

New York Times Best-Selling Author

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A MEANT TO BE NOVEL

then there had been the multiple screaming matches he'd gotten into during and after his father's funeral; they'd been all over the tabloids.

Almost immediately after the funeral, Marta had given him a splashy book deal for his memoir. But well over a year ago, Beau Towers had basically disappeared. He was definitely still alive; his agent periodically sent emails swearing Beau was working on the book, though his deadline had long since passed. But Marta had told her to email him regularly to check in, so she sent him an email every other Monday at 9:45, like clockwork. He never emailed her back, but she'd stopped expecting a response long ago.

She reread the email that she'd sent two weeks ago. When she'd first started sending these emails, they'd been polite, professional, earnest queries asking him to check in with her, or with Marta, or to reach out if he had questions, or offering to set up conference calls with potential ghostwriters—all basically ways of saying, "Please, please, please email me back!!!" without actually saying those words. But after many months of sending the messages with no response, and as everything in her job got more and more stressful, she'd cracked.

Now she had fun with these, since she was certain no one but her read them—not Beau Towers, not his agent, and not Marta, whom she always cc'd.

To: Beau Towers
CC: Marta Wallace, John Moore
From: Isabelle Marlowe

Mr. Towers,
Happy February! February is the shortest month of the year, along with being Black History Month, American Heart Month, National Bird Feeding Month, and National Snack Food Month! (I knew about the first two, but not the second two—we learn something

new every day!) I hope the transition to a new month is treating you well! I just wanted to reach out again to check in and say I hope the writing is going well, and that if you need any assistance as you work on your memoir, you shouldn't hesitate to email or call me. Please let me know if Marta or I can help you with anything at all.

Kind regards,
Isabelle Marlowe
Editorial Assistant to Marta Wallace

She let herself grin at that. Look, she had to find her fun where she could in this thankless, stressful, overwhelming job, okay?

She put her fake cheery email persona back on and typed Beau Towers's email address into the to box.

To: Beau Towers
CC: Marta Wallace, John Moore
From: Isabelle Marlowe

Mr. Towers,
Have you read any good books lately? I've read a number of excellent celebrity memoirs in the past few months—Michael J. Fox, Jessica Simpson, and Gabrielle Union all have fantastic memoirs out! People insist on giving me books for Christmas, even though I work in a place where books literally fall out of the sky, but I didn't have any of those books before and was both surprised and delighted to find that I was absorbed by them. Just in case you're struggling with anything in your memoir, I thought

maybe you could read one of those for inspiration! I'm happy to recommend more books to you at any time, or offer you any other assistance that you need. (FYI, Barack Obama's is far too long, though Michelle's is great! But really, would you want to edit a former president?) Looking forward to talking to you soon!

Kind regards,
Isabelle Marlowe
Editorial Assistant to Marta Wallace

She almost laughed out loud at that last line. She didn't think that she'd ever talk to Beau Towers, let alone soon. She'd probably be sending him progressively more and more unhinged emails every two weeks for years to come.

The thought of that made the smile drop from her face. How much longer could she do this?

Her first year at TAOAT had been hard, yes, but still new, exciting, thrilling every day to work with books all around her. But as certain parts of her job got easier, other parts got harder and more overwhelming. Marta gave her more and more work to do—more details to manage, more manuscripts to read, more authors to talk through their work with, cheer up, or get to chill out. And all those new responsibilities were great, and she felt like she was good at most of them, but they were all in addition to her regular work, and sometimes she felt like she was drowning. And since she was one of the few employees of color here, on top of everything else, she was always getting pulled in to give advice about diversity this or inclusivity that or to meet that one Black author who was visiting that day. She had to put a smile on her face and do it all, but it was exhausting.

Plus, what really mattered was whether Marta thought she was

good—and when it came to that, Izzy had no idea. She tried to remind herself every day that Marta was brilliant, that she'd learned so much from watching her and listening to her, that she was lucky to have this job. But while that was all true, it was also true that Marta was hard to work for—often curt, not at all friendly, not particularly encouraging, and she rarely, if ever, gave out compliments. What Izzy wanted was to get promoted to assistant editor, and then, eventually, to editor. Not immediately, but someday. After all, Gavin had been promoted after two years, and her own two-year anniversary was fast approaching. But Marta hadn't dropped a single hint to her that promotion was in the cards.

Very occasionally, Marta would throw a “Good job” in Izzy's direction, and each time it would thrill her. She would work harder for the next few weeks, in the hopes that Marta would notice her and praise her again, and when no praise came, she would give up in despair. One time, after a particularly curt email from Marta on an edit she'd worked so hard on, Izzy even went so far as to update her résumé. But she'd never done anything with it. Why would she, when she had no idea if she was doing anything right? And that was one of the most depressing things about this job—she wanted guidance, mentoring, a way to get better at her job, a way to someday become the kind of editor Marta was. She wanted to edit great literary fiction, commercial fiction, and memoirs. But she had no idea if she'd even been learning anything.

And, yes, she'd wanted to write some of that great literary fiction herself. But she hadn't written a word in months.

