

# CHANGING *Lanes*



SEASON VINING

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CHANGING  
*Lanes*

## Also by Season Vining

Beautiful Addictions  
Held Against You  
Perfect Betrayal  
Chaos & Control  
Fearless & Falling  
King Me

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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ASIN:

## Dedication

This book is for my dear friend Katie, who's always been there for a good laugh, good cry, or good drink. Sometimes all three at once.

# Acknowledgments

As with any book, there are many people who contribute to make it happen. Yes, I get the words on the page, but then what? Well, there's my local writers group who put up with hearing stories one chapter at a time, every two weeks. They are my friends, critique partners, and my favorite writers. There's the author tribe I am lucky enough to be a member of. Helena, Shannon, Casey, Lindsey: thanks for answering endless questions, spitballing ideas, and looking at countless cover designs. Not all heroes wear capes.

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And the biggest thanks goes to my family and friends who continue to support this endeavor and put up with my artistic weirdness. Love you to bits.



# 1

I SIGH WITH relief as I pass an old wooden sign reading *WELCOME TO GRACE*. Yawning, I give a little grin, hoping that this new start will be exactly what I need to find my grace. Being betrayed by the two people I trusted more than anything almost destroyed me. To cope, I buried myself in my only respite—books. Some days I would live in those fictional worlds, replacing the love interest with myself and imagining that in some alternate universe women still get swept off their feet by Mr. Perfect (who happens to be a billionaire and has an enormous penis). Other days I felt like I'd never survive the crushing sadness and hurt. But I did survive, and here I am, arriving in Grace.

Selling the home that I shared with my piece of shit husband for twenty years felt like the last thing tethering me to the town that's always been home—Savannah, Georgia. It's been six months since the divorce and I needed a new start—a place where no one knew me or my messy former life. I wanted to reinvent myself, take chances, be a bolder version of Stella Locke. And apparently, I wanted to do that in upstate New York.

I follow the directions on my phone and turn left onto Main Street. Yes, this tiny little town actually has a Main Street. It looks exactly like something out of a '50s sitcom. It's late, so all the stores are closed, but I spot the post office, a pharmacy, and an indie bookstore. I make a mental note to check that out soon, because I'm not sure if Amazon Prime delivery is an option for a place like this.

A few more turns and I pull into my new driveway. My headlights slide over someone standing on the sidewalk. He throws his hands up to block the light from his face before turning away. I glance at the time and wonder what anyone is doing out at almost midnight on a Thursday. The guy places

earbuds in his ears and takes off down the sidewalk at a brisk run. I yawn again and shake my head. *Weirdo*.

Seeing my new home for the first time in person brings a smile to my tired face. It's a cute two-story house built in the early 1920s. I fell in love with the photos of the hardwood floors, decorative trim and all the charm these old houses possess. I put a lot of trust in a local real estate agent and by the looks of things, she didn't steer me wrong. To me, the best selling point is that it sits on a lake.

I pick up my phone and dial the only person I know who is still awake at this hour.

"Hey, sis," Brea answers. "Made it to your new place yet?"

"Yep. Just pulled in. Brea, it's so adorable. I can't wait to get inside."

"Well, I still don't understand why you had to move so far away, but if you're happy, I'm happy. Lane's already cornered me at the grocery store asking about you."

I groan and let my head sink back against the seat. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I rammed his shins with my cart until he left me alone. Asshole."

"Good. I'm so glad to be far away from that bastard."

"I already miss you though," she whines.

"I've been gone three days, you codependent pest," I say, stifling another yawn.

"Don't judge me," Brea says. I can hear her moving around, doors opening and closing. "I'm pregnant and hormonal and you've left me here with Momzilla. Now that you're gone, she's just going to dote on me. She's already been over every day since you left."

I laugh. "She's not that bad, Brea. She just wants to make sure we're happy and taken care of."

"Well, are you? Happy?" she asks.

I stare up at the old house in front of me. "Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"Good. Now get in there and get some rest. I'm sure you're exhausted after that long trip."

I nod even though she can't see me. "Yeah. Made longer by a shitty Flex Fuel V6 engine with rear wheel drive. Should be getting at least 340

horsepower from this thing, but I swear I thought it was going to crap out on every hill. And there are LOTS of hills up here.”

“You know I can’t hang when you start speaking in motor-tongue.”

I finish off the last of my water bottle and toss it on the seat beside me. “Just because you didn’t spend any time with Daddy in the garage doesn’t mean I have to dumb down my conversations.”

She grunts. “Fine. Just get your ass inside, take lots of pics and send them to me tomorrow. And remember to call mom in the morning so she doesn’t come over here with a million questions.”

“Will do. Goodnight, Brea. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Ending the call, I slide my phone in my pocket and survey the mess around me. Three days in a moving truck and cheap hotels has left me exhausted and just wanting my own bed. I frown and reach for my travel bag, remembering that I don’t have a bed. I left it behind for Asshole and Voldewhore. It wasn’t mine anymore anyway. They ruined it with betrayal and skank juice.

I hop down out of the truck and stretch my hands high above my head. The ache in my muscles reminds me just how long I’ve been sitting. Pulling the fresh air into my lungs, I grin at how crisp and different it is than the air back home. It feels refreshing, not heavy and suffocating. Of course, that could have everything to do with the pain associated with that place and not so much the humidity of the South.

Climbing the house’s creaky wooden steps, I hear footsteps approaching. I turn and from the darkness of my front porch, I watch Mr. Midnight Jogger make a lap past my house again. There’s not enough light to get a good look at him, but the curve of his shoulders and muscled arms is unmistakable. But jogging after midnight? Who does that? Serial killers? Vampires? Narcissistic people who don’t want to jiggle in the daylight?

I’m not in terrible shape, but let’s just say I’d rather eat a pint of Ben & Jerry’s while curled up with my favorite novel than partake in *any* kind of physical activity. Yes, even sex. I turn the key and push the front door open wondering if that’s more of a reflection of me or my lazy, two-pump-chump, “It’s your turn to get on top” ex-husband. Considering I did all the housework, washed the laundry, cooked all the meals, worked full-time, and waited on him hand and foot, I’d say that counts as at least one yoga and two Jazzercise classes on the exchange scale.

The smell inside is stale air, nothing that can't be fixed with a few open windows. I drop my purse near the door, search for a light switch and flip it on. The room is cast in an amber glow from the vintage light fixture and I smile at the small rainbow dots of light across the ceiling. *Mine*, I think. This is all mine. I move from room to room, taking in every space with an appreciation that I've never felt before. Finally, I haul myself upstairs and check out the two bedrooms and bathroom there. There's a balcony that runs the entire width of the house upstairs. I slide open the door from my bedroom and step outside, looking out over the lake. I think I'm going to like it here.

The antique clawfoot tub calls to me, but I'm too tired to even consider it. Instead, I wash my face in the sink and pat it dry with the bottom of my shirt. I can't stand the thought of sleeping in my road clothes, so I strip down and decide to sleep naked. I roll out my sleeping bag in my bedroom right under the large bay window that looks out at the lake. The small bit of light from the moon reflects off the water making it look like a mirror of the night sky. I lay on the soft blankets and let the cool air wash over my skin while imagining where my new furniture will go and how I'll decorate the space.

A barking dog grabs my attention and after a few seconds, my curiosity gets the best of me. I crawl over to the window facing my neighbor's house to see him returning from his jog. He enters the front door, and a few seconds later, light floods his back yard. He steps onto his porch and I get to my feet for a better view. I can only see him from the waist down, but it doesn't look like anything on him would jiggle.

He whistles and an adorable tan corgi runs into the yard. The dog jumps around, chasing something I can't see and without even thinking, I'm grinning.

