

Chapter 1 - Seraphina

Present day, 27 years old

Tick... tock... tick... tock...

As I look at the man sitting across from me, waiting for him to say something, I nibble on my bottom lip.

He clicks on his pen and puts it back into the pocket of his white coat. Dr. Maxwell's blue eyes meet my green ones. He sighs before putting his iPad and clipboard to the side.

"Serephina, you don't look happy," he finally says. "This is good news. *This* is something to celebrate."

Happy. What does that word even mean anymore? When was the last time I felt happy? When was the last time I felt like my life wasn't about to implode on me? I stop my mind before I go too far down the rabbit hole. I remember when. *Croatia...* But that's not a memory I want to unpack. Not now. Not ever.

"I guess I'm still shocked, that's all," I answer, offering a nervous laugh.

Dr. Maxwell studies me, the look on his face telling me he's not buying what I'm selling. I twirl the lock of blonde hair that's resting on my shoulder, hating the texture of it. Hating the way it feels coarse to the touch. *Hating everything about my life right now.*

"So, what are you going to do?" He leans back in his swivel chair and rests his hands on his lap, criss-crossing his fingers together.

"Wh...what do you mean?"

"You know, now that you finally have your life back." Dr. Maxwell chuckles. "The world is your oyster." I've gotten to know him well enough these past two and a half years to know that this is him trying to be upbeat and motivating. He asks open-ended questions that make me think, and then elaborates in a positive light.

You see, with situations like mine, the doctors and nurses have to wear many hats. It comes with the territory, one attending at the teaching hospital where I've been recovering once told me. They're not only medical practitioners treating your condition—they're also often your therapists, life coaches, and friends, all rolled into one.

"I didn't expect to make it this far," I offer him the truth. "So I don't know."

“Ah.” A twinkle appears in his eyes as his finger index points at me. “That’s the survivor’s guilt talking.”

I swallow the lump in my throat because he’s right. When I first met Dr. Maxwell, even he couldn’t believe it himself. I was the youngest patient to ever walk into his office. He didn’t need to say it—and to his credit, he never did—but I don’t think either of us expected this day would come. The day I get to walk out of here like the past few years didn’t happen.

“If you need psychological assistance, Seraphina—” He speaks again, and I wish he would just send me on my way. “—we can help you with that.”

“I’m good, thanks.” I give him a weak smile.

“You know, in my thirty years of practice, I’ve treated many patients,” he says gently, scrubbing his tired face. “Most people always expect to go back to who they were before everything happened. But you’re a different person now. What happened to you was life-changing. It’s normal to feel a little lost. Your schedule consisted of constant hospital visits. Your future had one status—unknown. There’s no shame in seeking out help to try and figure out what’s next for you.”

“What do your other patients usually do after you declare them good to go?” Dr. Maxwell is right. I am lost.

“Some go on vacations. Some go back to school. The ones with small children continue business as usual.” He hums. “When was the last time you went on a vacation, Seraphina? Maybe you can escape the winter and fly out to Mexico.”

I narrow my eyes into slits and will the bile rising up in my stomach to go away. “A long time ago.”

Dr. Maxwell, thinking he’s made a breakthrough, grins. “You see? Maybe you could do that. My son is about your age. He and his wife go to Tulum all the time. Just make sure you don’t overexert yourself.”

“I’m more of a snow person,” I tell him.

“Colorado is wonderful this time of year,” Dr. Maxwell laughs. “I used to go skiing all the time back in the day. Now I always get stuck on grandpa duty.”

I cringe, mentally and physically. But Dr. Maxwell is right. Colorado *is* wonderful this time of the year. Besides, what are the chances I’ll run into him? Even if I did, he would probably just pretend he didn’t see me.

“Maybe I’ll go there,” I think aloud. “My aunt has a yoga retreat. It’s nice. Quiet.”

“Your Aunt Jill?” His head turns abruptly as he smiles. “I think it would be good for you to go there indeed. She always closes the place down in the winter, right?”

