

**THIS TIME
COULD BE
DIFFERENT**

a novel

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SPARKPRESS

MELTDOWN

“How did this get here, Rob?” The earring that Madeline had lost months ago trembled in her outstretched hand.

Her fiancé was looking at her the same way he’d eyed the manically chattering raccoon they’d encountered coming home late one night when they’d first moved into the house, standing on its hind legs and blocking their path to the front door.

A wave of nausea rolled through Madeline’s stomach as she pictured herself in this moment: standing there in pajamas she’d been wearing for most of the last month, milky face pale, red hair wild.

“Madeline,” Rob said, too carefully.

“I am not imagining this.” Even as she said the words, she worried she might be.

He tilted his head, his beautiful green eyes concerned, and opened his mouth.

He closed it and studied the floor.

“I’m not—” She swallowed, her voice disintegrating. “Crazy.”

“Honey.” Rob moved toward her. “I think your world has been pretty well upended.” He reached for her hand.

Madeline stepped back, her mind flitting over each and every decision that had led her to this point. She was forty-nine years old, and this was what she had fucking become?

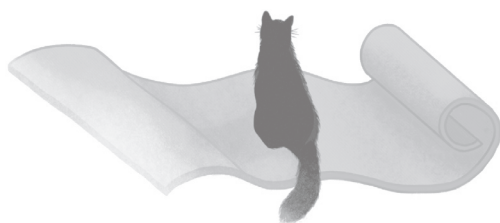
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“But how did this get here?” she asked, holding up the diamond stud and thinking of its mate, sitting alone in one of her jewelry box’s black velvet squares.

“There has to be a logical explanation.”

Madeline fled to the bedroom.

PART 1



CHAPTER 1

Six Months Earlier

Madeline gripped her umbrella as she hurried along the bustling Michigan Avenue sidewalk, avoiding big puddles and bobbing around slow walkers. A meeting had cancelled, and the idea of escaping the stale air of her office to grab takeout from the place with the *good* chicken soup had propelled her out the door.

As she walked, she tried to appreciate the sweetness of the post-downpour Chicago air. Mostly her mind rattled with worries about what she should have said differently at each of the four meetings she'd finished that morning or what might go wrong in any of the five meetings she'd squeezed into her afternoon—a typical day for her as the senior vice president of new deposit marketing at National Megabank.

Madeline pulled the umbrella closer to her head. The rain was only a drizzle now, but her hair would crimp into a nest of frizzy corkscrews if it got wet. She was waiting for the light to change at a crosswalk, scrolling through emails—thrilled to delete three and respond to two—when a damp poof of midnight-colored fur barreled into her leg.

Madeline jumped.

The cat scurried into an alley, terrified green eyes flashing in his teddy bear face.

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The air left Madeline's body. He looked exactly like Bo Bo.

Bo Bo—Madeline's childhood cat who had slept in her bed every night, who let her dress him in doll clothes with only minimal complaint, who lay curled on the table next to the metronome while she practiced violin every morning and afternoon.

Bo Bo—who Gran had given away to the postman when Madeline was nine years old.

The light flashed WALK, and Madeline thought of all the things she needed to do in the office—all the tasks that, if left unattended, would congeal into a giant ball and surely crush her.

She scanned the crowd for someone in pursuit of the little guy but saw only blank faces hunkered under hats or umbrellas. Her feet began walking her toward the alley.

She spied the cat trying, unsuccessfully, to crawl under a wooden gate that blocked the passageway. He burrowed under a crumpled newspaper, his little black bottom poking out for anyone to see.

Madeline stood there in a daze, long-buried memories unfurling in her mind: Gran's explanations when Madeline returned from school and found Bo Bo gone—*He sheds. That litterbox smells! I have allergies!* The kind postman, who always made a point of telling Madeline how well Bo Bo was doing and how much he was loved. And the thoughts that had looped endlessly through Madeline's own brain in the first months without Bo Bo—if only she'd cleaned his litterbox more often, if only she'd been more vigilant about brushing him.

Standing in the alley and feeling as if she'd been body-snatched by her nine-year-old self, Madeline searched for something to carry the cat in.

Ten minutes later, she was back on the corner, watching a Lyft's snaillike progress on her phone. Her own distress was reflected in the startled expressions of people passing by—the

way some tripped over their feet when a *yowl!* erupted from the cardboard box clutched to her chest. Others took large steps sideways when the box bounced violently, reminiscent of something from one of the *Alien* movies trying to escape through the side.

A tiny black paw shot through the flimsily folded cardboard pieces of the top, millimeters from Madeline's chin.

"It's okay, baby," she murmured. "It's okay, little bear."

The thrashing slowed, then eventually stopped. A raspy sigh lifted from the box.

Madeline peeked inside.

Guileless green eyes—Bo Bo's eyes—stared back at her.

Taking the cat to a shelter was suddenly unthinkable. Madeline swiped her phone to Google Maps and searched for veterinarians.

"I changed the destination address," she said, ducking into the Prius when it finally arrived. "We're going to Grand Avenue, not Wabash."

"Sure thing." The driver smiled at her in the rearview mirror. His smile disappeared when the cat wailed again.

Madeline texted her assistant, Phyllis.

Madeline: Delayed. Pls move afternoon meetings to Fri during 2 hrs I blocked to work on budget. Call if anyone needs me.

Resigned to finishing the budget forecast on Sunday, Madeline scrolled through Instacart, in search of pet supply delivery.

Her fingers froze as she thought of Rob, her fiancé of one month. They'd only recently moved in together and had never discussed pets. He was surely going to think she'd lost her mind.

She needed a second opinion.

Her fingers tapped in her best friend's number.

Unbelievably, she answered. "This is Emma."

Madeline swallowed. "You're not going to believe what I'm about to fucking do."



Emma hung up her desk phone, shocked. To her knowledge, Madeline had never kept a houseplant alive. Now she was bringing home a cat. A pet would be good for her, Emma decided, and Rob would agree to anything Madeline asked.

For her entire life, Emma had been compared to a dainty porcelain doll: small frame, dark curls, blue eyes sparkling against fair skin. Even though she was forty-eight years old, the image still held.

Her cell buzzed.

She studied the text message from her fourteen-year-old daughter, who had recently announced a desire to be referred to by them/they pronouns. Emma and her husband, Jeff, were still trying to piece together exactly what that meant in terms of Penelope's identity. *I don't want to be labeled* was all Pen would say whenever they asked questions.

Penelope: Idk how 2 tell if cheese is bad

Emma gnawed her thumbnail. One of her direct reports was due in her office in three minutes.

Tapping the problem-solving skills that had landed her as the senior vice president of retail marketing at National Megabank, where she and Madeline worked, Emma considered possible interpretations.

Emma: Where are you? She deleted the words.

Emma: What cheese?

Penelope: Smh in our refrig obvi

Emma googled smh and sighed at the result: *shaking my head*. She could always rely on Urban Dictionary to explain the insults her once-sweet daughter—Emma caught herself, once-sweet *child*—now hurled daily.

Emma tried to remember what was in their refrigerator. Jeff

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usually did the shopping, and she'd worked late all week on the budget forecast.

"Can cheese go bad?" Emma muttered to herself. Then an unsettling thought: *What if it's not cheese?*

A young man knocked on her door.

Emma typed as she motioned with her head for him to enter.

Emma: Don't eat it if you can't tell. There's mac n cheese in the freezer if you're hungry. We'll get takeout tonight. Whatever you want.