She'd started to question if she really belonged here, if this job, if this career, was really for her. Something she barely wanted to admit to herself was that working at TAOAT had spoiled her previously uncomplicated love for books and reading. Reading used to be her greatest hobby, her source of relaxation, comfort, joy. Always

reliable, always there for her. Now reading felt like homework, in a way that it never had back when she was in school. Now she felt guilty when she read for pleasure, because she knew there was always something else she should be reading, always another manuscript out there, always something Marta was waiting on, an author was waiting on, an agent was waiting on. It made reading stressful, when it never had been before.

Izzy sighed. She might as well deal with that pile of books she'd shoved to the side of her desk.

A few minutes later, Marta walked in, chatting with Gavin. As they got closer to her desk, it was clear they'd run into each other skiing over the weekend. Ah, that's why they'd both left early on Friday.

Izzy couldn't help but envy Gavin's relaxed, easy relationship with Marta, who still completely intimidated her. Even though Marta stressed her out constantly, Izzy wanted so much to impress her. She wished she had any idea how to do that.

Marta nodded at Izzy on her way to her office. That was more of a greeting than she usually got; Marta often didn't even seem to notice her there. Gavin stopped by her desk on the way to his own.

"Hi, Isabelle. How was your weekend?"

Izzy smiled at Gavin. "Good, thanks. How was yours? Did I hear you saying you were skiing?"

Izzy had heard the whole conversation—they hadn't been quiet—but she'd let Gavin tell her about it. He was always a little pompous and long-winded, but he'd also always been kind to her—he'd given her lots of advice about working with Marta and had always been something of a mentor for her. Lord knows Marta wasn't.

Months ago, Gavin had found her in the office, after hours, printing out the draft of her manuscript, and had asked to see it. She'd been nervous to show it to him—she hadn't really shown it to anyone at that point and had only really told Priya about it, but she'd handed the printed copy over to him then and there. He'd given it back to her a week later

without any notes on it and a pat on the shoulder. She shouldn't have asked him what he thought; she'd known from the look on his face, but she couldn't help herself.

"It's a really sweet first effort, Isabelle," he'd said. "But . . . I'm not sure this is your path. I . . . could tell you were trying to be literary, but, well . . ." He stopped himself. "I don't want to hurt your feelings. I shouldn't say anything more."

And because Izzy was a glutton for punishment, she'd asked him to say more, and he had. At length. She hadn't written a word since.

Izzy shook that memory off and tried to pay attention to whatever Gavin was saying about Vermont or wherever he and Marta had been.

"Oh," he said after a few more minutes of talking about how he'd ridden up a ski lift with Jonathan Franzen. "You know how you were wondering last week about whether you'll get promoted this year—when I saw Marta on the slopes, we talked a bit about that, and . . . don't tell Marta I told you this?"

Izzy could barely breathe all of a sudden. "Of course not, I wouldn't," she said.

He smiled at her, but she could tell from his smile the news wasn't good. "Not this year, Isabelle. Maybe not at all, from the way Marta talked about you."

Sudden tears sprang to her eyes. Why did that hurt so much? She hadn't realized how much she'd still hoped until just this moment.

"But you know how she can be," he said. "Are you okay?"

Izzy refused to let anyone here see her cry. She put a smile on her face. The bright, cheerful one she always wore at work. The one she knew she had to wear.

"Oh, I'm fine. Yeah, I know how she can be. Thanks, Gavin, for letting me know what she said."

He smiled at her one more time and walked over to his desk.

Izzy turned to her computer and let the smile fall from her face.

She wanted to leave the office, go outside to scream or cry, but it was too cold outside, and she couldn't cry in the bathroom where everyone could hear you. Instead, she clicked over to her travel itinerary. That made her smile for real. She needed some sunshine, she needed an adventure, she needed an escape. Even though she was only going to California for a few days, she would do everything she could to make them count.

CHAPTER TWO

Izzy and Priya walked into their hotel room and turned to each other with huge grins on their faces. There were palm trees and sunshine, right outside their hotel room. When Izzy had seen the Pacific Ocean out the window of the airplane as they'd descended into Los Angeles, she'd determined that she was going to enjoy this trip, no matter what.

Izzy unzipped her suitcase, and Priya laughed.

"You know we're only here for four days, right? I thought I packed a lot!"

Izzy shrugged. "I like to be prepared." Okay, sure, she'd definitely overpacked, but still, she liked to have options! Clothes for the conference, all her favorite pairs of pajamas so she could truly enjoy this hotel room, the workout clothes she knew she wouldn't wear but had packed anyway, a few sundresses out of sheer optimism that she'd get outside and have a chance to experience LA weather and not just hotel-ballroom air conditioning, the notebooks that she brought everywhere out of habit, even though she hadn't written in them in months, a few pairs of flats, and . . . yeah, nope, she was definitely not going to work out, she'd forgotten to pack her sneakers. Oh well.

Izzy looked around the room and sighed a little. She wished she'd had her own hotel room. She loved Priya, but after living with her parents for the past three years, she just wanted a place for at least a few days where she wasn't sharing space—or a bathroom!—with anyone.

After an afternoon where they'd both run back and forth and back and forth across a convention center at least a dozen times, Izzy and Priya returned to their room to change for the conference cocktail party.

As Izzy swiped some lipstick on, Priya grinned at her.