

FLETCHER

X-FACTOR

—I don't think I'm going to be able to make it over tonight, Cassandra says.

—What? Fletcher says. His shoulders slump. He eyes the shrimp thawing in a colander in his sink, the ziploc bag of spice mix he'd prepared twenty minutes earlier. —But the famous shrimp.

—I *know*, Cassandra says. —I'm *sorry*.

—It's OK, says Fletcher. —It's just—I was just looking forward to—

—I know, Cassandra says. —It's just—Nancy backed out on me at the last second and—

This isn't the first time this has happened. It has turned out that the five surrogate aunts Cassandra once said were raising her son are, in reality, closer to one surrogate aunt, this woman Nancy, whose exams are coming up in the fall, and, as the time between now and her exam date diminishes, the amount of time that she has available for watching Leander diminishes proportionally. (Fletcher's own exams will be this fall as well. He has a stack of poetry books in the other room that he needs to get to. At first he said *if I can just read two a week I can keep on top of this*. Now it's closer to *one every day*. As a result of thinking about it this in this fashion, he reads almost nothing.)

—So I'm thinking I'm just going to stay here. I'll order some Chinese from the place that Leander likes and—

—Listen, Fletcher says. —Do you just want me to come down there? It only takes me like twenty minutes to get down to your place. I'll throw the shrimp in a bag and—

This isn't the first time she's backed out on him at the last second, and this isn't the first time he's countered with this *I'll-just-come-over-there* response. They've played through it enough times in the past month or two that he already knows what her counter-counter-response will be.

—Fletcher, she says. —I *want* you to come over; you know I do.

—I know, Fletcher says.

—But I'm not ready to bring you home yet, she says. —Not to meet Leander. Not yet.

—We're going to have to meet sometime, Fletcher says. —I *want* to meet him. He's such a big part of your life but to me he's just this x-factor.

—Yeah, Cassandra says. —Does that suck?

Fletcher has to laugh. —Uh, he says. —A bit.

—I'm sorry, Cassandra says. —I don't want it to be this way, but—but this is a promise I made to myself before I even met you, and I don't want to just throw it out the window now that you've come along—now that someone's come along who I *like*—

—It's just— Fletcher says. —It's just that it's been five months.

—I know, she says. —This is just my *thing*, though. You have to let me have my thing.

—Until when? Fletcher says.

—I don't know, she says. —Soon. I don't know.