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SO, LIKE, THE NICEST GIRL BUT ALSO KIND OF A BADASS
UNDERNEATH IT ALL?

Exactly.

Is this character too perfect to be realistic, though?

IT ALMOST FEELS THAT WAY, DOESN'T IT?

But Emily was one thousand percent the real deal, the perfectly unforgettable
main character we were somehow blessed enough to know in real life.

Dedication #2

To YOU, Reader.

You might think you're alone, but you're not.

Your people just haven't found you yet.

They're coming, and they're going to LOVE you, so don't give up.

They're on their way . . .



Julia's Prologue

"If I die in Nebraska, I'm leaving everything
to the hot dog people."

—Remington

Sometimes life is ridiculous.

For example, on the eve of what would come to be known as one of
the most monumental days of my life, I was hauling around an old ice
cream bucket just in case I wasn't done feeling sick. I'd had an unfor-
tunate run-in with some surprise cashews after school, which led to an
ER visit, and now someone was at the door.

Wonderful.

And the rest of my family was in the backyard with the new kittens.

Perfect.

I hit the porch light and pulled open the door, unsteady on my feet,
expecting to see one of the neighbors.

Instead there was a man standing there.

A silver-haired man in a *very* nice suit, looking like a mob boss or an
FBI agent. His gaze was alert—intense—as he watched me.

"Hi," I said, pushing open the screen door, wondering where this
well-dressed stranger might've come from. "Can I help you?"

"Good evening, miss. Are *Clint* or *Shawna* available?"

It was almost as if his voice had applied air quotes around my
parents' names, like his lips had never uttered such unsophisticated
Midwestern labelery before.

His appearance on our porch felt . . . worrisome.

My stomach clenched.

Damn you, cashews. I knew I should've blown off the "free cookies" table in front of the counselor's office, but I'd been so depressed after hearing about Will and Hannah that I'd completely eaten my feelings instead.

I kept my hand on the door handle as I felt tiny beads of sweat forming on my forehead. "Um, may I ask—"

"Hey." Liam, my twin brother, popped up behind me. "What's up?"

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to Liam to just casually *what's up* a stranger from God-knows-where who was standing on our stoop with the intention of doing God-knows-what.

"My name is Bernard Elizando, and I'm looking for your parents, young man," the guy said in an accent that could only be called cultured. It wasn't technically British, I didn't think, but it was so locked-in on formality that it felt . . . noble. "Might they be available?"

"They're feeding the cats out back," my brother volunteered, ignoring my handle-grasping hand to push the door all the way open in a gesture that begged the potentially murderous stranger to enter our house. "Come on in."

"We don't even know him," I whispered under my breath as the man stepped over the threshold. "What are you doing?"

"He rang the doorbell and said 'might they be available,'" Liam said in a surprisingly good imitation of a British accent. "Bernard's obviously not the Golden State Killer."

"I can assure you I'm not here on violent business, Miss Lowell," the man said, meeting my eyes. He wasn't smiling, but there *was* some sort of reassurance in his calm expression, amusement in his ice-blue eyes. "I simply need a moment with your parents."

"I got you, Elizando," Liam said, leading the guy through the living room and toward the back door. "Do you want anything to drink? Busch Light? Water?"

Stop offering refreshments to foreboding strangers, you idiot!

"No, thank you," Bernard replied. I trailed behind them as Liam slid open the patio door and they both stepped outside.

And as the ick of nausea returned to my body, my world went off the rails.

Because after introductions were made and an entire conversation transpired about the adorable feral kittens living underneath our hydrangea bushes, Bernard Elizando started saying the craziest things I'd ever heard.

He calmly informed my parents they'd been named the primary beneficiaries in the will of some guy named Remington. Apparently there was money *and* a house, which now belonged to them.

Us.

My mom's mouth dropped wide open as Bernard shared the news, and my dad laughed like this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

"I'm so sorry, Bernard, but that name doesn't even sound familiar to me," my dad said, shaking his head. He smiled a confused grin and asked, "Are you sure you have the correct Clint and Shawna Lowell?"

