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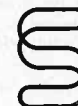
*Stuck with You*

*Below Zero*

*Loathe to*  
**Love You**



**ALI HAZELWOOD**



SPHERE

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*Under*  
**One Roof**

feel like him gently holding my wrist to check how badly I burned my thumb while cooking on the stove. This feels . . . “Liam?”

“Shh.” I feel his lips at my temple, warm and reassuring. “Everything’s okay, Mara.”

Something hot and liquid begins to coil at the bottom of my belly.

One 

Six months ago

Frankly, “They get on like a house on fire” is the most misleading saying in the English language. Faulty wiring? Misuse of heating equipment? Suspected arson? Not evocative of two people getting along in the least. You know what a house on fire has me picturing? Bazookas. Flamethrowers. Sirens in the distance. Because nothing is more guaranteed to start a house fire than two enemies blowtorching each other’s most prized possession. Want to trigger an explosion? Being nice to your roommate is not going to do it. Lighting a match on top of their kerosene-soaked handmade quilt, on the other hand—

“Miss?” The Uber driver turns, looking guilty about interrupting my pre-apocalyptic spiel. “Just a heads-up—we’re about five minutes from your destination.”

I smile an apologetic *Thank you* and glance back at my phone. My two best friends’ faces take up the entire screen. Then, on the upper corner there’s me: more frowny than usual (well justified),

more pasty than usual (is that even possible?), more ginger than usual (must be the filter, right?).

“That’s a totally fair take, Mara,” Sadie says with a puzzled expression, “and I encourage you to submit your, um, very valid complaints to Madame Merriam-Webster or whoever’s in charge of these matters, but . . . I literally only asked you how the funeral went.”

“Yes, Mara—how’d—funeral—go—?” The quality on Hannah’s end of the call is pitiful, but that’s business as usual.

This, I suppose, is what happens when you meet your best friends in grad school: One minute you’re happy as a clam, clutching your shiny brand-new engineering diploma, giggling your way through a fifth round of Midori sours. The next you’re in tears, because you’re all going separate ways. FaceTime becomes as necessary as oxygen. There are zero neon-green cocktails in sight. Your slightly deranged monologues don’t happen in the privacy of the apartment you share, but in the semipublic back seat of an Uber, while you’re on your way to have a very, *very* weird conversation.

See, that’s the thing I hate the most about adulting: at some point, one has to start doing it. Sadie is designing fancy eco-sustainable buildings in New York City. Hannah is freezing her butt off at some Arctic research station NASA put up in Norway. And as for me . . .

I’m here. Moving to D.C. to start my dream job—scientist at the Environmental Protection Agency. On paper, I should be over the moon. But paper burns so fast. As fast as houses on fire.

“Helena’s funeral was . . . interesting.” I lean back against the seat. “I guess that’s the upside of knowing that you’re about to die. You get to bully people a bit. Tell them that if they don’t play ‘Karma Chameleon’ while lowering your casket your ghost will haunt their progeny for generations.”

“I’m just glad you were able to be with her in the last few days,” Sadie says.

I smile wistfully. “She was the worst till the very end. She cheated in our last chess game. As if she wouldn’t have beaten me anyway.” I miss her. An inordinate amount. Helena Harding, my Ph.D. advisor and mentor for the past eight years, was family in a way my cold, distant blood relatives never cared to be. But she was also elderly, in a lot of pain, and, as she liked to put it, *eager to move on to bigger projects*.

“It was so lovely of her to leave you her D.C. house,” Hannah says. She must have moved to a better fjord, because I can actually make out her words. “Now you’ll have a place to be, no matter what.”

It’s true. It’s all true, and I am immensely grateful. Helena’s gift was as generous as it was unexpected, easily the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me. But the reading of the will was a week ago, and there’s something I haven’t had a chance to tell my friends. Something closely related to houses on fire. “About that . . .”

“Uh-oh.” Two sets of brows furrow. “What happened?”

“It’s . . . complicated.”

“I *love* complicated,” Sadie says. “Is it also dramatic? Let me go get tissues.”

“Not sure yet.” I take a fortifying breath. “The house Helena left me, as it turns out, she didn’t really . . . own it.”