I nod. “She hates the snow. Prefers to go back to Cali for the cold months and do her workshops in the summers instead.”

“That sounds like a plan, Seraphina.” A look of satisfaction crosses his face. I wonder if he can see the heartbreak I’m trying to hide. “Just make sure you’re back here in three months for the check-up, alright?”

“Will do, Doc.” I give him a mock salute.

As I text my aunt, asking her if I can stay at her empty retreat center and promising that I’ll clean up after myself, I think of the last time I was there.

And then I think of him. The man who made me feel alive, only to stab me in the heart and twist the knife. If only I could forget about Jonathan St. Claire, but I can’t. Because the good, the bad, the ugly... I remember everything about him.

For better or for worse, that man will be embedded in my brain for eternity.

Part one

Chapter 1 - Johnny

Three years ago, 26 years old

Have you ever heard of the term Murphy's Law? It describes the phenomenon when everything that can go wrong, in fact, does go wrong.

Say a car salesman is in trouble with his boss. The boss announces in the morning that he's officially putting him on a personal improvement plan due to poor performance. The salesman leaves the meeting, feeling like shit, when a customer walks in. Desperate to get back in his boss' good graces, he tries to sell a super expensive, ginormous truck to the customer. The customer keeps on insisting that he just wants a normal SUV, and he's about to give in—but then he sees his boss watching them from his office, so he pushes, and pushes, and pushes. When the customer finally relents, he gives the customer the key for a test-drive. Well, what do you know? The monster truck doesn't start. Something's faulty. The customer now insists on trying out the SUV, but the salesman can't find the keys for this one. When the customer leaves, the boss is waiting for him by the coffee machine, ready to tear him a new one. Nervous and jittery, the poor guy spills coffee all over himself. The icing on the cake arrives when he comes home to his wife banging the neighbor.

It's me. I'm the car salesman. At least it sure feels like it.

From the moment they announced that my three-hour layover at Frankfurt airport would turn into a ten-hour one, I already had an inkling that the universe had pressed play on Murphy's Law for this trip. Add me losing my book somewhere down the line, a few screaming babies on the plane, and forgetting where I put my ear plugs, and by the time the flight landed in Zagreb, Croatia, I was sure of my fate.

There's always an icing on the cake, though, and apparently mine comes in the form of not being able to enter the goddamn Airbnb.

I check the message that Marko, my Airbnb host, sent me an hour ago and try the passcode to the key box one more time. 2-2-4-7, and just like the last five times, *access denied*. Pushing my wet brown hair back—because of course it just has to fucking rain tonight, even though January's supposedly a dry month here—my other hand wipes away the water from my phone screen and calls the number Marko sent.

“Dobro večer,” someone on the other line answers in an unamused tone. “Ovdje Marko Kovačić.” *Good evening. This is Marko Kovačić.*

Good grief. For someone working in hospitality, this dude needs to be friendlier. *Way fucking friendlier.*

“Hey, Marko,” I say in a calm tone, because you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. “It’s me. Jonathan St. Claire.”

“Who?”

“Uhhh, the guy renting out the room in *Donji grad*?”

The guy grumbles something I can’t make out. I hear him try to pronounce my name to someone else, butchering the St. Claire part. (In fairness to him, I probably can’t pronounce his last name either.) When Marko is finally done talking to the other person, he responds to me.

“What do you need?”

Holy fuck. What is up with this guy?

“Do you think the passcode you gave me for the key box is wrong by any chance?”

“Did you try 2-2-4-7?” is his answer.

Rolling my eyes, I rest one hand on my hip, feeling my dampened sweatpants. “Yes, multiple times.”

“Are you sure you put in 2-2-4-7?”

I chuckle, hoping, *praying*, that this won’t be a difficult conversation. But I know better than that by now. Murphy’s Law and all. I reign in my emotions, resisting the urge to yell at this guy. “Yes, Marko. Multiple times.”