"Of course," Bernard said, and that response felt right. I somehow just *knew* this steely-haired man never made mistakes. He quickly listed off our address, the address of my parents' market, and a brief bio of my parents' life.

"That *does* sound like us," my dad quipped, still looking amused as hell.

"And this stranger seriously left us money and a house in his will . . . ?" My mother squinted and her eyebrows scrunched together. "That doesn't make sense. And we don't have to *do* anything to accept this inheritance . . . ?"

"There actually *are* some stipulations, Ms. Lowell," he said with a nod.

"Okay, here it is," she replied lightly, pursing her lips.

"Entirely aboveboard, I promise," Bernard assured her.

But then he spewed utter madness.

He looked my parents in the face and told them (in his very dignified voice) that the house they were to inherit was in New York City. It was a five-story single-family home on the Upper West Side, and the fact that my parents didn't just die on the spot when he said that told me they had no idea what this meant.

But I did.

And I gasped so loudly when he said it was in the Gardenwood neighborhood by Riverside Park, not that anyone in the backyard (aside from me and Bernard) knew what that clarification meant either, because holy, holy *shit*.

I'd binge-watched *The Woods* (prep-school drama series) multiple times, so *of course* I knew, but my parents and brother—clueless as to what this implied.

Gardenwood, also known as the *beau monde blocks* (a pretty nickname for the neighborhood), was an area where Manhattan felt quieter and more residential, where uptown old money lived in buildings that looked like rows of ornate mansions, all glued together.

I listened in shock as Bernard gave my parents a brief description of the "house"—*two kitchens, wine cellar, elevator, five wood-burning fireplaces, two-thousand-square-foot roof deck with Hudson River views*—and then he informed them we would need to *live in it* for no less than six months if we wanted to inherit.

Those were the two stipulations: We had to live in the house for at least six months, and Liam and I had to attend the very exclusive Gardenwood Academy during that time.

I took in a deep breath of fresh air and clutched the ice cream pail a little harder, fairly certain I was going to have to vomit in the next five minutes but unwilling to walk away from the conversation because *what*

the hell?? Every sentence he uttered was more unbelievable than the last, though the sudden notion of moving far away from the place where Will had moved on from *me* and was probably actively planning his homecoming proposal for Hannah *as we spoke* kind of sounded like sweet escape.

God, how can he be dating her already?

"Wait a minute," my dad said, screwing his thick eyebrows together and looking at Bernard like the man had just suggested he glue feathers to his chest and start clucking like a chicken. "Are you telling me that in order to 'inherit' whatever this stranger left behind, we're supposed to up and move to New York for six months?"

"Precisely," Bernard said, as if he wasn't aware my dad was mocking the idea. "In the next thirty days."

"Oh, well, we can't do that," my mom said, looking worried. "I'm a teacher and can't leave my classes—school just started. Liam's got baseball, Clint's got the store—"

"She's right, Bernard," my dad said, nodding. "There's just no way we can move our entire family across the country, especially when we know nothing about this stranger who apparently left us something."

I swallowed and closed my eyes, dizziness washing over me. I could feel sweat on my back, on my forehead—*God, I need to go in*—but I just couldn't walk away from this bizarro situation without some sort of answer or resolution to the great WHAT THE HELL.

"I understand, Mr. Lowell," he replied. "But perhaps you'd like to give this a little more consideration. I can return in the morning for further discussion, if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary," my mom said. "Springfield is our home—"

"What are we talking here, inheritance-wise?" Liam interrupted, unconcerned with the two kittens that appeared to be scaling the front of his T-shirt as he asked the million-dollar question. "Obviously we're

not gonna pull up stakes for two grand and a shanty; I mean, come on, Bern. You gotta give us a little more info before we can agree to move to the 212."

I expected my parents to call him out for being rude and mentioning money, but all eyes turned to Bernard as we collectively wondered.

How much?