"Come on, Chap. It's late," the man says. In the quiet of night, his voice carries up to my window so clearly, I can hear the slight northeastern accent to his words.

Chap sniffs around, does his business, and takes off running for the porch. I giggle watching his little legs work so hard. But then he trips on something and goes ass over head, tumbling until he comes to a stop at the bottom of the steps. I let out a laugh, thinking how he looks like a fluffy little eggroll.

It's then I notice my new neighbor looking in my direction. I guess my voice carries too. He's ducked down so he can see up into my window and in the shadow of his back porch, I can't see his eyes, but I feel them. A chill descends my spine and it's then I remember I'm naked. He's getting an eyeful of the girls.

I yelp and drop to the floor, hiding my face in my hands. I hear his door close and watch the light go off in his backyard. Not wanting to chance another flashing, I crawl over to my makeshift bed and tuck myself in, still stewing in mortification.

"Well, Stella Locke," I say to myself. "Welcome to the neighborhood. You've been here less than an hour and have already flashed the poor man twice with your headlights."

I HAVEN'T on the floor since tent camping in the Girl Scouts. I didn't like it then, and thirty years later, I surely don't appreciate it now. Blinking my eyes open, I find the room flooded with morning light from all the bare windows. From the empty walls to the hardwood floors, everything seems to glow. It truly feels like a new beginning—a rebirth. I groan and stretch my back.

After a trip to the bathroom, I check the time to find it's only 7 a.m. Like an immediate reaction to how little sleep I got, a yawn escapes. I unpack my toiletry case, lining up the bottles in a neat row beside the sink. It's my first claim to my new home and feels ridiculously good. To have something of my own, something that is solely mine stirs a latent emotion inside.

Getting married right out of high school, I went from my parent's house to my husband's. I never felt that anything belonged to me. I never felt possession and pride in the house I kept and the car I drove—not until now. A simple gathering of moisturizer, toothpaste, soap, and a toothbrush somehow represent much more than personal hygiene.

I turn the shower on and grab a clean towel from my bag as the bathroom fills with steam. The shrill ringtone from my phone cuts through the empty room, seeming to echo off of every surface.

“Good morning, Mom.”

“Stella,” she says in her I've been up for a while, already had three cups of coffee and held out as long as I could before calling you voice. “Where are you, dear?”

“In the new house,” I tell her, studying my reflection in the foggy bathroom mirror. “Made it in around midnight.” This is where normal people would realize how early it is and apologize for calling, but not my mom. I turn sideways and check out my profile, noticing that I've lost some

weight in the past few months. A failed marriage and friendly betrayal can do that to a girl. No wonder I'm always tugging at my jeans these days.

"Good to hear. Well, how is it way up there? What's it like? Do they talk funny?"

I laugh. "I've literally only seen the inside of my house. I don't know what it's like here yet, Mom. Let me settle in, do some exploring and I'll get back with you. And up here, I'm willing to bet they think *we* talk funny."

"They can think that 'til the cows come home, don't make it true." I grin at her slow southern drawl and how ironic it is that she thinks other people sound strange. "I want to hear all about the place once you've settled in. I was thinking of maybe coming for a visit for Thanksgiving. You reckon that'd be okay?"

I press a hand to my forehead, not really knowing how I feel about it. "Sounds great."

"Good. Well, I'll let you get to unpacking, sweetheart. Check in soon, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Love you."

"And I love you."

I press the button to end the call and stand there staring at the phone screen. The background photo is of my mom, sister, and niece all dressed in red, white, and blue for the Fourth of July party thrown downtown every year. It stirs a bit of guilt if I'm being honest with myself. I love them and know I'll miss them. But I just had to leave. I swipe a thumb over their faces. I hope they will learn to understand that.

After a hot shower and brushing my teeth twice, I am a brand new woman. I slide into my last pair of clean jeans and a light sweater, knowing I have a ton of work ahead of me today. Checking the time, I realize my real estate agent, Marley, should be here soon.

She's already arranged for some hired help to unload the truck, but I'll still need to direct them and start unpacking. Marley has been incredibly supportive in this whole process and I don't know what I would have done without her. When I asked her why she was being so nice, she just replied with "I need a new project and you are it," in her lovely British accent.

There aren't a ton of things to unload from the truck. I brought along the few pieces of furniture I inherited from my grandmother, my clothes—though now that I'm looking at my outfit, I maybe should have left those

behind too—and some personal items. After the truck is unloaded, my number one priority will be finding a bed. Another night on those cold, hard floors sounds like a nightmare.

In the early morning light, I can really see my new home more clearly. I snap photos of each room and the view of the lake from my bedroom and send them to Brea.

I find myself in my kitchen, running my fingers over the countertops with an appreciation I've never had for formica. My hands move to the wood cabinets with bronze pulls and I can't help the smile that grows across my face. This is my kitchen. This is *my* kitchen. I can leave dishes in the sink if I want to. I can store the coffee cups anywhere I please. I can fill an entire cupboard with red wine and cookies.

Throwing my hands in the air, I shake my ass back and forth. "It's all miiiiine," I sing. I spin around a few times, continuing my dance and moving to a rhythm that is only in my head. "All miiiiine." Pressing my back to the fridge, I do a little shimmy down to the floor. "This is miiiiine."

I'm rolling around on the floor when the growling from my stomach interrupts the celebration. I search through my purse, dig out a granola bar and just about inhale it. Just as I'm wiping the crumbs from my tits, my phone rings. I dig it out of my back pocket and see Marley's name displayed.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite friend in Grace," I answer.

"I'm your *only* friend in Grace, and technically I live outside of the town limits," she answers with a laugh.

"Well, I'm off to a great start. No friends, no bed, and being obscene toward my neighbor."

"You did what?" Marley asks before yelling at someone who cut her off on the road.

"It's not safe to use your phone while driving. Also, you sound like a raving lunatic," I tease.

"That's because I *am* a raving lunatic, love." Her British accent is heavier when doling out the pet name. "Besides, I'm hands free."

I lean against my kitchen sink and watch an old lady walk her dog down the sidewalk. "Studies show that it is the conversation, not the actual phone that is distracting." I see a sleek black car whip into my driveway next to the truck.



“It’s too early for you to be this cheeky,” Marley says. “Plus, I’m here, let me in.”

I end the call and head for the front door moments before she knocks. Pulling it open, Marley stands like a living art exhibit on my front porch. Her bright pink hair is knotted into buns on each side of her head. She’s got a jean skirt on with yellow and black striped tights that disappear into combat boots. Her sweater is lime green with an embroidered cactus and yellow flower stitched on. Her scarf matches the tights and large hoop earrings almost touch her shoulders.

“Well, are you going to invite me in or leave me to freeze? I *did* bring you coffee.”

I wave her in and close the door, leaving the chilly air outside and taking my coffee. We stand there, kind of awkwardly assessing each other the way women do. I see a wacky girl who probably has a really odd pet, a collection of vintage Barbies, and more vinyl records than the small shop back in my hometown. I’m guessing that what she sees is a tired woman who’s been someone’s doormat for too long, has never tried drugs, and finds her clothes in the “American Housewife” section of Walmart. Still, we embrace each other like old friends.

“It’s so good to finally meet you in person,” I say, releasing Marley and tugging on her scarf. “Love the yellow and black.”

“Yes, well, I’m a Hufflepuff. Fancy meeting you too,” she says, removing the scarf and tossing it onto her bag on the floor. “You’re a lot prettier in person, by the way. I totally stalked you on Facebook.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I shrug and give her a strange look as she strolls around the room.

“Don’t you just love the place? It’s got a lot of personality, I think.”

“I *do* love it.” I sip the coffee and close my eyes as it warms my insides and brings me to life. “The crown molding, the built-ins—it’s got a lot of charm.”

