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CATHERINE WALSH

**HOW TO  
WRITE A  
LOVE  
STORY**

  
SPHERE

## CHAPTER ONE

## Sam

NEW YORK

'He's not going to fire you.'

'He might.'

'He won't, Sam. You're basically his protégé. And also one of, like, three straight men in publishing. They need to keep numbers up.'

'Funny.'

I switch my phone to the other ear as I accept my coffee from the already exhausted-looking barista. It's not even eight a.m., and the Monday morning rush is in full swing. Behind me, a pack of finance bros in crisp white shirts and open spread collars read their emails as they wait to order, and for once I don't look completely out of place next to them. Granted, my shirt is neither as crisp nor as white as theirs, but I wanted to make an effort this morning. As if forgoing my usual uniform of dark jeans and the first sweater I find will make my boss go, *Here's a man I need on my team*. Or, at the very least, *Here's a man who owns an iron*.

I mean, it can't hurt.

'Plus, he asked you to come in early,' Lizzie continues as though reading my mind. 'If he wanted to fire you, he'd ask you to stay late.'

'How do you figure that?'

'Because that's what I'd do.'

'But you don't have a job.'

'Excuse me?' My sister's tone sharpens. 'You think looking after three boys under five isn't a job?'

'An *office* job,' I correct, clutching my laptop bag to my chest as I squeeze past the line. 'Like the one I'm about to lose.'

'Could you stop sounding so defeatist? At least save some of that self-pity for when it happens.'

'When it—'

'If,' she hurries on. 'If it happens.'

'You're bad at pep talks.'

'I know.' Her voice grows faint next to the roar of traffic as I step outside, and I turn up the volume on my phone.

'Do you want to say good morning to Oliver before we hang up?' Lizzie asks.

'He's three months old.'

'Exactly. He's developing. He should learn his uncle's voice.'

'How about this: when I'm unemployed, I'll spend the whole day with him. The whole *week*.'

'You'll be fine.' The words sound sympathetic enough that I don't believe her. 'And anyway, would it be such a bad thing?'

'Would losing my job be a *bad* thing?'

'I just mean that you've been working so hard and—'

'I like my job, Liz!'

'Okay. Sorry. Just let me know how it goes, all right? And don't make any stupid decisions in the meantime.'

'I make no promises,' I say, and we hang up as I scan the five-word email I've read a hundred times since I got it last night.

*See me in the morning.*

Seriously? That could mean anything from *I'm giving you a promotion to pack up your stuff*. And this is what Lizzie doesn't understand. It doesn't matter how well I'm doing. Cutbacks are happening everywhere in the industry. Two of my friends were let go in the past month alone. That's the state of publishing right now. More books. Fewer staff. And those of us who remain have to pick up the slack. I can't count the number of all-nighters I've pulled recently. All the weekend work and reading on the commute. And okay, maybe it was getting to the point where I was starting to envisage a world where my entire social life didn't hinge on whether or not my authors got their drafts in on time. But I thought about it in the way someone thinks about shaving their head, or selling all their possessions to travel the world. Not seriously.

And definitely not right now.

I take a sip of coffee, dread pooling in my stomach as I force myself through the revolving doors of our building and into the elevator.

Richardson Books takes up two floors of an office in Midtown and is almost empty when I stride inside. We have flexible hours, but there are only a few early birds at their desks, and they don't give me a second glance until Amy, one of our assistants, takes one look at me and bursts out laughing.

'Oh, Sam,' she says, pretending to wipe away a tear. 'Sammy Sam Sam. Samothy.'

'What?'

'Nice shirt, boss.'

'I have a meeting today and— Shit.' I glance down, finally clocking

what she means as I see the large brown stain spreading down my front.

'I think you pull it off,' she says as I set the coffee down.

'How the hell did that happen?'

'It's because your cup is leaking,' Deborah says, barely lifting her eyes from her computer. She works across from me, and I like to think she secretly enjoys my company even though she makes it very clear every day that she doesn't. 'You should have double-checked the lid.'

'Didn't you feel it?' Amy asks, pointing her phone my way.

'Obviously not.'

'I would have felt it.'

'This is why I don't drink coffee,' Deborah adds.

Amy grins. 'You are peak Monday morning right now,' she tells me. 'If you were wearing heels, they'd be broken.'

'Then thank God I'm not,' I mutter, undoing the buttons only to realise the coffee's leaked through to my undershirt. That sends Amy cackling again, and it's at that moment that my fellow editorial director, Laura, walks into the office, sipping from an extra-large, not-leaking iced latte.