I put a hand over my stomach as the queasiness got even worse.

Bernard flipped his gaze to my dad and asked, "You'd like an estimate on the inheritance amount?"

"If possible," my dad said, looking embarrassed. "I mean, just a ballpark would be nice, uh, in the decision-making process."

I swallowed.

"A ballpark." Bernard gave a nod, tilted his head just a fraction of a degree, and said, "I believe that ballpark would sit somewhere in the range of..."

And then he said a massively huge number.

A number with a *lot* of zeroes.

Multiple, multiple millions.

"*Million?*" my dad wheezed.

My mother gasped. "Did you say *million?* Dollars?"

"Holy *shitballs!*" Liam yelled.

At the exact second I threw up into my bucket.

Damion's Prologue

"Sometimes people do inexplicably weird shit."

—Remington

"Damion?"

I glanced up from the risotto I'd been zoned out on, only to see my parents watching me from their spots at the far end of the dining room table. My dad was still sporting the suit he'd worn to the office, which meant he was definitely going out after dinner, and my mom was wearing her "hot barre" workout clothes, which meant she wasn't going with him.

"Yeah?" I said, irritated they'd interrupted thoughts of Remi.

Every time I had risotto, I thought of him because he'd *hated* it.

Remi was my mom's uncle, an eccentric old guy who was like... well, *shit*, like no one else I'd ever met. I swallowed hard, that marble-in-my-throat feeling back again as I pictured his face.

How can Remi be dead?

It seemed impossible that he was gone.

"What do you mean, yeah?" My dad raised his eyebrows, and I could tell by the expression that I'd tuned out something he deemed important. He had the kind of face that should've belonged to a king or a world leader on the wrong side of good, the kind of face that wielded powerful expressions with little effort.

You could tell if he wanted you praised or executed simply by the speed of his blink. "Your mom asked if you stopped by the office after school."

"Quinn," my mom snapped, letting out a long-suffering sigh as she

glanced at her annoyingly intense husband. "Not tonight—I'm too tired for this."

The "this" she was referring to was any conversation with my father whatsoever.

God, adults are wonderful.

"I was simply trying to get our son to answer a basic question," he snapped back as he set his knife on the edge of his plate. "My apologies."

"I *did* stop by the office," I said, doing my best not to sound like a judgmental dick. It was hard when they were once again discussing *the season*, which was an exorbitant waste of time and money, in my humble opinion.

A formal ball for high school seniors that felt like something out of Regency England, with multiple parties leading up to said ball?

Fucking asinine.

But I pointed my fork at my mother and added (with the congenial smile of an affable son), "And I dropped off the donation cards, so we're all good."

"Wonderful, thank you," she said, reaching for her wineglass. "I swear to God the planning is already killing me, and it's only getting started."

"Oh, you love the PTA," my dad muttered as he lifted the lowball glass in his hand and tossed back the last of whatever brown liquor was lining the bottom. "What would you do without festivals and balls to plan?"

"Million-dollar question right there, honey," she quipped, raising her glass to her mouth, pausing to say, "Talk about your swoony thoughts. What *would* I do if there were no festivals or balls for me to plan?"

"Shop more, perhaps," my dad suggested.

"Oh, good one," she replied with an eye roll.

Your parents are shitty to each other and you need to know that's not how you talk to someone you love.

I could hear Remi's voice as if he were actually there. He'd spent half

my life trying to undo what he saw as the damage my parents were doing to me with their "adolescent thoughtlessness."

How can he be gone?

It was impossible that he wouldn't be there anymore.

My parents already seemed to be *over* his death. Since the moment we'd heard, they'd been on this whole *he was probably ready to go* kick, mostly because good ol' Remi had been in his eighties, living far away and off the grid.

But they'd had no clue.

Uncle Rem's last letter to me—sent at the beginning of May—had been all about how I needed to come to Nebraska and fish with him. He'd mentioned the good steaks, the woman at the bait shop he said he "might've had the hots for," and the possibility of me bringing him another cat because Mr. Dipshit was lonely.

