

CHAPTER 1

IT'S STORMY

Shawn didn't feel like an adult because adults were married, and he struggled to get through a date. He was twenty-four years old and looked like a man, with his powder-blue eyes, a trim physique, and a handsome face on a well-shaped head crowned with light brown hair. But he had never quite gotten used to his long arms and legs. When he walked, it looked like Shawn was carefully stepping between raindrops, especially when he started noticing all the colors around him.

The bashful sun peeked out from behind a gray curtain of clouds, kissing the Manhattan skyscrapers. Perfect dating weather. Shawn accompanied his latest date along a path through the High Line, a park that snaked above 11th Avenue, formerly abandoned railroad tracks that were transformed into a popular park years ago.

Emily looked pleasant but unremarkable as she trudged along, towering over him. She glanced his way, but Shawn couldn't peer into her eyes or anyone's eyes for that matter. When he did, it felt like he was staring into the sun. He'd force himself to do it, though, since people got uneasy when he darted his eyes away. But Shawn couldn't keep looking for long. The connection felt too electric, like he had jammed his finger into a wall socket.

The trees around them swayed in the wind; their branches collided against each other, clanging like wind chimes on a blustery day. The melodic tones transfixed Shawn.

Emily cocked her head to the side. "Are you even listening?" she asked.

He wasn't.

She knocked on an invisible wall between them. "Hello?"

Shawn broke out of his trance. "Sorry. I get distracted sometimes. By all the colors." He looked up at her height. "You must be good at basketball."

Her eyes narrowed. This wasn't Shawn's first awkward comment of the night. "And you must be great at miniature golf."

Shawn kicked the ground. "Not really."

"You're gonna ask me how the weather is up here? I'll save you the trouble." She popped the cap off her bottle and splashed water on his face. "Stormy!"

Shawn stood there, water dripping off his face, his mouth hanging open. His stomach ached as Emily stomped off, shaking her head. *What did I do this time? Maybe she doesn't like basketball.* She disappeared into the crowd of people surging around him.

Shawn sat on a park bench and logged into his online dating profile. Time to set up his next date. This was definitely a numbers game.

Later that week, he met Anna at the High Line. She was in her thirties, lean and frail-looking. Friendly, but needy. Pictures of cats covered her rainbow suspenders. Her profile emphasized her love for all things feline, and Shawn hoped there would be more to her. He was getting less picky. Shawn led her down the path.

"Whenever I look at a cat, I try not to think about how lazy it is," Shawn said.

Anna raised her eyebrows. "They aren't lazy. They like to sleep."

“For seventy percent of their lives. Male lions sleep twenty hours a day, so you can tell they’re related.” Shawn had many more cat facts up his sleeve, but this one didn’t land the way he thought it would. He hoped she’d find the rest of them captivating, so all the preparation he did for this date wouldn’t be a waste of time.

“Cats are more intelligent than most people I date,” Anna said.

“Then, you’re dating the wrong people.” Shawn peered at her face. “You know, you look different from your profile picture.”

She slipped her hands into her pockets. “Confession time. That’s actually my sister. I get a lot more interest when I use her pic. We’re pretty similar, though. She’s just more photogenic.”

“No, she’s a lot prettier than you.”

Anna shrank back. “Are you for real?”

“Very,” Shawn said. “She’s the one who got the looks in your family.”

Shawn’s thoughts often raced out of his mouth, unedited. He knew people had to get used to that, or they wouldn’t stick around for long. Anna blinked a few times as if she didn’t know what to say. She scoffed, shrugged her shoulders, then hurried down one of the stairways that led to the street below.

Shawn knew better than to run after her. That had never worked on his previous dates. He peered at the red petals of the snapdragons circling the tree trunk next to him. The petals shivered and hummed, sounding like sustained chords of a violin.

On the following Saturday afternoon, he met Lindsay at the High Line. She looked identical to her picture, and he was relieved. She was in her twenties, with delicate features and dark hair pulled back from the planes of her face.

Their conversation began with how their days were going (fine) and about the state of the world (worrisome). They progressed to how expensive it was to reside in New York City (shockingly so, though technically Shawn didn’t pay anything to live here). Then, the conversation detoured to how people perceive colors. This was Shawn’s opportunity to shine. He fought to keep his thoughts on track as he strolled down the path with her.

“The light receptors in our eyes transmit messages to our brains about what we’re seeing. Newton first observed that the surface of what we see reflects some colors and absorbs the rest. So our eyes only perceive the reflected colors.” He forced himself to stop, a skill that usually led people to talk with him longer.

Lindsay leaned into him. “You’re a walking Wikipedia.”

Shawn beamed. The sunlight sparkled off the brook next to them as it bubbled down the path. He lost himself for a moment in the melodic stream of the water. Lindsay nudged him.

“You there?” she asked.

“Oh. Sorry about that.” He searched for a new topic. “The other day, I read an article about how this place would’ve still been an abandoned railroad track if someone didn’t have the imagination to make it this beautiful.”

Lindsay flicked her hair back. “So true.”

“When it opened, people called it a secret, magic garden in the sky.”

He started walking with a spring in his step. Lindsay reached over and held his hand. Startled, he shook her off. She stepped back with widened eyes. Shawn looked down; his arms hung to his sides.

“I’m sorry.” He paused. “Sometimes touching can be too intense for me.”

Lindsay poked her tongue against her cheek. “Oh.”

“You look like you swallowed a lemon.”