He hums a noncommittal sound, and I have the feeling he thinks I’m a fucking imbecile who doesn’t know how to punch in some numbers on a keypad. “2-2-4-7, yes?”

I grit my teeth. “Yes, Marko 2-2-4-7.”

“And it didn’t work?” He asks, unconvinced.

Stay cool, Johnny. “No. I can’t get the box to open.”

The other line goes silent. He’s not talking to anyone in Croatian. I can’t even hear him breathe.

“Marko?” I call out to him to make sure he’s still there.

“Can you try one more time?”

This motherfucker.

"Yeah, sure," I sigh. My fingers press the code I know by heart by now, and lo and behold, same result. "It doesn't work, Marko."

"I come," he groans. "Wait fifteen minutes."

"Alright, thanks man. I appre—" Marko hangs up on me before I can finish my sentence.

Deciding that I'm past the point of caring, I sit down on the front steps of the beige, two-story building. I look up, guessing which window will be mine for the next week. When I booked this place, I was instantly charmed by the pictures. *Donji grad* is smack-bang in the city center, but this apartment is on a quiet cobblestone street, a hidden alley amidst all the noise. I thought it'd be a nice oasis for me after discovering Zagreb. Horrible start aside, the listing isn't lying. It's real pretty here.

A smile forms on my lips, yet I feel anything but happy. But hey, that's what this vacation is all about, right? Two months of traveling around Croatia and Serbia to find myself again. To regain my footing. To get myself out of this existential crisis.

A hand stretches out in front of me, breaking me out of my misery. My eyes look up to see a stocky man in his fifties holding an umbrella, looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here on a Saturday night at 8 p.m. "Marko Kovačić."

"Jonathan St. Claire."

I shake his hand and stand in front of him, towering over Marko with my six-foot-three frame. Marko purses his lips and looks at me with what I suspect is pity in his eyes. I picture myself from his perspective: a sopping wet guy with an equally drenched backpack. Thank God the lady at the outlet store finessed me into buying an expensive hardshell suitcase, otherwise I'd be done for.

Without saying a word, Marko marches straight to the door, punching the same codes that I've been putting in. He purses his lips when nothing happens, then starts cursing in what I can only assume is Croatian. I resist the urge to tell him, *I told you so*.

He raises his index finger to me as he pulls out his phone from the pocket of his windbreaker. "Wait, let me call my brother," he says, before speaking to someone on the phone in a language I can't comprehend. After three minutes of grumbling and sounding angry, he finally hangs up and sighs. "Wrong box. Sorry. It's the one next to it."

What happens next feels like a dream come true. Marko punches in the numbers, and the box magically opens. He turns the key in the hole, and *what do you know*, the door also opens. The whole way up the stairs, I fantasize about taking a nice, long shower before crashing. My aching body is winning the war that my grumbling stomach is waging.

“This is you.” Marko finally stops in front of apartment number five.

“Thank you so much for coming and helping me out,” I say excitedly. *Forgiven and forgotten.* My mind is too busy to be vengeful when all I can think about is getting out of the wet hoodie and sweatpants clinging to my fucking body. The sneakers, too. I feel my soggy socks with every step I take. Spongy, damp, and probably smell like shit. The moment Marko leaves, they’re the first thing that’s going to go.

As my Airbnb host puts the key in the lock and opens the door, he says, “Welcome. You have a roommate, but she’s not here yet. Ivan already messaged her to say you’re coming.”

I stop following him and stand on the welcome mat, a little perplexed and a lot pissed off. “Wait, wait,” I mumble. My head is running through roommate horror stories at high speed. Trust me, I’m not picky when it comes to living conditions—spending eight years in the military will do that to you. But this is not what I signed up for. “You listed this apartment as private accommodation on Airbnb.”

“No, it’s a shared apartment,” Marko defends himself.

I scoff at his blatant lie. Immediately pulling my phone out of my pocket, I open the app and scroll until I find the listing.