Why didn't I drop everything and bring him another damn cat?

And who's taking care of Mr. D now??

The guilt was going to kill me, I swear to God.

And a thousand question marks about my future surrounded me now, a future I'd secretly plotted with Remi.

Could it still happen? Could I make it happen without him?

My gut said yes, that he'd somehow drafted a plan in case of his death because that was just the kind of guy he was, but I wasn't sure how to find out. I alternated between wanting to send a letter to the Nebraska address in hopes of a response from Bernard, and worrying that someone else—someone on my dad's payroll—might intercept the note and all hell would break loose.

So for now I was just waiting. Longer than I realized I had been, because Remi had died months ago. *Months* ago, but we weren't notified until a few weeks ago.

My parents were pissed at Bernard for being so grief-stricken that

he hadn't thought to let them know immediately, but I wasn't buying into that shit. There was no one on the planet more focused and intentional than Bernard fucking Elizando, Remi's right hand. If he didn't let us know, that meant Uncle Rem had made arrangements *in advance* for Bernard to keep it on the quiet.

But why?

He did whatever the hell he wanted, all the time, sure. But it felt . . . I don't know . . . *shitty* that he hadn't let *me* in on the ending.

Whether he was surfing in Rio, exploring ancient ruins, or just hanging out in some random highway town, he always sent letters to the PO box he'd opened *for me* when I was in third grade.

The PO box I'd checked on a daily basis *since* he opened it.

The PO box that I probably needed to close now.

The sound of the doorbell cut through the quiet awkwardness of our family dinner.

"Um, hi . . . ?" Jeffrey Callahan, one of my father's trusted attorneys, walked into the dining room a minute later. Every item of clothing on his body was expensive and perfectly pressed, but the way his glasses slid down his nose and the ever-present sheen of sweat on his forehead made it clear to all that he was an outsider.

What are you doing here right now, Jeffrey? Go. Away.

There was something about my father's lack of work-life balance, the fact that he never stopped working at all, that grated on my nerves. He was like a mob boss, the way his colleagues were constantly popping over to the house at all hours. Only instead of addressing urgent things like family feuds and murder contracts, they were discussing mind-numbingly boring financials that could definitely wait until the next morning.

But Quinn Rutledge never let anything wait, not when money was attached.

"Listen—Quinn, Whitney," Jeffrey said, his voice an urgent whisper. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your dinner, but I thought you'd want to know that I just found out the will is already out of probate and disbursed."

He looked agitated and slightly terrified, like the human embodiment of nervousness, as he spit that statement directly at my parents.

"What are you talking about, Jeffrey?" my dad said with a calm smile, though I could hear the irritation in his voice.

"Remington," he replied, scratching his neck. "I'm talking about Remington's will."

"Would you like to have a seat, Jeffrey?" my mother asked with a bright smile. "Are you hungry?"

"No, thanks," Jeffrey said to my mom, then to my dad, "Can I speak to you in the other room, perhaps?"

NO.

My gut clenched, and I wondered what this was about as my dad and Jeffrey went into the study and closed the doors.

Had Remi mentioned me—and our plans—in his will?

I was ninety-nine percent sure he wouldn't—he was way more off-the-books than that, especially when it came to me—but I still felt dread as silence settled over the dining room. Dread that quickly turned to confusion and fear when my dad's voice erupted from behind closed doors a few minutes later.

Shit.

My dad returned to the room, his relaxed smile a thing of the past as he ushered a now-mortified Jeffrey quickly out the door.

Shit, shit, shit.

He was in full-on freak-out mode, fast-pacing around the dining room as my mother scrambled to keep up with him. He was ranting in a low voice that only allowed me to hear every few sentences.

But they were *big-ass* sentences (and not about me, thank *God*).

Apparently, Remi had left a big chunk of his estate to some randos in Nebraska.

As in *millions* of dollars, left to strangers in the Midwest who no one had ever heard of.