“What?” Sadie aborts the tissue mission to frown at me.

“Well, she did own it. But only a little. Only . . . half.”

“And who owns the *other* half?” Trust Hannah to zoom in on the crux of the problem.

“Originally, Helena’s brother, who died and left it to his kids. Then the youngest son bought out the others, and now he’s the sole owner. Well, with me.” I clear my throat. “His name is Liam.

Liam Harding. He's a lawyer in his early thirties. And he currently lives in the house. Alone."

Sadie's eyes widen. "Holy shit. Did Helena know?"

"I have no clue. You'd assume, but the Hardings are such a weird family." I shrug. "Old money. Lots of it. Think Vanderbilts. Kennedys. What even goes on in rich people's brains?"

"Probably monocles," Hannah says.

I nod. "Or topiary gardens."

"Cocaine."

"Polo tournaments."

"Cuff links."

"Hang on," Sadie interrupts us. "What did Liam Vanderbilt Kennedy Harding say about this at the funeral?"

"Excellent question, but: he wasn't there."

"He didn't show up to *his aunt's funeral*?"

"He doesn't really keep in touch with his family. Lots of drama, I suspect." I tap my chin. "Maybe they're less Vanderbilts, more Kardashians?"

"Are you saying that he doesn't know that you own the other half of his house?"

"Someone gave me his number and I told him I'd be coming around." I pause before adding, "Via text. We haven't talked yet." Another pause. "And he didn't really . . . reply."

"I don't like this," Sadie and Hannah say in unison. Any other time I'd laugh about their hive mind, but there's something else I still haven't told them. Something they'll like even less.

"Fun fact about Liam Harding . . . You know how Helena was, like, the Oprah of environmental science?" I chew on my lower lip. "And she always joked that her entire family was mostly liberal-leaning academics out to save the world from the clutches of big corporations?"

"Yeah?"

"Her nephew is a corporate lawyer for FGP Corp." Just saying the words makes me want to gargle with mouthwash. And floss. My dentist will be thrilled.

"FGP Corp—the fossil fuels people?" A deep line appears in the middle of Sadie's brow. "Big oil? Supermajors?"

"Yep."

"Oh my *God*. Does he know you're an environmental scientist?"

"Well, I did give him my name. And my LinkedIn profile is just a Google search away. Do rich people use LinkedIn, you think?"

"No one uses LinkedIn, Mara." Sadie rubs her temple. "Jesus Christ, this is really bad."

"It's not that bad."

"You can't go meet with him alone."

"I'll be fine."

"He'll kill you. You'll kill him. You'll kill each other."

"I . . . maybe?" I close my eyes and lean back against the seat. I've been talking myself out of panicking for seventy-two hours—with mixed results. I can't crack now. "Believe me, he's the last person I want to co-own a house with. But Helena did leave half of it to me, and I kind of need it? I owe a billion in student loans, and D.C. is crazy expensive. Maybe I can stay there for a bit? Save on rent. It's a fiscally responsible decision, no?"

Sadie face-palms just as Hannah says combatively, "Mara, you were a grad student until ten minutes ago. You're barely above the poverty line. Do *not* let him kick you out of that house."

"Maybe he won't even mind! I'm actually very surprised he lives there. Don't get me wrong, the house is nice, but . . ." I trail off, thinking about the pictures I've seen, the hours spent on Google Street View scrolling and rescrolling through the frames,

trying to get a grip on the fact that Helena cared about me enough to *leave me a house*. It's a beautiful property, certainly. But more of a family residence. Not what I'd expect from an ace lawyer who probably earns a European country's annual GDP per billable hour. "Don't high-powered attorneys live in luxury fifty-ninth-floor penthouses with golden bidets and brandy cellars and statues of themselves? For all I know he barely spends time in the house. So I'm just going to be honest with him. Explain my situation. I'm sure we can find some kind of solution that—"

"Here we are," the driver tells me with a smile. I return it, a tad weakly.

"If you don't text us within half an hour," Hannah says in a dead-serious tone, "I'm going to assume that Big Oil Liam is holding you captive in his basement and call law enforcement."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Remember that kickboxing class I took in our third year? And that time at the strawberry festival, when I kicked the butt of the guy who tried to steal your pie?"

