

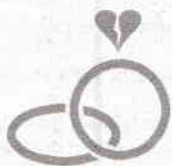
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HAPPILY

Never

AFTER



LYNN PAINTER



PENGUIN BOOKS

Sophie

THE MOMENT MY dad raised my veil, kissed my cheek, and handed me off to Stuart, I wanted to throw up.

No—first, I wanted to punch my groom right in his besotted smile.

Then I wanted to vomit.

Instead, I took his arm and grinned back at him like a good bride.

The pastor started speaking, launching into his cookie-cutter TED talk about true love, and my heart was racing as I waited. I swear I could feel four hundred sets of eyes burning into the back of my Jacqueline Firkins wedding gown as I heard nothing but the sound of my panicked pulse pounding through my veins and reverberating in my eardrums.

Was he already there, seated among the guests? Was he going to burst through the doors, yelling?

And—God—what if he was a no-show?

The photographer, kneeling just to my right, took a photo of my face as I listened to Pastor Pete's love lies, so I turned up my lips and attempted to project bridal joy.

"You look so nervous," Stuart whispered, giving me a small smile.

I honestly don't know how I didn't throat-punch him at that moment.

"Welcome, loved ones," the pastor said, beaming at the congregation as he spoke. "We are gathered here today to join together Sophie and Stuart in holy matrimony."

I felt my breath hitch, unsteady, as he kept yammering, leading us closer to the moment. Something about the twinkling lights and evergreen boughs that we'd painstakingly selected for our December wedding felt garish to me all of a sudden, as if the hobo ghost from *Polar Express* was going to show up in the back of the church and mock me for my foolishness.

And he wouldn't be wrong.

Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please, I thought, panic tightening my chest. With every word the pastor spoke, my anxiety grew.

Stuart squeezed my trembling hand, the ever-supportive fiancé, and I squeezed back hard enough to make him look at me in surprise.

"Should anyone present know of any reason that this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your—"

"I do."

A collective gasp shot through the large chapel, and when I turned around, the man standing up was not at all what I expected. He was big and tall and impeccably dressed: charcoal suit, white shirt, gray tie, and matching pocket square. He looked like Henry Cavill's stunt double or something, but with darker hair and more intense eyes.

Honestly, I'd imagined he would be a party bro, like Vince Vaughn in *Wedding Crashers*, but this man looked more like he belonged in a boardroom.

"So sorry to interrupt," he said in a smooth, deep voice, "but these two should absolutely *not* be married."

"Who is that?" Stuart hissed, daring to give *me* an accusing stare as a low rumble of whispers emanated from the pews.

"Oh, she doesn't know me, Stuart," the man said, looking a hundred percent comfortable in his uncomfortable role. He raised one dark eyebrow and added, "But my friend Becca knows *you*."

I gasped, my response entirely authentic even though I'd actually practiced it beforehand. I'd known this man was coming, but I hadn't expected him to be so . . .

Good.

The man was *good*. The way he spoke made me feel just as shocked as I'd been two nights ago, when I'd discovered Stuart's *Becca* on his phone.

"Listen, pal, I don't know—"

"Stuart. Shut up." The man looked down at his wrist and straightened his cuff, as if the mere sight of Stuart bored him. "The lovely Sophie deserves so much more than a cheater for a husband. I would imagine most of us here know it isn't the first time; wasn't there a Chloe last year?"

"I don't know who you are, but this is *bullshit*." Stuart's face was red as he glared at the man, and then his darting eyes came back to me. I looked at his face, remembering how it'd looked when he'd sobbingly begged my forgiveness over his Chloe transgression, and he actually had the gall to say to me, "You know it's not true, right?"

My gut burned as he feigned innocence and I said, "How would I know that? Isn't Becca the name of the girl who texted you in the middle of the night, and you said it was a wrong number?"

"It *was* a wrong number," he said with wild eyes. "This guy is obviously trying to ruin our day, and you're letting him, Soph."

"Then give me your phone," I said calmly, and Pastor Pete pulled at his collar.

"*What?*" Stuart's flushed face twisted, and he glanced at the congregation as though looking for backup.

"If you have nothing to hide," the objector said, still standing

and talking in that deep, steady voice like this whole scenario was completely normal. "Just give her the phone, Stuart."