“So what’s this about you being obscene? You seem perfectly fine to me,” Marley says, having a seat on my floor and crossing her legs out in front of her. She pats the hardwood next to her and I sit down. “The movers should be here in a few, but tell me all about it.”

I take a seat next to her and tell her the whole story of my jogging neighbor, his cute dog, and boobies on display. She doesn’t even apologize for laughing so hard she snorts.

“Is he hot?”

“I don’t know,” I say, sipping more coffee. “I couldn’t get a good look at him.”

“Well then, he’s already gotten a good look at you. No need for introductions or anything. Just invite him over a piece of fanny pie,” Marley says.

I stare at her waiting for an explanation, but she only smiles. “Fanny pie?”

“Pussy, love. You know. Your taco, honey pot, the great divide...”

I press my fingers to her lips. “I got it.”

Marley checks her phone. “I know you said you didn’t have a bed, so that is priority today. Once everything’s unloaded, I’ll take you over to Hamilton Bay. They’ve got a mattress store where I can get you a good deal.”

“Really?” I ask. “That’s amazing. Sleeping on the floor just about killed me. Old ladies shouldn’t have to endure such things.”

“Old ladies?” Marley laughs. “As if. You’re not a day over twenty-nine.”

I chuckle and swallow down more coffee. “Sure. We’ll say twenty-nine, plus shipping and handling.”

“Couldn’t convince me otherwise,” she says with a wink.

A quick knock pulls us both from the floor. Marley jumps into action, directing the guys to unhook my car from the back of the truck and start unloading. I offer to help bring things in, but she assures me they will take care of everything.

She wiggles her eyebrows at me when a large, muscled man carries two boxes into the kitchen. “Forget the neighbor. Just drag him upstairs and let him pack your box.” Marley breaks into a fit of giggles while I roll my eyes.

“Slow down, Marley. I’ve just gotten out of a twenty year marriage and have been in town for less than 12 hours.”

“The best way to get over a man is to get under another one,” she says, resuming her spot on the floor.

While I can’t deny the guy is hot, that sounds more like the intro to a vintage porno film and not the kind of romance I long for. I made a promise that I’d never settle again. I want grand gestures and charm, a slow burn that will leave me breathless. I suppress a groan, wondering if I’ve got unrealistic goals because of all the novels I read.

It’s a bit uncomfortable for me to sit idly while others work. That’s something that is bred into my DNA, or maybe was handed down from my

mother and kept in check by my ex-husband. Meanwhile, Marley has no qualms with ordering these guys around while sitting on the floor painting her fingernails a bright turquoise color.

“So, tell me, did you just tuck tail and run away or did you at least get some revenge before disappearing? Because I know I would have gone off the rails.”

I lean against the wall next to her and fold my arms. “I’m not sure that anything will ever satisfy the word revenge in this case.” Marley frowns. “But I did throw all his belongings into a pile in the backyard, douse them with gasoline, and watched that shit burn for hours. Did you know when your cousin is head of the fire department, you don’t even get fined for that?”

Marley chuckles and waves her freshly painted nails at me. “That’s my girl,” she says.

I walk to my purse and dig out the folded newspaper page before handing it over. “There’s also this.” I wait while she opens up the page and reads over it. I can tell when the moment of realization dawns.

“Oh my god. You didn’t!” she squeals.

“I did.”

“You had their sexting messages printed in the paper?”

“Along with their photos so everyone could recognize them.”

Her giggle starts small and grows into a cackling kind of laughter, where she’s clutching her chest and wiping tears from her eyes.

“I knew I liked you,” she says. “That’s bloody brilliant.”

We both watch the movers bring boxes in and eventually, I can’t help myself. I start hauling the smaller boxes upstairs to my bedroom, ignoring Marley’s bitching. I make a few trips up and down the stairs before needing a break. Trying to be subtle, I check the neighbor’s house when passing by the windows, but there’s no sign of life.

“I told you to let them get it,” she sings, as I rub the muscles of my lower back.

The three men have the truck empty in under an hour. I hand over the keys so they can return the truck for me and Marley and I pile into her car for a little mattress shopping.

“You’ll need food and toiletries, but we’ll get your bed first. I may even be able to persuade them to deliver it today,” she says, batting her eyes at

me. Somehow I have no problem believing that this woman could sell ice to an Alaskan. “And then we’ll work on finding someone to break it in.”

### 3

THE TRIP TO Hamilton Bay is a short twenty minute drive. The mattress store is the first thing I notice once we get to town on account of the row of wacky wavy inflatable tube men at the road. They're sort of obnoxious in their neon colors and jerky movements, and in other ways remind me of my dad when he had too many bourbons. That brings a smile to my face and an ache to my chest. When he wasn't buried under the hood of a car, he was a silly man who gave us a fun and sometimes chaotic childhood.

Once inside the store, I am overwhelmed by a sea of beds. Can there really be this many options? Two salespeople spot us and all but elbow each other to get there first. Before they make it down the first row of beds, Marley stops them cold.

She holds up a hand in their direction. "Don't even bother. We're here to see Orvalle."

I whip my head toward her. "You know a real person named Orvalle? Is he like 93 with a bowtie? Does he sell popcorn?"

Marley rolls her eyes and nods her chin to the left. I follow her gesture to find a gorgeous young man in a modern suit that hugs his body very nicely. He's wearing a smile that is all perfect white teeth and it's just for Marley.

"Orvalle, love, how are you?" she says, giving him a kiss on each cheek.

"I'm good," he says. "Good to see you, Marley. Been a while."

She looks off across the store as if uninterested with small talk. "Yes, well, I have need of you now. I'm here to cash in that favor you owe me."

This confident, grown ass man blushes. His cheeks flame pink and he stares at his shoes too long. My gaze bounces from Marley to Orvalle and back again. Just when I feel like I'm going to choke on the tension between the two, she speaks.

"This is Stella. She needs a love sack and she needs it quickly."

He holds out a hand and at the same time I open both of mine for a hug. It's just customary in the South. Besides, I'm a hugger. Orvalle sees my intention and lifts both arms at the same time I correct myself, extending one hand for shaking. I let out a weird grunt and he laughs before grabbing my hand and shaking it once.

"Well, that was super awkward," Marley says. "Now, show us the fanciest stuff you've got."

"What?" I say, my eyes wide. I look to Orvalle. "Just a comfortable, reasonably priced mattress set will do. But I want it big and wide and all to myself."

"Bor-ing," Marley says, and takes off down a row of beds. "Got anything that vibrates?" She picks one and crawls up to try it out. After a few seconds, I get a thumbs down and she's off to the next one.

Orvalle asks me a string of questions to find out what I want in a bed. We test drive a few with Marley insisting that Orvalle get in the middle.

"Let's make spoons," she says, turning on her side and curling herself into Orvalle. He does the same to me and I have to admit that it feels strangely nice.

When his hand presses into my stomach, a weird sensation comes over me. It's like when your foot falls asleep and you start moving it around to get the blood flowing. The tingling sensation prickles beneath where Orvalle's hand rests and blooms out like an ink stain on paper. I realize that this is the first time another man's hands have been on my body in twenty-three years. The thought causes my brain to panic.

"Switch!" I call out. We all roll over and now I am spooning Orvalle. With his hand gone, the sensation fades away completely and my pulse slows. I can't help but wonder if this is a normal reaction, or if my ex has done more mental damage than I imagined. "This is pretty comfy."

"The man or the bed?" Marley calls out.

"The bed," I say, kind of unsure of the truth. "We'll take it."

After we crawl out of bed together, I follow Orvalle to his desk and make the first purchase for my new home. With a stern tone and a look that could melt ice, Marley tells him it will be delivered today and Orvalle agrees with no questions asked. I'm curious to what kind of favor he owes her, but think better of asking.