"He was an eight-year-old boy, Mara. And you did *not* kick his butt—you gave him your own pie and a kiss on the forehead. Text in thirty, or I'm calling the cops."

I glare at her. "Assuming a polar bear hasn't mugged you in the meantime."

"Sadie's in New York, and she has the D.C. police on speed dial."

"Yup." Sadie nods. "Setting it up right now."

I start feeling nervous the moment I exit the car, and it gets worse the farther I drag my suitcase up the path—a heavy ball of anxiety slowly nestling behind my sternum. I stop about halfway to take a deep breath. I blame Hannah and Sadie, who worry way too much and are apparently contagious. I'll be fine. This will be

fine. Liam Harding and I will have a nice, calm chat and figure out the best possible solution that is satisfactory to . . .

I take in the early-fall yard around me, and my trail of thought fades away.

It's a simple house. Large, but no topiary shit or rococo gazebos or those creepy gnomes. Just a well-kept lawn with the occasional landscaped corner, a handful of trees I don't recognize, and a large wooden patio furnished with comfortable-looking pieces. In the late-afternoon sunlight, the red bricks give the house a cozy, homey appearance. And every square inch of the place seems dusted in the warm yellow of ginkgo leaves.

I inhale the smell of grass, and bark, and sun, and when my lungs are full I let out a soft laugh. I could so easily fall in love with this place. Is it possible that I already am? My very first love at first sight?

Maybe this is why Helena left the house to me, because she knew I'd form an immediate connection. Or maybe knowing that she wanted me here has me ready to open my heart to it. Either way, it doesn't matter: this place feels like it could be home, and Helena is once again being her meddling self, this time from the afterlife. After all, she always went on and on about how she wanted me to really belong. "*You know, Mara, I can tell you're lonely,*" she'd say whenever I stopped by her office to chat. "*How do you even know?*" "*Because people who aren't lonely don't write fan fiction for The Bachelor franchise in their spare time.*" "*It's not fan fiction. More of a metacommentary on the epistemological themes that arise in each episode and—my blog has plenty of readers!*" "*Listen, you're a brilliant young woman. And everyone loves redheads. Why don't you just date one of the nerds in your cohort? Ideally the one who doesn't smell like compost.*" "*Because they're all dicks who keep asking when*

*I'll drop out to go get a degree in home economics?" "Mmm. That is a good reason."*

Maybe Helena finally realized that any hope of me settling down with *someone* was a lost cause, and decided to channel her efforts into me settling down *somewhere*. I can almost picture her, cackling like a satisfied hag, and it makes me miss her a million times harder.

Feeling much better, I leave my suitcase just off the porch (no one is going to steal it, not covered as it is in geeky KEEP CALM AND RECYCLE ON, and GOOD PLANETS ARE HARD TO FIND, and TRUST ME, I'M AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER stickers). I run a hand through my long curls, hoping they're not too messy (they probably are). I remind myself that Liam Harding is unlikely to be a threat—just a rich, spoiled man-boy with the depth of a surfboard who cannot intimidate me—and lift my arm to ring the bell. Except that the door swings open before I can get to it, and I find myself standing in front of . . .

A chest.

A broad, well-defined chest under a button-down. And a tie. And a dark suit jacket.

The chest is attached to other body parts, but it's so wide that for a moment it's all I can see. Then I manage to shift my gaze and finally notice the rest: Long, well-muscled legs filling what's left of the suit. Shoulders and arms stretching for miles. A square jaw and full lips. Short dark hair, and a pair of eyes barely a shade darker.

They are, I realize, fixed on me. Studying me with the same avid, confused interest I'm experiencing. The man appears to be unable to look away, as if spellbound at some base, deeply physical level. Which is a relief, because I can't look away, either. I don't want to.

It's like a punch to my solar plexus, how attractive I find him. It addles my brain and makes me forget that I'm standing right in front of a stranger. That I should probably say something. That the heat I'm feeling is probably inappropriate.

He clears his throat, looking as flustered as I feel.

I smile. "Hi," I say, a little breathless.