"That's it, fucker!" Stuart yelled, rushing toward the guy. All hell broke loose as his groomsmen followed, though it was unclear if they were trying to hold him back or incite the forthcoming brawl.

It was a cacophony of male yelling and gray tuxedos in motion.

His mother yelled, "Stuart, no!"

Just as Stuart punched the objector square in the face.

"Oh, my God," I said to no one in particular, watching in disbelief as the objector took the punch without his body moving, as if he hadn't even felt it.

Stuart's father looked right at me as he loudly muttered, "Jesus Christ."

And Pastor Pete apparently forgot that his lapel mic was on, because he sighed and said, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"To dodging the Stuart bullet," Asha said, holding up her shot glass.

"To dodging Stuart," I repeated, tossing back the Cuervo.

It burned going down—*man, I hate tequila*—but I welcomed its effects. My head was spinning from the wedding collapse, and I desperately wished for impairment of any sort. It'd been four hours since the ceremony brawl and an hour since Stuart had removed his things from the honeymoon suite, yet I still felt like everything had just happened.

"Woo!" Asha shouted, slamming her glass down on the bar.

Yes, she is one shot ahead of me and way more relaxed.

The honeymoon suite had a fully stocked bar between the two balcony doors, and we'd been bellied up to it since the moment Stuart had left.

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"I still cannot believe how perfectly it went down," she said, giving her head a shake. "I mean, technically it's exactly what we paid for, but the dude made everyone at the ceremony *haaaate* Cheating Stuart and totally sympathize with you."

Cheating Stuart. I appreciated her villainizing him—that's what friends did, after all—but I was still devastated by Stu's infidelity. Yes, he'd cheated in the past, so I hadn't been completely blindsided, but I'd wholeheartedly believed that it was a onetime mistake and I'd chugged the Kool-Aid of happily-ever-after like a damn fool.

Until I saw his phone two nights ago.

"I'm just *so* relieved the blame for the canceled wedding falls solely on Stuart instead of me and my parents," I said, leaning forward on my stool to grab a Twinkie off the bar.

Until Asha found her unorthodox solution, I'd been resigned to marrying Stuart and seeking an annulment after the fact. I knew it was totally bonkers to go through with the wedding, but it was the only way to ensure my father didn't pay the price for my failed relationship.

I unwrapped the snack and shook my head, still in awe.

"I can't believe the plan actually worked," Asha agreed, reaching around the box of Twinkies to grab more tequila. "Thank God for The Objector."

Max

I KNOCKED ON the hotel room door and waited.

This was my least favorite part.

More often than not, the bride who desperately wanted out of her own wedding was an emotional mess afterward, shocked by the end of what she thought would be the beginning of the rest of their lives together.

And I was not the reassuring kind. Back pats and handkerchiefs were not my thing.

I just needed my money and to get the hell out of there.

On a side note, who the hell doesn't have Venmo or PayPal?

I heard a noise just before the door flew open.

"The Objector!" A blonde in a Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirt that went down to her knees grinned at me. "I'm Asha. We talked on the phone . . . ?"

Ah, yes. The bride's best friend and my college roommate's cousin. "So you're Tom's cousin."

"Yes!" She grinned again, and I realized she was totally buzzed. "Come in!"

She held open the door, and I followed her inside what was obviously the bridal suite. Huge living room, bedroom to the left that appeared to have rose petals everywhere, and a silver bucket on the coffee table with a bottle of champagne inside.

Typical.

I shifted my gaze to the right and saw the bar, with an open bottle of tequila in the center and two shot glasses on the surface.

Less typical.

“You were *amazing*,” she squealed, shaking her head like she couldn’t believe it as she went right over to the bar and grabbed the bottle. “Tommy told me to trust him, but I had no idea that you’d be such a professional.”

I smiled and muttered a thanks, but I was never sure how to respond to that. It wasn’t like I was proud of my performance. I wasn’t an actor looking for good reviews, for fuck’s sake.

It was just something I occasionally did for money.

At that moment the balcony door flew open and the bride—Sophie—ran in, saying to Asha, “I need one more.”

At least it *looked* like the bride.