"We'll go ahead and do the rest of your shopping in Hamilton Bay too," Marley says when we're back in the car. "You've got options in Grace, but

the grocery is such a rip off, being a smaller town and such.”

Shopping with Marley is much like shopping with my five-year-old niece. While I’ve made a list of all the necessities, she just keeps dropping things into my cart. And we’re not talking kale chips and veggie straws. There’s sugary cereal, frozen pizzas, and a couple of cans of Pringles. I finally protest when she adds a bag of golden Oreos.

“I don’t even like those,” I say. “They’re an insult to the original institution of the Oreo with the perfect chocolate to filling ratio. There’s not even chocolate in those which should be against some kind of cookie law.”

“It’s for when I visit.” She waves a dismissive hand in my direction and keeps walking. “Besides, there’s no cookie laws. My friend Kennedy owns the bakery downtown. I think she would have told me.”

Our last stop is the wine aisle where she loads me up with all of her favorites and I even include a few of mine. While Marley rambles on about reds versus whites, I close my eyes and dream about an evening curled up with one of my favorite books and a bottle of wine. I’ll snack on saltines and cheese and leave crumbs wherever I damn well please.

“Darling,” Marley says, snapping her fingers in front of my face. “Are you listening?”

I shake my head. “Not at all.”

She chuckles and adds another two bottles to the cart.

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BACK AT MY house, we work to unload everything. Marley organizes my kitchen while I unpack my books, filling the built-in shelves in the den. We both head upstairs to get my bedroom ready before the store arrives with my bed.

“Is there anything in these boxes that you don’t want me to see?” Marley asks, ripping the packing tape off of a box.

“Nah. I’m not that interesting of a person,” I say with a flippant wave of my hand.

“Now I know that’s bullshit,” she says, pulling a bag of my socks and underwear from the box. “Unless you are a direct reflection of your knickers, because I see some granny panties and nothing but white and nude colors.”

I snatch the bag from her hands and toss it in my closet. “Don’t judge a woman by her drawers,” I say. “I’m here to start over. If that means maxing out a Victoria’s Secret credit card, then so be it.”

Marley’s eyes light up and she squeezes her hands together. “Oh, please let me help. Shopping is my favorite thing ever. Though we’ll have to do it online unless you want to drive to Syracuse.”

“Online is fine with me. The internet people are coming to install tomorrow.”

“Sweet!” Marley says. “Next, we’ll tackle those mom jeans you’re wearing.”

“Hey! I heard they were making a comeback,” I protest, tugging on the waistband.

“There’s a difference between high-waisted jeans and what you’re wearing. But don’t fret, love. I told you that you’re my new project, so I’m here for all of it. The good, the bad, and the tacky.”

I rip the tape off of a box and open it up. “If I weren’t so uncomfortable in these jeans, I’d be offended. But now you’ve called attention to them,” I spin and look at my backside in the full length mirror in the corner of the room. “I totally have square ass.” I grab a handful of each cheek and lift. “What the hell?”

“Yeah,” Marley agrees, eyeing my reflection. “Bums should not have corners.”

We work hard to unpack the rest of the boxes after I make Marley promise to not judge anymore of my belongings. My bed is delivered right on time. They even haul it upstairs and set it up for me. I throw my newly purchased sheets and comforter in the washer in anticipation of a great night’s sleep.

Around dinner time, I open a bottle of wine while Marley heats us each a Lean Cuisine.

“Is this more sad or pitiful?” I ask, motioning to the piping hot processed food in plastic trays.

“This,” Marley says, taking a huge bite of her dinner and realizing that it is lava hot, waves a hand in front of her open mouth. “This is single life independence, lady. With no MSG! Welcome to it!”

She holds her plastic cup of wine in the air and I bump my own against it. “To independence,” I say.



That night, after Marley is gone and I am alone in the quiet of my new house, I revisit each room. I take my time walking around, finding new details. When it's time for sleep, I keep my clothes on and make a note to buy curtains or blinds for all the windows in the house. Around eleven, I am sleepy and exhausted from the day, but curiosity keeps me up.

Just like the previous night, my neighbor exits his house around midnight and takes off for a jog. I wonder what kind of work he does to keep such odd hours. In the light of the full moon, I get a better look at his profile and it makes my heart race. The bulge of his arms and calves are enough to get me thinking about doing very naughty things to him. I consider that he might be alarmingly disfigured, or even a bad person, but those thoughts slip from my mind as my fingers slide down to my clit in the shower. I come more quickly than I ever have before and chalk it up to how long it's been since I've had an actual orgasm.

This time, I stealthily watch from my window as he returns home, lets his dog out for a bit and heads back inside. He doesn't catch me watching tonight. In fact, he doesn't even look up in my direction. I lay in my new bed, in soft sheets that smell of lavender, and feel a little pissed off at that.

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IN THE NEXT couple of days, I focus on unpacking. I try not to dwell on how the few things I have don't fill up this house. My shelves are nearly empty, rooms are bare, and it all feels a little too lonely. But sometimes, when it's quiet, and I'm standing with my coffee, toes digging into my fluffy loop rug, it feels just right. I love having my own space and no rules—real or implied. I don't have to answer to anyone or account for my time. Finally, it's all about me.

I enjoy time out on the lake. The wooden dock that leads from my backyard out over the water isn't as impressive as some of the others, but it suits me just fine. Every afternoon, I wrap myself in a flannel blanket and sit out there reading until the sun disappears from the sky. It's a simple pleasure that makes me happier than I've been in a long time.

I still spy on my next door neighbor and his late night jogs. I'm basically in love with his corgi and resist the urge to steal him for myself—the dog, not the neighbor. I'm not sure if the mystery surrounding his late night

habits or the silhouette of his runner's body has me more intrigued, but I can definitely say my interest is piqued.

Though I got a nice settlement in the divorce, I cannot stand to sit home doing nothing. Besides, getting a job in town will be a great way to meet people. On Tuesday morning, I drive to Main Street and park at one end. I figure I'll walk one side of the street and come back up the other. The air is crisp and when the wind blows, it cuts through my not-made-for-real-cold coat. I curse my southern wardrobe and wrap my striped scarf around my neck—a gift from Marley. She insists I'm a Ravenclaw.

I adore the old authentic feeling of this town. Here on Main Street, the road is still made of cobblestone. Each storefront is warm and inviting with handwritten signs displayed in the windows and welcome mats marking each entrance. It's so Americana and quaint, I want to send pics of this to my sister just to show her I'm not exaggerating. I spot a couple of bars, a women's clothing store, and a bakery on my drive in and vow to check those out as well.

My first stop is at Grace Garage. I grew up in my dad's shop, so I can build and repair engines with the best of them. From the time I was able to walk, I was passing him tools and learning everything I could. When I enter the place, a feeling of nostalgia washes over me. The familiar smells take me back to sitting on my father's lap, covered in grease as we rebuilt the carburetor for his '56 Chevy Bel Air.

The guy at the counter has the standard mechanic coveralls on, his name stitched onto the pocket. He's got a baseball cap on his head and his feet propped up on the desk in front of him.

"Hi, Chance," I say with a smile. "I was wondering if you're hiring right now?"

Chance drops his feet to the floor and tents his fingers together, resting his chin on top. "Well, we don't really warrant enough business to hire a receptionist, and my nephew cleans the place once a week."

I want to roll my eyes, but I refrain. Been dealing with this as long as I can remember. "I meant for a mechanic."

His eyebrows shoot up toward the bill of his hat and he grins. "You?"

"Yes, me."

"What are your qualifications?" he asks. I want to wipe that smug smile off his face with the grease rag hanging out of his pocket.