"Can he do that?" my mom asked my dad in a hushed tone, her hands wrapping around his bicep. My eyes got stuck on that—diamond-ringed fingers clutching at him in a gesture of support—because whenever drama ensued, my parents always came together.

It was somehow sweet and toxic, all at once, the way they bonded over crisis.

Although, what was the crisis here?

Since Rem had never married or had kids, I think my parents sort of assumed his assets might be left to our family. But Dad was good at his job and great at investments—we had more than enough money, so if Remi wanted to give everything away, why shouldn't he?

"Well, of course he *can*," he said, rapidly typing something to someone in his phone as he spoke. "But the bigger issue here is that he *wouldn't*. This screams of coercion. Of fraud. Of someone taking advantage of a little old man."

I snorted.

Because the idea of someone taking advantage of Remi was ridiculous. Even in his eighties, he was balls-to-the-wall and get-out-of-my-way, one hundred percent of the time. I mean, his letters had never changed. Their tone—and even the handwriting—remained the same from the time he first started sending them when I was in elementary school, until the very last one arrived a few months ago.

"He'd obviously slipped into some form of dementia, if this is truly what his will and testament looked like," my dad said, shaking his head. "And the fact that he had it disbursed before we even knew

about his death is *beyond* problematic. Talk about your red flags."

I kept my mouth shut (not easy), but part of me wondered why he cared. Yes, it was a lot of money, but we *had* a lot of money.

So did it *really* matter if the old guy threw his money at some nobodies in Nebraska?

It was funny, actually, and the more I thought about it, the harder it was not to smile.

So on-brand for my badass weirdo Uncle Remington to say *fuck it all* and just give it away to strangers.

"Is it too late to contest the will, since it's post-probate?" my mother whispered.

"Oh, we're contesting," my dad said with so much ferocity I almost felt bad for the Nebraska randos. "Jeffrey will get to the bottom of this bullshit and jerk every penny from their grasping fingertips."

I said, "I don't want to be the voice of dissent—"

"Yes, you do," my mom interrupted.

"Not now, Damion," my dad warned.

"But what if this was what Remi wanted?" I said, needing to finish my sentence. "Shouldn't he be allowed to leave his things to whoever he wants?"

That made my dad send every bit of his attention my way. He glared for a long moment, icy blue eyes pinned on me like my question had greatly disappointed him, before saying, "Did you know that the house is included in his estate, Damion? That these strangers from the middle of nowhere will be moving into his *house*?"

"I'm sorry, did you just say—"

"It includes the house."

In an instant it felt like the oxygen had been sucked from the dining room, from the world, from my lungs.

NO.

I stared back at him, not believing what I was hearing.

It couldn't be true.

Remi would *never* do that.

"Not only did he leave it to these people, but he included a stipulation that they must live there for six months; I *did* discover that much. They're going to *move into* the home that Remi said, and I quote, would be *Damion's to play in forever*. So these . . . *grifters* are going to be living in your house, and they can do whatever they want to the space. They can sell off every belonging, paint the walls pink, and then auction it to the highest bidder after the six-month requirement is met."

I could feel that he was still watching me, but I wasn't there anymore.

No, I was at Uncle Remi's.

Because that house . . . that house was so much more than a house to me.

One of the original "seven beauties" of the Upper West Side, it had hidden rooms, library walls that moved, a bar that F. Scott Fitzgerald himself had carved the initial Z into with a pocketknife; the place was legendary.

Rich with history.

But more importantly, my entire childhood with Remi was centered there, hanging out with my favorite person in the world while he taught me countless lessons and told me a thousand cool stories. It was like I was *built* in that place, raised by the echo of Rem's booming voice as he let me be . . . *me*.

So yes, that house was technically just real estate, but *fuck*, it was also the only piece of *him* left in the world.

And if he'd left them the house, did that mean he *hadn't* set anything aside for my "alternate" college plans, the ones my parents knew nothing about?

"Dementia seems like a stretch, though," my mom said to my dad. "He was always so sharp. And fraud . . . ?"