Walking down the aisle, she’d been stunning. Her dark hair had been tidily piled on top of her head, accentuating her light brown eyes and long, graceful neck. She’d looked like everything I imagined a bride would want to look like on her wedding day.

Her hair now, though, was *everywhere*. Technically a lot of it was in a messy bun, but long strands of curly hair hung all around her face like she’d just wrestled a bear. She was no longer wearing any makeup, which made her look like a teenager, and she’d switched out the wedding gown for a Chicago Bears jersey and leggings.

And . . . snow boots.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw me, and then a big smile slid across her face. “You. Are. My. Hero.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off with an index finger. “Gimme one sec. I have to finish a project.”

I watched in disbelief as Asha tossed her a Hostess Twinkie, and then she disappeared back out onto the balcony.

“Do I want to know?” I asked, my eyes still on the sliding door.

“Twinkies won’t hurt the Volvo’s paint, so it’s a victimless crime.”

she said, turning to look at the bottles of liquor on the shelf behind the bar. "That's all you need to know."

I contemplated just exiting the hotel room at that moment, because (a) this was clearly none of my business, and (b) it was just past seven and I was starving.

But when I saw the bride pull her arm back and launch that snack cake off the balcony like a professional quarterback, I decided to stick around for another minute.

"Want a drink?" Asha asked, looking ready to pour herself a tequila shooter.

Before I could answer, the bride came back inside, saying as she closed the sliding door behind her, "We need to switch to something else."

"What? Why?" Asha asked, pouting. She held up the bottle of tequila and said, "Jose is our friend."

"Nope." The bride shook her head, kicked off the boots, and said, "As much as I want to get ripped, I don't want to end up with my head in a hotel toilet. Pretty sure that's how you get dysentery."

"Pretty sure that isn't right," I said under my breath.

"Schnapps, maybe?" Asha asked.

"Objector's choice," Sophie said, her lips turning up into a little smile as she tilted her head and looked in my direction. "What should we drink?"

"Whiskey," I said, wondering what her usual drink of choice was. Because when she was dressed as a bride, I would've pegged her as a cosmo drinker, perhaps someone who enjoyed a nice chardonnay. But this Twinkie-tossing, wild-eyed girl was a bit of a mystery. "Unless you're dialing back to something lighter."

"Not at all," she said, pulling the elastic from her hair and shaking out the half bun. "But tequila punches too hard."

"Have a shot with us, Objector," Asha said—or, rather, squealed. "The pizza's already on the way."

"First of all, you *have* to stop calling me that."

"Why?" Sophie asked, putting her hands on her hips and screwing her eyebrows together. "What's your real name again?"

"Max," I said. "Parks."

"*Max*," she repeated, raising her eyes to the ceiling as if it held an opinion on my name. "I mean, that's a fine name and all, but The Objector is next level."

"It makes me sound like an off-brand superhero."

She snorted a little laugh, and I noticed her freckles when she crinkled her nose. "Like a lawyer who got stuck in radioactive waste, right?"

"Exactly," I agreed.

"Which whiskey, Objector?" Asha asked, gesturing toward the bar. "You're drinking with us, right?"

"Thank you, but I can't—"

"Of *course* he isn't," Sophie said, rolling her eyes and climbing onto one of the two barstools. "He is a man, and it's their job to disappoint us. Eternally. Please pour me a shot, Ash."

"Didn't you just call me your hero?" I asked, sliding my hands into my pockets as she ignored me and reached for the shot glass. "Like two minutes ago?"

"Your actions *were* heroic and I'm very grateful," she said, circling a perfectly manicured fingernail over the top of the tiny glass and turning her back to me. "But I said what I said. Asha, my love, will you pour my whiskey shooter, please?"

Something about the all-knowing way she said it and her absolute dismissal of me made me shrug out of my jacket, toss it on the sofa, and grab the stool beside her.

"Make that two, please."

She turned her head toward me, her eyebrows raised. "You're staying?"

"I can't ruin the reputations of men everywhere by disappointing

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you, can I?" I asked, reaching for the shot that Asha slid in front of me. "What are we drinking to?"

Her lips slowly slid into a smile as she lifted her glass. "To last-minute reprieves."

I raised my shot to her. "To last-minute reprieves."