“And your profile didn’t say, ‘don’t touch me.’”

“It used to, but I didn’t get a lot of replies.”

Lindsay bit her upper lip. “Are you on the spectrum?”

Shawn hesitated, then nodded. Whenever he told someone about his autism, their reactions were a mysterious mixed bag. Mysterious because Shawn couldn’t understand what they were thinking. Sometimes those dates didn’t last long after he brought this information to light, even after he explained he was high functioning. His brother, Colin, thought Shawn should keep his autism a secret for as long as possible. Or at least until the second date. But whenever Shawn kept those details in the dark, his dates seemed confused by how he would react to the world around him.

Shawn looked past her at a tall woman with black curly hair and olive skin dressed in a flowing wedding dress, holding a bouquet of purple and pink roses. The bride intertwined her hands with her smiling groom, who kissed the top of her head as a photographer snapped pictures of them holding each other. Shawn took in the moment. This was special.

Lindsay checked her watch. “So...”

“We should grab some coffee,” Shawn said.

“Not a coffee drinker, I’m afraid.”

“I didn’t notice that on your profile.” Shawn swallowed.

“You know what? I should get going. Need to meet someone. Don’t know how I let that slip my mind. Sorry to cut this short.”

“They look like they won the lottery,” Shawn said, pointing to the couple behind her.

“It was so nice meeting you.”

“Should we go out again? I like how you smell like laundry detergent.” He realized he shouldn’t have mentioned her scent. His brother always reminded him to keep olfactory observations to himself.

“I’ll call you, okay?” she said, stepping back from him while keeping up the mask of her smile.

“I’ll wait for your call,” Shawn said, confident that day was just around the corner.

Her plastered grin continued as she made her way down the path. As Shawn watched her leave, the colors around him roared back to life. Tree branches clanged. The water tinkled. Petals hummed. The evening sun dazzled brightly. Shawn shielded his eyes and hurried his way back home.



Shawn shared a large condo with his grandmother on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the kitchen, dining room, and living room all enjoyed inspiring views of Central Park. Black and white oil paintings of scenes from the city—wet seals basking in the sun at the Central Park Zoo, the triangular Flatiron building dominating its street corner, a couple caught in intimate conversation in front of a boxy florist shop in SoHo—hung on the silver-gray walls. All these were proud creations of Shawn’s grandmother, Ruth, whose spotless home could be easily confused with a museum if the furniture went missing.

A golden birdcage hung in the corner of the room near the window. Inside, the yellow and green lovebirds, Sunny and Cloudy, nestled against each other. Shawn dropped a large spoonful of cooked lentils into their feeding trough. His grandmother liked to stick her fingers into the cage to caress their

feathers., But Shawn only dared to feed them. Nothing more.

Shawn kicked his feet up onto the walnut coffee table and tried to sink into the red velvet couch, but it never let him. It was too much like his grandmother, stiff and proper. He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until he settled on a black and white movie, where a woman gritted her teeth while a seamstress worked on zipping up the back of her wedding dress. The woman turned toward a mirror, and her face lit up. The seamstress dabbed a tear from her cheek.

Ruth's voice echoed from her bedroom down to the hall. "Shawn, I can hear your feet on the table."

Shawn quickly moved his legs off the table. "You can't hear feet."

Ruth glided into the room in a vintage robe. She was in her seventies with curly auburn hair and a slim body, a gift from her years of swimming. Her stateliness masked her artistic side. She never traveled without putting her face on, as she called it.

"Bore me with the details," she said.

Shawn looked away from her inquisitive eyes at the darkening clouds outside. It felt like the sun was forever setting on his dating life.

Ruth tapped her foot. "I'm waiting."

"Same as always..."

Ruth frowned. "You didn't look into her eyes, did you?"

Shawn looked at the floor. "No one's going to marry me."

"Marry? We need to get you a second date." She straightened one of the paintings on the wall.

"If I don't get married, I won't have anyone after you die."

"I'm still ticking. And when I'm not, you'll have your brother, whatever that's worth."

"Sometimes, to keep myself going, I picture you lying in a casket."

Ruth gasped. "How dare you say that. You know I want to be cremated. So no one can screw up my makeup."

"Maybe I should start picturing you as an urn."

Ruth shrugged. "Whatever works."

Shawn glanced out the window. A breeze rustled through the trees in Central Park. A drizzle fell in sheets from the sky. "I miss Grandpa."

"Yeah? Me too." Ruth filled a silver teapot with water from the sink and set it on the stove. "He'd love to ask me about my day and then turn off his hearing aid." Ruth snickered. "Once, he told me the best part of growing up was getting less and less peer pressure since all his peers were dying."

"He died so suddenly. I don't want that to happen to you."

"That's sweet, Shawn," she said, walking toward him. She took an unsteady step and grabbed a nearby chair to get her balance.

"Who'll buy my cereal? Or help me pay bills? Or..."

"Glad I'll be missed," she said with a wry smile. "Just promise me you'll keep the urn polished."

"Of course."

Shawn returned his attention to the TV. The woman was dolled up for her wedding day, gliding down a sweeping staircase. The groom's smile stretched from one ear to the other. Shawn imagined himself in that white suit, waiting for the love of his life.

"Tell me about your wedding day again, Grandma."

Ruth didn't answer.

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Shawn looked over and saw her slumped in her rocking chair, looking like a marionette without its strings. "Grandma?" His mouth went dry. He rushed over and shook her, but she only flopped around in his hands.