even though we were juniors, I still didn't have enough information to figure out how to classify him.

And I hated that.

"You were the one who was stopped in the middle of a busy street," I said.

"There was a squirrel crossing," he replied in a near-growl.

"Listen, Nick." I took a deep breath, found my mental mantra—*You are on top of this, you are on top of this*—and managed, "Don't blame—"

His eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry. You are . . . ?"

I crossed my arms and squinted *my* eyes. "Are you serious?"

"You go to Hazelwood?"

"I'm your *lab partner*." Was he messing with me? The guy never really spoke other than the occasional one-syllable response, but still. "We've shared a table in Chem the entire year . . . ? Ringing any bells here?"

"That's you?" His eyes roamed over my face like he wasn't sure if he believed me or not.

"Yes, that's me!" I was losing my cool because I had very big plans for the day, and this surly boy was holding me up from making my perfect Valentine's Day happen.

And also not remembering me, which . . . what the hell?

He said, "You have insurance, right?"

LYNN PAINTER

“This is unbelievable,” I muttered, looking at his old red truck that didn’t appear to look any worse in the back than it did all over. “It doesn’t look like there’s any damage. From this end, at least.”

“Insurance information, please.” He held out his palm and waited. I kind of wanted to push him for his attitude of driverly superiority, but he was a lot taller than me and had broad shoulders that didn’t look like they’d budge easily.

So instead, I leaned into the van and snatched my backpack from the seat before opening the glove box and pulling out the small binder I put together the day I got the van. I flipped to the yellow divider—the “In Case of Accident” section—and slid the insurance card out of its protective sleeve.

He took it and his eyes narrowed. “You keep it in a notebook?”

“It’s not a notebook, it’s an emergency binder.”

“And the difference is . . . ?”

“It’s just a way to keep everything protected and organized.”

“Everything?” He looked at the binder and said, “What else is in there?”

“A list of mechanics, tow truck companies, first aid instructions . . .” I rolled my eyes and said, “Do you really want me to continue?”

Nick stared at me for a solid five seconds before muttering what sounded like *Hell no* as he pulled out his phone and snapped a photo of the insurance card. After that, he insisted on calling the police when my van started smoking. I tried to insist that it was drivable—I needed to get to school and hear my poem, dammit—until the engine went up in flames and the firemen had to put it out.

Ugh, my dad was going to kill me.

And then my mom was going to pick apart my corpse until there was nothing left.

And I wasn't going to have time for Josh's poem until after first block.

"Here." Nick came over from his truck and held out a coat. "I know it doesn't match your outfit, but it's warm."

I wanted to say no because I blamed him for this disaster, but I *was* chilled. My classic pink Ralph Lauren oxford dress had been too cute to cover with a coat, but that'd been before I was standing out in the cold, watching my vehicle become a bonfire.

"Thanks," I said as I slid into the army-green jacket that nearly went down to my knees.

Nick crossed his arms and surveyed the scene of emergency responders cleaning up the wreckage. "At least you already had a clunker."

"I think you mean 'classic,'" I said, even though I hated my creeper van. There was just something about Nick's attitude—and the fact that he didn't recognize me—that made me want to argue with him.

He crossed his arms and said, "You doing okay here?"

I fake-smiled and bit out, "Wonderful."

I glanced down at my phone. No notifications. Neither of my parents answered when I tried calling them, which wasn't surprising. I desperately wanted to text Josh, but the last thing I needed to do was remind Nick that I might've been distracted when I hit him.

LYNN PAINTER

The police officer got there quickly after the firemen and was relatively nice as he wrote me the citation that was sure to get me grounded.

Ugh.

Nick looked at me as the tow truck disappeared with my van. “You want a ride? I mean, we’re going to the same place and you’re dressed like *that*.”

I looked down at my bare legs and brown leather booties, clenching my teeth to keep them from chattering. “Like what?”

“Ridiculously.”

“*Hey.*”

He actually grinned at my expression. “I wasn’t impugning your fashion choices—you look very, um, *polo player’s girlfriend*, don’t worry. I was merely referring to your bare legs and the fact that it’s, like, twenty degrees outside. Ride? Yes?”

I swallowed and buried my frozen nose in the coat collar. It smelled like cold and motor oil. “Um, yeah. I guess.”

“You mean *thank you*?”

That actually made me smile a little. “Thank you so much, my amazing savior.”

“That’s more like it.”

I climbed into his truck, slammed the heavy door, and buckled my seat belt. It rumbled to a loud start before he turned off his flashers and headed in the direction of the school. Whatever angry band he had blaring from that antiquated stereo system was atrocious and way too loud.

“What *is* this?” I turned down the garbage music and held my

frozen fingers in front of the vents that were haltingly blowing out warm air.

“If you’re referring to the music, it’s Metallica. How do you not know that?”

“Um, because I have taste and I’m not a hundred?”

That made his mouth slide into a smirk. “What is *your* go-to driving album, then, lab partner?”

I was currently super into Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* album but I shrugged and said, “I kind of just listen to the radio.”