"Hi." He sounds the exact same. He wets his lips, as though his mouth is suddenly dry, and *wow*. That's a good look for him. "Can I . . . Can I help you?" His voice is beautiful. Deep. Rich. A little hoarse. I could marry this voice. I could roll around in this voice. I could listen to this voice forever and give up every other sound. But maybe I should first answer the question.

"Do you, um, live here?"

"I think so," he says, as though too wonderstruck to remember. Which makes me laugh.

"Great. I am here for . . ." What am I here for? Ah. Yes. "I was looking for, um, Liam. Liam Harding. Do you know where I can find him?"

"It's me. I'm he." He clears his throat again. Is he flushing? "That is, I am Liam."

"Oh." Oh no. Oh *no*. No, no. No. "I'm Mara. Mara Floyd. The . . . Helena's friend. I'm here about the house."

Liam's demeanor changes *instantly*.

He briefly closes his eyes, like one would when given a tragic, insurmountable piece of news. For a moment he looks betrayed, as though someone gave him a precious gift only to steal it from his hands the second it was unwrapped. When he says, "It's you," there is a bitter tinge to his beautiful voice.

He turns around and begins to stalk down the hallway. I hesitate for a moment, wondering what to do. He didn't close the door, so he wants me to follow him. Right? No clue. Either way, I

half own the house, so I'm probably not trespassing? I shrug and hurry after him, trying to keep up with his much longer legs, taking in next to nothing of my surroundings until we reach a living area.

Which is stunning. This house is all large windows and hardwood floors—oh my God, is that a *fireplace*? I want to make s'mores in it. I want to roast an entire piglet. With an apple in its mouth.

"I'm so glad we can finally talk face-to-face," I tell Liam, a little out of breath. I'm finally recovering from . . . whatever happened at the door. I fidget with the bracelet on my wrist, watching him write something on a piece of paper. "I am so sorry for your loss. Your aunt was my favorite person in the whole world. I'm not sure why she decided to leave me the house, and I do understand that this co-owning business comes a bit out of left field, but . . ."

I trail off when he folds the paper and hands it to me. He's so tall, I have to consciously lift up my chin to meet his eyes. "What is this?" I don't wait for his answer and unfold it.

There's a number written on it. A number with zeros. Lots of them. I look up, confused. "What does this mean?"

He holds my gaze. There is no trace of the flustered, hesitant man who greeted me a few moments earlier. This version of Liam is coldly handsome and self-assured. "Money."

"Money?"

He nods.

"I don't understand."

"For your half of the house," he says impatiently, and it suddenly dawns on me: he is trying to buy me out.

I look down at the paper. This is more money than I've ever had in my life—or ever will. Environmental engineering? Not a lucrative career choice, apparently. And I don't know much about real estate, but my guess is that this sum is *way* above the actual

value of the house. "I'm sorry. I think there's a misunderstanding. I'm not going to—I don't—" I take a deep breath. "I don't think I want to sell."

Liam stares, expressionless. "You don't *think*?"

"I *don't*. Want to sell, that is."

He nods once, curtly. And then asks, "How much more?"

"What?"

"How much more do you want?"

"No, I—I'm not interested in selling the house," I repeat. "I just can't. Helena—"

"Is double enough?"

"*Double*—how do you *even*—do you have *corpses* buried under the flower beds?"

His eyes are blocks of ice. "How much more?"

Is he even listening to me? Why is he being so insistent? Where has his cute, boyish blush gone? At the door, he just seemed so . . .

Whatever. I was clearly wrong. "I just can't sell. I'm sorry. But maybe we can figure out something else in the next few days? I don't have a place to stay in D.C., so I was thinking of moving in for a little while . . ."

He exhales a silent laugh. Then he realizes that I'm serious, and shakes his head. "No."

"Well." I try to be reasonable. "The house seems large, and—"

"You're not moving in."

I take a deep breath. "I understand. But my financial situation is very precarious. I'm starting my new job in two days, and it's really close by. On foot. This is a perfect place for me to live for a little while, until I get back on my feet."

"I just handed you the solution to all of your financial problems."

I wince. "It's really not that simple." Or maybe it is. I don't know, because I just can't stop remembering the ginkgo leaves