"The only way Remi would give up that house was if someone forced him to. Think about it." My dad gave my mom a serious look and said, "He's all alone, in his eighties, and some small-town nobodies in Springfield-Nowhere, Nebraska, discovered he had money. They could've befriended him, listened to his stories, and slowly convinced him they cared."

I wanted to puke as I listened, because the idea of anyone manipulating Rem felt nauseating.

"All we know about these people so far is that they own a tiny grocery store—a store that was hemorrhaging money—and a house that's mortgaged to the hilt. They were *this* close to losing everything when suddenly Remi leaves them his fortune? They *had* to have played him, Whitney."

Could my dad be right about this? Could some small-town hucksters have wormed their way into Remi's life to steal his everything?

"Maybe," my mom said, her eyes wide on my dad like she was looking to him for next steps.

"At the very least, I'm going to do some digging," my dad said, taking off his suit jacket. My mother swooped in with the assist, helping with the blazer removal before rushing away with something close to a smile on her mouth, presumably to fetch him caffeine and tea cakes.

"Brace yourself, Nebraska," my dad muttered under his breath as he read something on his phone screen. "Because we're onto your bullshit."

My dad acted like he *was* a mob boss whenever he faced conflict. It never entered his mind that he couldn't fix something once he drew up battle plans, and I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him lose.

Usually it was all in business, but this time it was personal.

And for the first time in my life, I found that to be really reassuring.

Thirty days later

“Never half-ass New York. Snag a bagel, walk with purpose, draw into your lungs that intoxicating mix of exhaust fumes, garbage, and the best food you’ll ever fucking taste.

Let the city mark you.”

—Remington

Julia

“So maybe you two should just go . . . um . . . walk around the neighborhood for a bit.”

“Are you serious right now?” I asked, leaning into the front seat of the minivan from my spot in the back, just so I could peer into my parents’ eyes and figure out if they were, in fact, being serious. “You want us to just randomly wander the streets of New York City when it’s going to be dark soon and we have no idea where we are?”

According to the internet, once it got dark in the city, the criminals came out.

“Dead serious,” my mom said, glancing over at me with a sardonic smile. “We’ve got an hour to kill, and I’ve had more than enough time in the car with you guys over the past few days. You and Liam can go find some food, and it won’t be dark for another hour. You’re going to have to get to know the neighborhood since we live here now, anyway.”

For the thousandth time in the past month, I couldn’t believe this was actually happening.

We were seriously about to *live* in New York City and be in possession of a massive fortune.

Howwwwwwwwwwww . . . ??

We’d lived a relatively “comfortable” lifestyle before the inheritance, financially speaking. Our house was nice enough and we had plenty of food, but our *comfortability* was in a super Midwestern sort of way. My parents’ tiny supermarket paid the bills (or so I’d thought), any labeled clothing came from nationally branded mall stores and places like Kohl’s, and our family cars came from Jim’s Dodge Country down the road (where Jimmy Bob had been dealing vehicles since before I was born).

We weren’t uncivilized and we knew how to fit into a normal city, but I had no idea how we were going to learn to fit into a place like Gardenwood.

Thank God we had Bernard; we at least stood a chance with his expertise at our disposal.

For starters, he’d sat us down and thoroughly schooled my family on the details of the inheritance, once we’d decided to accept.

“I don’t want to scare you, but there *will* be interested parties who won’t want you to inherit,” he said, pacing as he spoke to us like no information had ever been this important. “Those parties could benefit from knowing the details of the will and manipulate the outcome, so it is imperative that you tell no one the stipulations, do you understand?”

He gave us a cover story and answers, in case anyone had questions, but under no circumstances were we to let on that we’d recently come into money via an inheritance.

The Lowells had always had a fortune, but they didn’t flaunt it—that was the vibe.

Clint and Shawna have always wanted to live in New York, and after a lifetime of hard work and skilled investments, they’re finally doing it.

Key phrases: diverse investment portfolio, robust interest earnings, investors.