“You poor, quality-music-starved girl.”

“In this instance it would be poor, unintelligible-barking-starved girl.”

“Just listen.” He cranked it back up and smiled over at me. “Their rage feels good, doesn’t it? Feel it, Bunsen Burner—breathe it in.”

“I’m good.” *Bunsen Burner*. I shook my head but couldn’t hold in the smile as the word “blackened” was grunted out by Metallica all over his truck. “I’ll just snort my own rage, thank you.”

After a minute he turned the music back down and hit his blinker as the high school approached. He moved the shifter next to the steering wheel, popping it into second gear for the turn, and I think I sounded a little too excited when I said, “This truck is three-on-the-tree?”

He crinkled his brows together. “How do *you* know about three-on-the-tree?”

I crossed my arms and felt kind of cool. “I know lots of things.”

His mouth went into a filthy smile. “Well, that is certainly nice to know.”

LYNN PAINTER

Did he think I was flirting? “I didn’t mean it like *that*.”

He chuckled a little *hub-hub-hub* laugh that was deep and rumbley.

My cheeks were burning and I said, “My dad had a car with that. Forget it.”

He pulled around to the junior parking lot. “Did he teach you how to drive it?”

“What?” I reached down and pulled my lip gloss out of my backpack.

“The car with standard transmission on the column. Did your dad teach you to drive it?”

“Nope.” I pulled down his visor and ran the wand over my mouth, remembering all the times my dad had promised to teach me but ended up getting too busy with work and the twins to actually follow through on his word.

“That’s a shame.” His truck fishtailed as he turned at the end of the first row. “Everyone should know how to drive a manual transmission.”

Yeah, they should. I flipped the visor back up and pictured the stick shift in my dad’s Porsche, the decades-old project car he’d always said would be mine when he finished it.

He’d finished it three years ago.

“By the way, did you tell your parents that your machine burned down?” He gave my phone a sideways glance, like he was waiting for me to start texting.

I looked out the window. The fact that neither of my parents had called back was nice in a way, as it postponed the immense amount

of trouble I was about to be in. But it also stung a bit that they weren't concerned about why I was contacting them when I should have been at school. Instead of explaining all those complicated emotions, I said, "No, I thought I'd save it as a surprise."

"Good call." He slid into a snow-packed spot, and I reminded myself that it was still Valentine's Day. I may have lost my car and would soon be destroyed by my parents, but in a few minutes I'd be with Josh. He'd read me poetry, give me my present, I would say those magical three words, and everything else would melt away.

"Well," I said, opening the door after he pulled to a stop and cut the engine. "Have a happy Valentine's Day."

"Fuck that," Nick said, biting out the words as if I'd wished him a happy castration as he got out and slammed his door. "I fucking hate this day."

I stepped out of the truck, took off his coat, and held it out to him when he came around. "Well, then, just have a day, I guess."

"Sure," he said, tossing the coat into the back of the vehicle. "Thanks."

CONFESSION #2

*I once pulled a hotel's fire alarm because my
parents were sleeping in and I wanted to get to Disneyland
before there was a line to see Belle.*

“Emilie, I have a note here that says you need to go to the office.”
Mr. Seward, my second-hour teacher, waved a hall pass in front of
his face.

“Oh.” I put down the book I wasn’t supposed to be reading,
stood and grabbed my bag from the floor beside me. I’d been in the
middle of a fairly intense sex scene, so my cheeks instantly got hot
as I felt porn-busted.

“Oooh—Emmie’s in trouble.”

I smiled at Noah, Josh’s best friend. He was a tennis player
who’d never said a single word to me until I started dating Josh.
Who, coincidentally, I missed this morning because Nick and I got
into school just in time for first hour. So far, this day was not going
how it was supposed to.

“You know me,” I said to Noah as I shoved my book in my
bag, grabbed the pass, and exited the classroom. I missed Nick
Stark’s oversized jacket as I walked down the empty hallway. I’d
been frozen solid since the minute I’d handed it back to him in the

parking lot. I knew Josh wouldn't have anything that utilitarian in his locker—his light-knit navy cardigan was as warm as it'd get—but I was so cold that I'd probably swing by to pick it up.

I looked down at my phone, but the only message I had was from my awful boss at work, trying to get me to come in when I wasn't scheduled.

Not on Valentine's Day, sir. Or Stankbreath, which is what I referred to him in my head.

Which sounded mean, but he really *was* awful. He'd been known to clip his fingernails in the break room, scroll through Tinder while working even though he was married, and he'd never heard of the term "personal space." How else would I know so much about his breath?

I put the phone in my dress pocket and wondered what the office summoning was about, but I wasn't worried. I'd just been notified the previous week that I'd won the Alice P. Hardy Excellence in Journalism High School Fellowship, so it was probably about that.

I still had to pinch myself over that one. Not only had I been accepted into the prestigious summer journalism program, where I'd get to stay in an apartment in Chicago and work alongside fifty other high school students for an entire month, but it was going to be 100 percent paid for.