'Why is Sam stripping?'

'We're starting a romance imprint,' Amy quips as I shrug the first layer off.

'I'm sure romance readers have better taste than that,' Laura says, ignoring my *ouch* look as she tosses me one of the many blankets she keeps under her desk.

'Don't listen to her,' Amy says. 'You're extremely hot. If I were poly—'

'This is a professional environment,' Deborah interrupts.

Laura kicks Amy's chair. 'Are you taking pictures?'

'Just of his arms.'

'Delete,' Laura warns. 'Now.'

'But he needs them to reel in women online.'

'No, he doesn't.'

Amy waits until her back is turned before gesturing me over, and I pause at the not-terrible photo of me on her screen.

She's right. I do need to reel. 'Send that one to me first.'

She nods, completely serious. 'If you pretend to take your shirt off again, I can get a great shot of you—'

'Samuel.'

As one, we turn to where my name was yelled from the next room.

Right. That.

Amy snorts as I wrap the blanket around my shoulders, trying to cover myself.

'You've been summoned,' Deborah says.

'And you're telling me no one has any spare T-shirts? I helped pack three boxes of blogger swag-bags last week, and there's not a single branded T-shirt left?'

Amy bats her lashes. 'I have a little black dress in my drawer.'

'I'm giving you three hours of printing today,' I tell her, and turn with as much dignity as I can muster towards the small side office.

Laura catches up with me before I'm even halfway there. 'You're in early,' she says, sounding so casual that I laugh.

'He wants a meeting.'

'What kind of meeting?'

'Don't know yet.' I stop, turning to face her. 'Why are *you* in early?'

'Because I'm a go-getter,' she says, innocent as ever. 'You want me to sit in?'

'Nope.'

We stare at each other as she takes a slow sip of her latte.

Laura is my work nemesis. In the purely professional sense. She joined the company a few years ago, leapfrogged a whole job level and now we work side by side overseeing the editorial department. She's really good at what she does, which is great for Richardson Books and terrible for me, because I am also really good at what she does and that's been fine until now. Until the point where we're both vying for the same promotion.

All the more reason to get rid of one of us.

'It creeps me out when you do that non-blinking thing,' I say when she doesn't move.

'I know.'

'Samuell!'

Shit. I tug the blanket tighter. 'Your paranoia is making me late.'

'All part of the plan,' she stage-whispers, and backs away as I poke my head through the doorway to find my boss at his desk.

Casey Richardson is a self-described *relic of the publishing industry*. He rose through the ranks long before I was even born, and his eye for spotting talent is the stuff of legends. His authors love him. His staff do too, which is why many of them followed him when he set up his own publishing house thirty years ago, dedicated to bringing the best sci-fi and fantasy fiction to shelves around the world. Even now, at seventy-three, he shows no signs of slowing down. He still reads more than anyone I know. Still comes to the office every day and is usually first in and last out. He hired me as an editorial assistant ten years ago, and I can't imagine working anywhere else. I don't want to.

'You rang?' I ask, knocking on the doorframe.

'That was me shouting, actually.' He looks up from his phone, peering at me over his thin-rimmed glasses. 'You're not wearing a shirt.'

'No.'

'All right. Close the door.'

I hesitate, but he doesn't miss a beat.

'You're not being fired.'

Well, that's a relief. 'You could have mentioned that in your email.'

'My apologies.'

He gestures to the armchair in front of his desk, and I swing the door shut before gently nudging Melville out of the way. Casey's cat doesn't like me, but he doesn't like anyone (the Deborah of the cat world, if you will), so I don't take offence when he hisses at me.

'What's up?' I ask, more relaxed now we're not at doomsday scenario.

Casey puts his phone down and leans forward, steeping his fingers together. 'Ciara Sheridan.'

I wait a long moment. He doesn't go on. 'What about her?'

'What do you know of her?'

'Frank Sheridan's daughter? I know that she's Frank Sheridan's daughter.'

Casey gives me a look. 'You don't have to pretend in here, Sam. I know you're a fan. It's why I hired you.'

Right. Ciara Sheridan. 'She's an only child,' I offer. 'Somewhere near thirty. Her favourite colour is blue.'

Casey's eyebrows rise.

'He mentioned it in a *New Yorker* interview.'

'I see,' he says. 'I meant professionally.'

Yeah, that makes more sense. 'Crime author. Or at least she used to be. She had a series under a pseudonym.'

'She did. Three books. Three good books, as a matter of fact. But she got stage fright when her real name was revealed and didn't publish again.'