“Well, I did not go to school for it, if that’s what you’re asking. But I did an apprenticeship under my dad in his garage for ten years. I started with the easy stuff and moved my way up to rebuilding entire engines. While I specialize in vintage cars, I have certifications from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence in transmissions, brakes, and electrical systems.”

Chance’s grin falls and he picks up a tool from the drawer next to him. “What’s this?” he asks.

“Oh, a test. Goody,” I mumble to myself. “A fine-tooth 5-degree ratchet with recessed quick-release and reversing mechanisms.”

He laughs, looks at the tool, and back to me. “Wrench would have been fine.” I cross my arms now and cock one eyebrow. “Look, I’m sure you know what you’re doing, but we’re not hiring right now anyway.”

“Thanks for your time,” I say, turning on my heel and heading out onto the sidewalk. I try to shake free of the annoyance from being dismissed so easily just because I’m female, but it sits heavy on my shoulders. Taking a few deep breaths, I let the wind whip around me and take those negative feelings away. I need to put my game face on if I’m going to land a job in this town.

I stop at the pharmacy, the grocery, the hardware store, and even a dry cleaner. Each time, I put on my best smile and ask if they need any help. Everyone is friendly, but a little leary of a stranger. I imagine most of the management, owners, and employees have known each other their whole lives. I fill out applications and leave them with the promise that they’ll call if they find themselves in need. Each time, I know they won’t call.

At the diner, I grab a cup of coffee and with no experience, they’re not even willing to let me clear dishes. The owner is a harsh looking old man with a permanent scowl painted on his wrinkled face who only shakes his head when I ask about a job. I leave there with my hot coffee mumbling how he probably hasn’t gotten laid in the last twenty years.

Crossing the street—at the one traffic light in town—I head into Grace Books. After a half dozen rejections, this is a sweet spot on my tour of downtown. I swear I hear an angel choir singing hallelujah when I enter the doors. I practically skip my way to the first display of books and wrap my arms around it, like hugging an old friend. Humming in delight at the smell of books, I lay my head on the top shelf.

“Uh, can I help you with something?” a nasally voice says from behind me.

I snap to attention and spin to find a young girl staring at me. She pops her gum and twists a lock of jet black hair around her finger. Her name tag is upside down, not mistakenly, but in an ironic way. It reads Jude.

“Hey, Jude!” I say, a little too excitedly. “Take a sad song and make it better,” I sing.

She stares at me, unimpressed, blinking her dark eyes. “Yeah, I’ve never heard that one before.”

My mouth pulls into a tight line and my fingers tap out a rhythm on my coffee cup. “Is the manager or owner around? I’m looking for a job.”

Jude lets out a laugh in one breath and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, she’s here.”

I wait for more information, but the girl just stands there eyeing me. “Can I speak with her?” I say slowly, like giving instructions to a toddler.

“She’s in a meeting, but if you wanna hang out, she should be done soon.” Jude turns and takes her place behind the front counter. She pulls out her cell phone and types away, probably posting about the annoying lady in square-butt-mom-jeans who came in today.

I casually browse the rows of books until I get to the romance section. There, in all its glory, is a huge display of all of Alaina Taylor’s novels. A hand-drawn sign hangs above that reads “Local Author,” and I almost pee myself in excitement.

Picking up a copy of *Any Man of Mine*—the first book I fell in love with—I fan through the pages and discover that the title page is autographed. I squeal, and press the book to my face to stop the ridiculous noise. While the thought of having an autographed copy is appealing, I don’t want some generic signature waiting for any person. I want a personalized signature, promising that we’ll be besties and get froyo together, and try out new pasta recipes while drinking bottles of wine and toasting fictitious men.

A door next to the display whips open and out steps a man I instantly recognize. Even though I’ve never gotten a very clear look at his face, I know it’s my neighbor. This man is stunning. His skin is a golden tan that seems odd in a place with such long winters. Brown hair frames his face, a day’s worth of scruff covering his jaw. Those blue eyes hold me in place as if I’m under a spell.

I realize the book is still pressed to my face. So I quickly pull it away and hide it behind my back. My mysterious neighbor, dressed in jeans, a nice

button up shirt, with a blazer and scarf draped over his arm, raises his eyebrows.

“You going to buy that, or try to sneak out?” he mock whispers.

“I...what?” I stammer. “This?” I ask, holding up the book. “No, I already have a copy at home.” I place it back on the shelf as if it’s a ticking bomb and back away.

He gives me a grin and turns to go. My eyes stay glued to his fantastic ass until he rounds the corner and I regret nothing. Peeking over the shelves, I notice Jude abandon her phone and watch as he slips into his coat and scarf before heading out.

“I love to watch him go,” a voice says from beside me.

My shoulders jump and I turn to find a lady with short, spiky red hair standing there eyeing me over her cateye glasses. She’s a tiny woman, only about five feet tall, but I can tell immediately that she’s spunky.

“So you like Alaina Taylor?” she says, gesturing to the display.

“She’s my favorite author, ever. I can’t get enough,” I admit.

“Well, you’re in the right town, then. I don’t recognize your face,” she says. “I’m terrible with names, but good with faces.”

“I just moved here. Are you the owner?”

“All of this is mine,” she says, swinging her arms wide. “I’m Rebecca Sellings, but everybody calls me Becca. My brother calls me Bacon, but he’s an asshole.”

I chuckle and hold out a hand. Becca seems like a name that suits a much younger woman, but somehow it fits her. “I’m Stella and I’m looking for a job.” Becca shakes it and motions me back through the door she and my neighbor came out of.

“Take a seat, Stella.”

I sit in a large overstuffed chair that makes me feel like a child in adult furniture, while she takes a seat behind her desk. The desk is covered in papers marked with neon sticky notes, stacks of books and an old desktop computer.

“So,” she says, raising her bifocals to rest in her hair and clasping her hands together on top of a pile of papers. “Why do you want to work in a bookstore?”

“I just love books,” I announce excitedly. “I mean, my last job was okay. I had been an executive assistant to this big deal real estate agent in

Savannah. But it was just what I was good at, not what I loved. And I love books.”

“So you mentioned,” Becca says. “What genres do you read?”

I sit up taller in the chair, grasping the armrests and leaning forward. “At this point, mostly romance. But I’ve read everything from horror to nonfiction and all the classics. I even like reading a few books at once. Keeps things interesting.” I pause and wonder if I should stop, but my mouth keeps going. “Except that time I was reading Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* and *Eat, Pray, Love* at the same time. Had some really messed up dreams about zombie elephants and Julia Roberts. That’s the last time I watched a movie before I read the book.”

Becca just stares, blinks a few times and scribbles something on a yellow sticky note. “I don’t have any full-time positions open, since I’m the only full-time employee. But if you want twenty-five to thirty hours a week, the job is yours.”

“Really?” I say too loudly, standing from my chair. “Thank you so much.”

Becca gives me an odd look that makes me fall back into the chair and tamp down my excitement.

“I’ve been needing to replace Jude for a while now. I don’t think I can take another day of her can’t-be-bothered attitude or her ridiculous reasons for calling in.”

“Uh.” I suddenly feel guilty about taking the girl’s job.

But Becca holds up a hand and shakes her head. “Don’t worry, honey. It’s been a long time coming. Last week she left me short-handed because her cat watched a scary movie and was too traumatized to stay alone.”

I chuckle as Becca rolls her eyes. We discuss pay, availability, and scheduling details, then she asks if I can start Monday.

“Sure!” I say, standing when she does. “I’d love to. I can’t tell you how excited I am to be surrounded by books all day.”

“Great,” Becca says. “I can’t tell you how excited I am to have an employee who’s read more than conspiracy theories and *Green Eggs and Ham*.”