Quaint One-Bedroom Flat in Lower Town of Zagreb. Old Charm with Modern Amenities.

I show him my screen. One of my eyebrows is raised and I’m pretty sure I have a smug look on my face. *You better believe I’ll leave a shitty review.*

“*Jebiga!* Ivan!” Marko yells. He turns his head toward me, a clueless expression on his face. He’s trying to figure something out—I can see it in his eyes. I just don’t know what.

Murphy’s Law, Johnny.

“Look, Marko.” I try to reason with him. “I’ve had a really long day. Can you please just show me to the other apartment? We can forget all about this.”

Marko clicks his tongue, and the words that leave his mouth next make me want to just cancel this whole trip. Surely nothing good will come out of the next two months if this is how it starts. “I can’t. It’s double booked and that one is already taken.”

“Fuck,” is all I can say. Not only am I going to leave a bad review, I’m going to contact the customer support team of the sight and go apeshit.

“Let me call my brother,” he says before leaving me to go to the hallway.

Once I hear the door click, my eyes scan the living area. I feel my heart sink more and more. Books and loose papers lie scattered everywhere on the coffee table. Taking a deep breath, I walk toward the door closest to me, looking for a bathroom. On a positive note, I find what I'm looking for. What I see, though, is another story. Dishes, *literal dishes*, are towered in the tub. Pots, pans, plates, cutlery... you name it, it's all there. If there was ever a reality show about roommates from hell, I'm sure whoever this person is would be a fantastic fucking candidate.

As I pull my pants down and take a leak, my soul mourns the fact that I will not be taking that nice long shower after all. I'll probably have to fight Marko and Ivan for a refund and scramble to find a new place. No way in hell I'm staying here.

"You can stay here for free," Marko announces once I come out of the bathroom.

"Nope," I answer. "Have you seen the condition of this place? I want my money back and I'm filing a complaint. Everything has been mix-up after mix-up. You guys seriously need to figure your shit out."

Very rude of me, I admit. I swear I'm not usually a spoiled brat, but holy shit. My body is aching, I've been wearing the same underwear since I left Colorado two days ago, and fuck... my roommate is worse than a military recruit leaving home for the first time.

"I'm very sorry." The first apology of the night leaves his lips. "But Ivan and I just started this. Everything is still very confusing. You can have the room for free, but please don't complain." When I don't say anything back, he continues, "At least stay for the night. It's late. I bring you dinner. Also for free."

"Fine." I sigh. Dinner actually sounds good. And to be honest, I'm not in any condition to be looking for a hotel room right now. "I'll think about it."

Marko nods and leaves me alone to fend for myself. I hoist my backpack over my shoulder and roll my suitcase to the other end of the living area. There are two white doors next to each other on the far left. I open the first one and shake my head, in disbelief that my slob roommate is a girl. Her room is in the same condition as the coffee table—books, clothes, and all things imaginable strewn everywhere.

Banging the door shut, I open the next one and flick on the light switch. I exhale a sigh of relief when I see that at least something is right in this alternate reality I'm stuck in. A double bed with fresh bedding waits for me right in the middle of the room. A big window is on the right side, showing me a glimpse of the dark sky outside. Keeping true to the promise I made myself, I kick my shoes off, and then the socks are next to go. The sweatpants and hoodie immediately follow. I'm going through the clothes in my suitcase when I hear the front door open. Quickly slipping on a new pair of boxer briefs and basketball shorts, I rush outside, wondering what Marko's food bribery will be.

“Hey, you got back qui—”

Yeah, I should've known better. That old man Murphy isn't done with me yet. Standing in front of me is not Marko with my dinner. It's a blonde-haired girl. Underneath her glasses, her green eyes are downcast. She fidgets as she clutches a hideous lime-green raincoat in one hand.

“Sorry for the mess,” she mumbles, her voice like a mouse. “If I had known you were coming, I would've cleaned up a bit.”