'I heard she moved to France.'

'Did you? And where did you hear that?'

Reddit. 'Around.'

'It was London,' he says, readjusting his glasses as he turns to his computer. 'But she moved back to Ireland just before Frank died. She lives there now.'

'In his house?'

'In his house.'

I let out a low whistle. Frank's house is famous. Almost as famous as his books. He bought it after he sold his first million copies, and it became this mythical pilgrimage site for his readers. He lived in the middle of nowhere, and locals kept tight-lipped, but it didn't stop people from travelling halfway around the world to try to find it. I'd thought about making the trip myself after college, but when I got the job here I'd figured the whole 'stalking one of our authors' vibe might be frowned upon. Especially someone like him.

Even after his death, Frank Sheridan is still our biggest name. His Ravian books, a nine-volume epic fantasy series, have sold in the tens of millions, aided by a wildly successful movie trilogy. Everything remotely to do with him turns to gold, so if Casey is bringing up his daughter . . .

'Is she writing something else? Under her own name?' Just the thought has me sitting straighter. The marketing plan writes itself.

But Casey's being coy.

'She is.'

'Fantasy?'

'That's the plan.'

'Finally walking in her father's footsteps.'

'You could say that. She's writing *The Last Mountain*.'

I laugh, as anyone would when their boss tells a joke. But Casey doesn't say anything more. He just continues to tap away with slow, deliberate prods of the keyboard, waiting for me to catch up.

It takes me a minute. *The Last Mountain*.'

'Yes.'

'As in . . .'

'Yes.'

'Ciara Sheridan is writing *The Last Mountain*?'

Casey's eyes shoot to the door and I press my lips together. 'Sorry,' I say, lowering my voice. 'But . . . what?'

The Ravian series wasn't supposed to be nine books; it was supposed to be ten. And, for years, *The Last Mountain* had been the promised culmination of nearly two decades of storytelling. The ending to it all. Like everyone else, when Frank died I'd resigned myself to never knowing what was supposed to happen to the characters I'd grown up with, to this world I'd loved. So . . . *what*?

'He kept copious notes,' Casey continues.

'He said he didn't want anyone else to write it.'

'Anyone but her, though he didn't say that in public. He knew the pressure she'd face.'

'But she's writing it now?'

'Yes.'

'But she's . . .' I shake my head. 'But he didn't . . .'

'Sam?'

'I think I need to sit down.'

'You are sitting down.'

Oh.

Casey pushes a glass of water towards me.

'Frank got in touch with me a few years ago,' he explains as I take a gulp. 'He said he'd started writing it, but I never thought he'd finish.'

I knew he was unwell and assumed he was just growing sentimental. But after his death his estate sent some final letters and things he wanted me to have. Among them were explicit instructions regarding his final manuscript. Chiefly, that he wanted Ciara to finish it. I waited a few months to give her space and then reached out. When I asked her if she would write it, she said yes.'

She said yes.

Ciara Sheridan said yes.

The team are going to lose their minds.

Not that we'll need to work that hard. We could charge fifty dollars a copy and people would still buy it. Hardback. Paperback. Special edition. Exclusive edition. Bonus material. *Complete box set*. We could repackage the whole series. No more talks about cutbacks. We'd probably have to double our staff just to keep up with it all.

My heart starts to race just thinking about it. Frank Sheridan's final book. Frank Sheridan's *final book*. This is it. This is the moment that makes up for every late night and every long email. This is the moment that—

Casey shuffles some papers. 'I don't think she'll be able to do it.'

And I swear there's a goddamn record-scratch in my brain.

'What do you mean?'

'The first few chapters were good,' he says. 'So good that I thought about telling you all weeks ago, but I wanted the book on my desk before we announced it. We can't afford to make any mistakes.'

'Understood,' I say slowly. 'So what's the problem?'

'She hasn't written any more. She hasn't sent me anything in five weeks. And she's barely responded to my emails in the past two.'

'Maybe she's just putting her head down,' I point out. 'Doing the work.'

'Maybe,' he agrees. 'But maybe not.'

'You think she's bailing?'

'I think she's struggling. In fact, she told me as much in her last message.'

I sit back, confused. 'So we'll get a ghostwriter. Put her name on the cover. The important thing is that we get the story right.'

Casey frowns, but I don't see the issue.

'Or we say she was a contributing writer,' I insist. 'She did some Zoom calls. Came up with the character names. It's not like every random celebrity doesn't do the same thing.'

'But this is not a random book. And Frank was clear that he wanted her and only her to write it, or no one at all. When she agreed so quickly, I hoped she was up for it, but I think we'll need to do some hand-holding.'