“WHAT ARE YOU up to?” Brea asks, while crunching loudly over the phone.

“Will you stop eating in my ear? It’s rude.”

“But I’m so hungry,” she says. I can just picture her face right now—sad eyes and a protruding bottom lip. Not much has changed since we were kids. “And this baby really likes potato chips dipped in Nutella.”

I turn the water on in my tub and add some lavender bath salts while Brea continues to crunch. “That is disgusting.”

“Flashed anymore neighbors today?” she asks through a mouth full of chips.

“Not yet, though the night is still young. Thanks for bringing that up.”

“It’s basically what I live for.”

“Anyway, I’ve decided on a nice long soak in the tub and a bit of pampering before starting my new job tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right. Good luck with that. Sounds like your dream job, bookworm.”

I light a few candles and set my glass of wine and book on a small table next to the tub. “Well, the guys at the garage were just too stubborn to even give me a shot.” I frown at my reflection thinking about my encounter with the local mechanic. I slip out of my clothes and set my phone down on the counter, pressing the button to put it on speaker.

“Ugh. Men are the same everywhere I guess,” Brea says. I pull a clip from a basket on my counter and wrap my hair into a messy bun on top of my head. Suddenly, I hear what sounds like streaming water coming from my phone.

“Brea? Are you peeing?”

“I’m six months pregnant,” she says. “I’m always peeing.”

“Well, it’s been awesome listening to you eat and pee tonight. Is there anything else you’d like to share?”

“Oh shut it. I bet you’re naked right now.”

I grin at how well she knows me. “Doesn’t matter. You can’t hear naked.”

“Whatevs,” she says, washing her hands. Not even five seconds later I hear her crunching again.

“Okay, I’m done. Goodnight, Brea.”

“Love you, sis.” I can hear her laughing as I end the call.

Turning the water off, I glance at the bench at the foot of my bed. Next to my grandmother’s quilt, I’ve laid out my clothes for tomorrow, along with my coat, scarf, earrings, and purse. My ex-husband always made fun of me for being such a planner, but it’s who I am. Being prepared is the best way to avoid complications. Complications are the bane of my existence. I don’t like surprises. I don’t like awkward situations. Though, I seem to find myself in more of them than the average person.

I slip into the hot bathwater and hum as the bubbles tickle my chin. The water covers me completely and I think I could spend eternity in here. After a few minutes of soaking, I dry my hands off on a nearby towel and reach for the latest Alaina Taylor novel. Opening to my bookmark, I hold the pages apart and press the book to my face, my nose in the spine. I inhale the scent of ink and paper and smile at an old familiar friend.

I love books—real books. I love holding them, smelling them, filing them on my shelves, and of course, reading them. Alaina Taylor is my favorite author, by far. She writes modern day romances that split your heart open and then piece it back together page by page. Her men are swoon-worthy and her leading ladies are realistic and relatable. I always get lost in her words and too often find myself wishing to be the heroine.

If I’m being honest, Alaina is one of the reasons I moved to Grace, New York. She lives here, in this small upstate town and I thought, “Well, if it’s good enough for her, it’s good enough for me.” It also didn’t hurt that it was far from home and filled with the possibility of someday meeting my favorite author in person. While I’d like to imagine we’d be such good friends, realistically I’d be a complete spaz and she’d probably run as far as her feet could take her.

Just as I focus on the words on the page, I hear a distinct hissing noise. Setting aside my book, I look around the room, trying to pinpoint the sound.



I search the room and find nothing. Shrugging, I dive back into my book, letting the words pull me into a world of men who fiercely protect their women and women who insist they don't need protecting.

When my toes start to wrinkle, I finish up my bath and pull the plug to let the lukewarm water drain away. When I step out of the tub, my foot lands in water.

"What the hell?" I screech.

I wrap the towel around my body and follow the hissing noise to find the pipe behind the tub spraying water all over the place. Rolling my eyes, I chastise myself for not investigating the strange noise earlier. The faucet is off, so I'm not sure what to do. Then I remember a similar situation at our house a few years ago and my ex-husband needed to shut off the water to the house.

"Great. How do I do that?" I ask out loud.

I quickly slip into some yoga pants and a t-shirt and head outside. I search the back yard and don't find anything. My bare feet are freezing in the grass as I make my way to the front yard and find nothing there either. I do a perimeter search of the house and find nothing indicating it's a water main. As I turn to head back inside for my phone, I hit my toe on the bottom step.

"Son of biscuit," I curse, grabbing my toe and massaging it while balancing on one foot. "Ow, ow, ow. Mother-fluffing-witch-waffle-butt-trumpet."

"Are you okay?"

I spin to find my neighbor standing there. He's in a long sleeve T-shirt and jeans that look soft and worn in, in a natural, not purchased way. The street lamp casts harsh shadows across his face and makes him look a bit menacing in the dark space between our homes. My nipples instantly harden and I'm not sure if it's from him or the cold.

"Umm, a pipe is leaking in my house and I was looking for the water shut off, but I can't find it," I explain.

He almost grins, but contains those beautiful lips to a tiny smirk that pulls higher on the left.

"Well, out here there's the main shut off for the cul de sac and it's three houses down," he says, gesturing behind him. "You'll shut everyone on the street off."

I cross my arms trying to hide my traitorous nipples that have surely cut holes in my shirt by now. “Well, I’m not sure what to do. At this moment, my upstairs bathroom is filling with water.”

“There should be one on the house itself. Want me to take a look?” he asks.

“That would be amazing. Thank you so much,” I say, now really self conscious about my messy hair and old sleep clothes. It’s hard to focus on anything with my feet going numb in the cold, dewy grass.

He walks along the side of my house, using his phone as a flashlight. I follow, not knowing how to keep the conversation going. He’s got this brown wavy hair, longer on top and cut short on the sides. It looks effortless and just long enough to get a firm grip if given the chance. I grin at myself and wonder where this sexually charged woman has come from.

“My name’s Lane, by the way. Sorry we haven’t officially met yet,” he says over his shoulder. I let out an audible groan before slapping my hand over my mouth. Lane stops and turns to face me now, an amused look on his handsome face. “Something wrong?”

I shake my head. The light from his backyard spills over the fence, illuminating those icy blue eyes and I feel like he has frozen me to the spot. “It’s just that my ex-husband’s name is also Lane.”

“That’s a bummer,” he says. “I don’t want to start off on your bad side.”

I grin because I can’t help it. “Don’t worry. If you’re any kind of decent human being, I’d guess you’re pretty far off from that scumbag.”

“All those colorful words I heard earlier and you’re going to go with scumbag now?” Lane asks.

I laugh as my cheeks burn. “Oh, you heard that, huh?”

“I think everyone in the tri-county area heard that.” He’s teasing me and the joy that brings feels foreign. I crave more of it.

“My sister and I used to have contests to see who could make up the best alternatives to curse words. Drove my mom nuts. Sometimes they still come flying out of my mouth. So, okay, not scumbag. How’s slap nugget thunder cow?”

Lane throws back his head and lets out a laugh. “I definitely do not want to be associated with him. You want to call me a different name or something? How’s Mike or Larry?”

I scrunch up my face and shake my head. “No. Lane is fine. I’ll just have to associate some new, more pleasant thoughts with the name.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” he says and resumes his search along the perimeter of the house. “But don’t say I never gave you the chance.”

I can’t keep my eyes off of his wide shoulders and the way those jeans hug his ass. It almost makes me feel like a dirty old lady. Almost. We go through the gate into my backyard and he spots something under my porch steps.

“This might be it,” he says. With no hesitation, he drops down and crawls under the steps. I duck my head to watch him try and turn a knob connected to some old pipes. The muscles of his arms flex, the thin material of his t-shirt pulling tight, as he finally gets it loose and shuts it off. Lane crawls out and dusts off his hands. “That should do it, but we should check to be sure.”