I was beyond excited for the work, but even more thrilled about how good it would look on my college applications. Most of my friends didn't care about that yet, but I was going to make sure I got into the college of my choice if it killed me.

LYNN PAINTER

“Hi, Emilie.” Mrs. Svoboda, the school secretary, smiled and gestured for me to go to the counseling office. “Go on back to Mr. Kessler’s office. He’s waiting for you.”

“Thanks.” I went back and lifted my hand to knock on the counselor’s half-closed office door when he bellowed, “Here she is now. Come in, Emilie.”

I walked into his office and saw the woman who’d interviewed me for the fellowship. She was sitting in a chair, holding a cup of coffee and giving me hard-core eye contact.

“Oh. Um, hi.” I hadn’t expected to see her, but I quickly recovered and went in for a firm handshake. “Nice to see you again.”

The woman—Mrs. Bowen—fumbled for my hand and looked shocked by the shake. “You too, though I wish we were meeting under better circumstances.”

Even with that warning, I didn’t expect something *bad* bad. I expected her to say I needed one more reference, or perhaps that it was imperative they get a headshot from me stat.

I perched on the edge of the chair in the corner. “Oh?”

“Unfortunately there was an error in the scoring of fellowship applications. It has come to our attention that some numbers were added incorrectly.”

My heartbeat picked up a little. “Which means . . . ?”

“Which means that you actually *didn’t* win a fellowship.”

It sounds cliché, but I felt the blood drain from my face. Like, I *felt* it. I saw sparkly stars in front of my eyes and my hearing turned furry as the ramifications of her statement sunk in.

No getting far away for the summer.

No prestigious program to list on my college applications.

Being left behind while Josh attended *his* prestigious summer program.

No Northwestern.

“Emilie?” Mr. Kessler narrowed his eyes and looked like he was afraid I was going to faint. *As if*. There were a hundred things I felt like doing at that moment—most of them violent—and fainting wasn’t one of them.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and worked for a polite smile. “So that’s the final and confirmed tally, then?”

Mrs. Bowen’s lips turned down and she nodded. “We are so terribly sorry.”

“Well.” I shrugged and smiled. “What can you do, right? These things happen. I appreciate the opportunity.”

The woman tilted her head, like she couldn’t believe I wasn’t freaking out. *Trust me, lady, I’ve learned that freaking out never changes a thing*. She added, “I just cannot apologize enough, Emilie.”

“I understand.” I cleared my throat and stood. “Thank you for letting me know.”

I left with my head held high and went straight to the bathroom. I hated crying, but there was a huge ball of devastation sitting right on top of my sternum that threatened to knock me over if I didn’t take a minute.

I texted both of my parents and neither of them responded.

It was so undignified, sitting fully clothed on a toilet and

LYNN PAINTER

crying, but it was just such a blow. Everything I'd been working toward might've just been ripped out of my hands.

Because when the topic of college was first broached after the divorce, my parents were very clear that if I planned on going away to school, I was going to have to find scholarships. The dissolution of their marriage had apparently wreaked havoc on their savings, what with all the fighting through lawyers and such, so there was nothing set aside for my education.

I'd taken that to heart and dedicated myself to educational excellence. Since that fateful conversation, I'd earned all As, thrown myself into writing for the school newspaper, and I'd taken the ACT five times even though my score had been exemplary the first time.

Every little point counted, after all.

But in order to go somewhere like Northwestern—my dream school—without my parents bankrolling the excursion, I needed perfection. Impeccable extracurriculars, letters of recommendation, a plethora of volunteer hours. I needed everything.

And even *with* those, I might still fall short.

The other thing that I didn't like to admit to myself was that I didn't want Josh to beat me. We had the same GPA—the same weighted 4.4 GPA—and it irked me when he pulled ahead. I couldn't stand the smug look that crossed his face when he was winning, and if Josh was doing better than me, affection was *not* the feels coming over me.

I spent a few more minutes getting control of my emotions

THE DO-OVER

before I wiped at my eyes and stood. It was Valentine's Day, dammit. I was going to soak up every glorious minute of *that* and not think about the rest until tomorrow.

There were two more written-in-red events left on my to-do list—gift exchange and saying those three big words. I was going to throw myself into checking off those boxes and forgetting the rest.

CONFESSION #3

I have a perfect fake ID.

Between classes, I stopped at Josh's friend Blake's locker to ask if he'd seen my boyfriend. I'd yet to connect with him in person on Valentine's Day, and I desperately needed to see his face. There was no way for us to have the perfect day I'd planned if we weren't together.

Blake was leaning against the wall and texting when I said, "Have you seen Josh? He's usually hanging out in the commons between classes but I don't see him anywhere."

"Nah." He looked over my head, appearing—as always—like he didn't even see me. I'd never figured out if Blake hated me or if I scared him, and it drove me to distraction. Chris always said I had serious issues with needing people to like me, and I always considered him to be wrong except for when I was in the presence of Blake.

He said, "No idea where he is."

"Oh. Well, thanks." I turned away and felt silly just for existing. Blake was one of those guys that made you feel that way.