'You want her to come to New York?'

'I proposed that, but she refused. Says she has too much to do at home.'

'What, then?'

'That's why I wanted to speak to you,' he says as Melville hops from one stack of papers to another. 'I was hoping you'd go to Ireland for me.'

'To—' I break off with a wince as the cat lands directly on my lap, digging his claws into my thighs. 'Excuse me?'

'Ireland,' he repeats as I encourage Melville off.

'And do what?'

'Something on this scale can't be worked out over a few emails. I want you to sit with her and go through Frank's notes. I don't expect her to piece it together by herself, and no one here knows these characters better than you do.'

'Is that your way of saying I'm a giant nerd?'

'It's my way of saying that this is my solution to publishing the biggest book I'll ever work on.'

'Paul is supposed to send his draft back in a few days,' I remind him. He's my most difficult author, but he writes extremely sellable books. When he wants to, that is.

'We can move things around. I'm sure Amy will be eager for the opportunity to take on some titles.'

'And she deserves it, but—'

'Sam,' he interrupts, and I shut up. 'I'm asking if you would like to edit the final book in one of the most popular series of all time. One that you grew up reading and that, if published right, will probably define your career. Is that something you're interested in?'

'It's only my greatest dream,' I admit, and I swear his lips twitch.

'Then it's decided. Your passport's up to date.'

'I think so.' I shift in my seat as Melville stretches and settles on the windowsill. 'Does anyone else know?'

'No one. We're keeping it quiet at Ciara's request. She doesn't like publicity.'

'Please tell me she's not a recluse.' Visions of a peephole-peering, get-off-my-property figure come to mind, but Casey shakes his head.

'She just doesn't want the pressure of too much attention.'

'Then she's writing the wrong book,' I mutter.

He gives me a knowing look. 'I can ask Laura to take over if you don't—'

'No,' I say quickly. 'Sorry. It's just a lot to wrap my head around.'

'I know. And I know it's a big change to the schedule, but I want you on this, Sam. I'm trusting you to get this done.'

'But how will I—'

'I'll send you an email with the details.'

That's Casey-speak for *get to work*.

'Okay, then,' I say as his phone starts ringing. 'I guess I'll start on my handover.'

'Wonderful. And Sam?'

'Yeah?'

'Find a shirt, would you?'

## CHAPTER TWO

## Ciara

COUNTY KERRY, IRELAND

*Three weeks later*

The beach is busy today. I guess it's been busy since early April, when the weather first changed, but it's especially busy today. They must have let the schools out early. Or maybe everyone's just playing hooky.

I can't blame them if so. My father used to say that nowhere is more beautiful than Ireland in the sunshine. Probably because we never get that much of it. Especially on the west coast, where it rains fifty per cent of the year. We're used to clouds here. To dull, drab grey permeating our world. And so, when they part, when that big ball of fire shines down on us, it's a little like Dorothy stepping into Oz. The grass looks greener, the rivers sparkle and everyone walks around with bemused looks as they inform each other that for two hours the other day we were hotter than Seville.

*There now, they say triumphantly. Where else would you get it? Beautiful. For a week or two anyway. Because the thing is, when*

you're not used to much more than that, when your buildings are designed to keep *in* the heat and your entire humid-loving ecosystem has developed around the rain you so often complain about, you start to long for a breeze. For an item of clothing you haven't sweated through. And as I stand manning the tiny smoothie truck on this sweltering May afternoon, watching a mother diligently cover her toddler head to toe in sunscreen, I wonder how much longer my people, my temperate, let-me-just-grab-a-jacket people, can pretend to enjoy this.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Maddie's voice whips through the cramped space of the truck, sounding so furious that I look down to make sure I'm still peeling bananas and not, you know, murdering a small child.

'Ciara.'

'What!' I exclaim as she stomps inside. 'Stop yelling at me. I'm on my period.'

'No, you're not; we're synced. Where's Natalie?'

'I let her go early.'

'You can't do that. You don't work here.'

'And apparently she doesn't know that.'

Maddie plucks the banana skin from my hands, dumping it into a bin bag before pinning her glare on me. 'You're supposed to be at home. Writing.'

'I'm taking a break.'

'You're procrastinating.'

'And providing you with free labour in the process. I'm making smoothies,' I add when she goes to argue. 'I'm not heading down the mines for the day. Plus, you have air-conditioning.' I grab the small portable fan from the shelf, holding it up to my face. 'We're in the middle of a heatwave.'