A bark comes from his backyard accompanied by some scratching at the fence. “Quiet, Chap,” Lane says. I stand there staring at him in the moonlight, appreciating the sharpness of his jaw and the thick black lashes lining unreasonably blue eyes.

“I love your dog,” I blurt out. He smiles in a way that says he loves his dog too. “Sometimes I just want to steal him out of your yard and keep him. But then that wouldn’t work, because you’d totally recognize your own dog if he lived next door. Maybe he can visit? He’s just the cutest thing.”

“Thanks. He’s lucky he’s cute, because that short little mongrel is a handful. And I think a visit would be fine. Though I might have to keep a close eye on you now that I know you’re a thief.”

“Non-practicing thief,” I clarify.

“Non-practicing?”

“Yes. I’ve never actually stolen anything. I’m a thief in theory.”

We wear matching grins and stand silently in the darkness of my backyard until it becomes awkward.

“Ma’am?” he asks. I snap out of my staring.

“Uh, yes,” I answer. “Come on in.” I lead him back to the front of the house. “Don’t judge my empty house,” I beg as I let him inside. “And please don’t call me ma’am. God, it makes me feel so old.”

“Sorry,” Lane says with a shrug. “I thought it was customary for you southerners. Besides, you never told me your name.”

I head upstairs and he follows. “Oh, god. I’m sorry. I’m Stella. And apparently, I’ve forgotten my manners. My momma would be so embarrassed. How did you know I’m from the South?”

He grins. "This is a small town. News travels fast. Besides, your accent is a dead giveaway."

"Damn. And here I thought I left that back home."

"Definitely not. But don't worry. I like it."

I blush, but don't have time to respond before reaching my bedroom door. Lane crashes into my back as I stop short. His large hands grab my waist to keep me from falling over.

"Shit," I say. The water has covered the bathroom and seeped out into my bedroom now, onto the hardwood floors. "Let me get some towels."

"I'll make sure the leak has stopped. Where was it?"

"Behind the tub," I shout from inside the linen closet in the hall.

I grab every towel from the closet and throw them over the water in my bedroom. Lane finds me down on my hands and knees, sopping up water in the most ineffective way.

"I have a wet vac in my garage. Let me go put my dog back inside. I'll grab it and be right back."

He's out the door before I can answer. As soon as the front door closes, I jump up and check myself out in the bathroom mirror. My feet are in about an inch of water and practically frozen at this point. My hair is a tangled mess and my face is red and blotchy from the cold. I try to smooth down my hair, but it's no use. Cupping my hands in front of my mouth, I huff hot air onto them a few times before I hear the front door again.

Sloshing through the water, I pull up all the soaked towels and drop them in the empty tub. I look up when there's a knock on my bedroom door.

"I'm back," Lane says, appearing in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. He stands in the hall, his eyes connect with mine as he holds up the wet vac.

"Well, come on in," I say, meeting him in my bedroom.

"Sorry," he says with a smirk. "I don't usually go into a woman's bedroom unless I'm invited."

Lane gives me a wink and my heart thumps so hard, I'm sure he can hear it. Is this flirting? It's been so long, I'm not even sure. My face warms at the thought. While I'm not sure I'm ready for anything serious, a nice roll in the hay would be welcome. I think.

"Well, thanks for the vacuum. Can I return it to you in the morning?" I ask.

“No way,” Lane says, giving me a look that says I must be crazy. “I’m not going to leave you here with this mess. What kind of man would do that?”

“My ex-husband,” I say without thinking. I turn toward the window, so he can’t see me cringe.

“Well, he sounds like a loser. No offense.”

I turn to find Lane holding out the plug of the vacuum and nodding to the outlet on the wall. “None taken,” I say as I plug it in for him.

I move to the bathroom and create a dam between the two rooms with the last of my towels and my bathrobe. I hear the vacuum shut off and go to check on him. What I find makes my stomach lurch.

This beautiful, sweet man is standing beside my bed, holding a pink velvet bag trimmed in fur and dripping wet. Two vibrators and a glitter dildo peek out of the top. He seems amused while I want to spontaneously combust into a pile of ash.

“They were under the bed and getting wet,” he says with a grin. “I thought you might want to save them.”

My pulse spikes and I feel dizzy. “Oh, uh.” I race over and snatch the bag from his hands. “That’s just a silly divorce gift from my former coworkers.”

“That you conveniently keep under your bed?” His smirk is so infuriatingly devilish it makes a warm tingling sensation sprout in my chest and settle in my panties.

I clutch the wet bag to my chest and the glittered dildo slaps me in the chin. “Oh god,” I mumble. “I’ll just put these... yeah.”

I practically sprint into the bathroom and throw the bag into a wicker basket on the highest shelf on the back wall. Lane follows me in and the space is so tight, I feel trapped in here with him now. While I stew in my mortification, he starts the vacuum and works to dry the bathroom floor. When he reaches me awkwardly standing in the corner, he wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me onto the bathroom counter. I let out a little yelp, though I doubt he hears it over the roar of the vacuum.

Another few minutes and Lane is done. He turns the machine off and straightens up, stretching his hands high over his head. The thin t-shirt lifts just enough to see a strip of skin and I avert my eyes just after he catches me looking.

“Is your back okay?” I ask.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, his eyes on my chest. I wait for Lane to meet my eyes, but he doesn’t. Glancing down, I find that my t-shirt must have gotten wet when I held the wet bag of sex toys to my chest and now it is practically see through. This man has seen my tits twice and it hardly seems fair. I clear my throat to get his attention and it barely works. Slowly, his gaze moves to my face and he laughs, knowing he’s been caught.

“Thank you so much for your help,” I say, hopping down from the counter and crossing my arms over my chest. “Between the water cut off and the cleaning up, you really saved me tonight.”

“No problem. We can all use a little saving sometime, Stella.” Hmm, the first time he says my name sends a flutter through my body. It feels sweet and warm, and a little bit dirty. I want to hold onto that feeling, but a yawn escapes interrupting my thoughts.

“Well,” I say. “I’m going to get all these towels into the washer and get to bed. Starting my new job tomorrow.”

“Down at Grace Books?” I nod. Lane wraps the cord around the vacuum while I gather up all the wet towels. “Need some help?” he asks.

I peek around the pile and shake my head. “No, I’m good. Luckily, the laundry room is upstairs.” I feel the water soaking into my clothes and just want him to go.

“It’s not a problem,” he says, grabbing a handful. Again, wet t-shirt tits on display. Lane practically throws the towels back into my arms. “I’m sure you can handle it. I’m going to empty this outside and head home.” He backs out of the room quickly. “If you need a plumber recommendation or anything, let me know.”

And just like that, he’s gone. I don’t exhale until my front door slams closed.

# 5

“SO, YOUR MAIN duties,” Becca says while pinning my new name tag onto my shirt, “are stocking shelves, assembling displays, customer service, and helping with inventory twice a year.”

“Got it,” I say, giving her an enthusiastic smile. “I think I can handle that.”

“Honey, we both know you’re overqualified for this job, but who am I to deny a true book-lover?”

I smooth down the front of my shirt, though there’s no need. I’m just nervous for some reason. Getting a job here makes everything more real. Not even purchasing a home made me feel like I was putting down roots like this does. I follow Becca from her office, to the back room where there are stacks and stacks of books and it’s so organized it makes my heart happy.

“This is my system. You’ll have to learn my way because I’m old, and there’s no changing it now.”

“Of course,” I say, running my fingers along the spines of books. I see JUDE drawn onto a cardboard box with permanent marker. “Was Jude upset when you fired her?”

Becca laughs and presses a hand to her stomach. “That girl wouldn’t care if an alien race landed here and took over the town. You know how these teenagers are.”

I nod. But I don’t really know anything about teenagers. I have a niece, but she’s still young—and now, so far away. When I am settled in, I want to have her up for a visit, maybe during the summer break. I want to introduce her to a world outside of the South.

I always wanted children of my own, but my ex said it was never the right time. Now that I’m older, I feel like my window of opportunity has

passed and I'll have to be content with that.

My day is spent learning the ropes from Becca. She shows me how to work the register, lets me wander the store regularly so that I'm familiar with where everything is, and even treats me to lunch at the diner.

"I'll pay if you go pick it up," she says, handing over some cash.

My mind flashes back to the owner of the diner and his grumpy face, but I nod and take the money. I throw on my jacket and walk to the corner to cross at the light. I laugh out loud when I realize I'm waiting for a crosswalk signal with not a car in sight.

I hurry across the street and step into a surprisingly busy diner. Seeing an old yellowed sign hanging from the ceiling that reads "Pick Up" I place myself in line and wait. Waitresses busy themselves filling drinks and delivering food. There's a melody to this place that is clinking forks and conversation. And the smell is familiar, like a home-cooked meal and fresh apple pie.

Suddenly, a large body slides in front of me. "Excuse me," I say.

Lane turns around and acts surprised to see me. "Oh, Stella. I didn't see you there."

"Uh huh. Back of the line." He chuckles and takes his place behind me. I spin to face him, not wanting to miss looking at his gorgeous face and the way his long sleeve shirt pulls tight around his biceps. "Nice to see you in the daylight again."

"You too," he says with his lopsided grin. "It's rare that I come out of my cave, but it's Wednesday, so that means the Reuben sandwich special."

"So the Reuben can drag you out of isolation. Good to know."

"Stella, are you keeping notes on me?" he asks, leaning in so that we're closer now. My heart thumps against my chest and I'm still shocked at my body's reaction to this man.

"Let's just say I'm trying to keep up with all the new characters in my story." He grins and nods his chin, letting me know I need to move up in line. I take a step backward as Lane moves forward.

"Well, good luck with that. There is no shortage of 'characters' in this town. Have you met Frank? He owns this place."

"Yeah," I say, twirling a piece of my hair around my index finger. "I came in looking for a job. He was not impressed with me."

Lane laughs and nods his chin again. I move back. He moves up. "Frank is not impressed with anyone. He's the very definition of a curmudgeon."



A grin tugs at my lips. "Mmm," I say. "I love a good vocabulary word."

Lane returns my grin. "Really? How about superfluous? Boondoggle? Idiosyncratic?"

I fan a hand in front of my face. "If this is your version of dirty talk, I'm in."

We both laugh and I turn to face the register now, unable to face him after my brazen flirting. I tell the waitress Becca's name and hand over the cash. She gives me my change and a bag of food from under the counter. I turn to Lane.

"Well, I'll see you around. I've gotta get back to work," I say, moving toward the door.

"Bye, Stella. This capricious meeting has been scintillating."

I giggle and make my way out the door, across the street and back into Grace Books.

"That's a big smile you're wearing for a cheeseburger and fries," she says. I just shake my head and hand over the food.

We stand at the front counter, eating our lunches, and have only seen three customers all day. When it's quiet, my mind often returns to Lane coming to my rescue last night, our chat in the diner.

"So, the guy who was here yesterday..." I say, trailing off.

Becca smiles. "Lane Holder? What about him?" she asks, raising one eyebrow higher than the other.

"He's my neighbor. His real name is Lane Holder?" I ask with a chuckle.

"Yep," Becca says. "Was a real pain in the ass when he was a kid. But now he's all grown up and nobody seems to mind. You must have bought the old Whitman place? Nice. I always loved that house."

"I love it too." I stare at her, waiting for more, but Becca remains quiet. "Are you going to make me ask again?"

"What?" she asks. "Oh! Lane, yes. He's my accountant," she says. "Helps me out with taxes, payroll, whatever I need. I'm friends with his grandmother. Super smart kid."

The word kid guts me. "He certainly doesn't look like a kid," I say.

Becca laughs. It's a big, guttural sound that startles me. "When you're my age, everyone is a kid," she says. "Doesn't mean I would kick him out of bed, sweetheart."

I laugh and decide to change the subject. "Is it usually this slow?" I ask, returning my attention to my lunch.

Becca nods and pops a French fry into her mouth. “Yeah, ebooks are killing bookstores. But we seem to be able to hang on with the older generation. Once the old farts around here die off, who knows what will happen. Hey, maybe print will make a comeback, huh?”

My eyes drift to the huge display for Alaina Taylor at the back of the store. “Maybe. Do you ever have any author signings or events? I imagine that would be a great way to bring in customers, especially since Alaina Taylor is a local.”

I watch Becca for a reaction, hoping I’m not pressing for information too soon. While my insides scream, “Yes, I’m a stalker. I love her. Please introduce me!” my expression remains indifferent.

“Every once in a while, we’ll have an author blow through town, wanting to support an indie bookstore. It helps,” Becca says before sucking on her straw.

“But what about Alaina Taylor? I mean, she lives here.”

Becca stares at me and then looks out at the street. “Well, that’s a different story,” she says. “That woman is reclusive and never does public appearances. We get autographed books, but never a personal signing.”

“Never?” I whine.

“Never.”

I push my food away, no longer having an appetite. All I can think about is how I partly picked this town, a thousand miles away from home, for a chance to meet my favorite author, and she ends up being some kind of hermit.

“Well, that sucks,” I say, resting my chin in my palm.

“I know you’re a fan,” Becca says. “Maybe we can get her to sign something to you. Let me contact her people.”

I grin, hope is restored. “Her people? She has people? Can I be a people? I’m *good* people.”

Becca laughs and pats my shoulder. “I’m sure you are, Stella.”

---

I SIT AT my kitchen table, picking at a microwaved dinner while still wearing my nametag. A pounding knock rocks through the house and I jump from my chair to see who it is. When I swing the door open, Marley is smiling back at me. She’s holding a bottle of wine and a white box.

“How was the first day, love?” she asks, while moving past me into the kitchen. She sets the box down and proceeds to open the wine.

I close the door and follow her. “You know I had plenty of wine already, right?”

“Yes. But this is a special occasion. This is ‘She got her own house. She got her own car. One job, work hard, you a bad broad’ wine.”

“Oh,” I say, shaking my head. “Silly me. Side note: hearing you try to rap in that accent just may be the whitest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Fuck off,” Marley says, sticking her tongue out. “I know you’ve heard worse. And forget that sad little dinner you’ve got. I brought cake,” Marley says, flipping the box open. Inside is a round white cake with strawberries on top. Written in sloppy letters is ‘Eat Me.’

“Cake for dinner?” I ask.

“Sure. Why not? We are grown women. We do what we want,” Marley answers, sliding out of her bright pink coat that matches her hair. Today she is covered in black and white polka dots, green pants and tan boots that lace up to her knees. “Plus, I figured if you didn’t want it, you could always deliver it to your neighbor—as an instructional invitation.”

She laughs at her own joke as I grab two forks from the drawer. “Do we even need plates?”

“Yes, darling. We’re independent, not uncivilized.”

I pull down two plates from the cupboard and place them on the table. Marley turns on the faucet to wash her hands, only to hear a loud rumbling noise echo through the house.

“Oh shit!” I say. “I forgot I don’t have water.”

“What on earth are you on about?” Marley asks, twisting the knob off. The noise stops and her eyebrows shoot toward her hairline in question.

“Let’s have cake and wine and I’ll tell you about it.”

So, over vanilla almond cake filled with buttercream and fresh strawberries, I relive the water leak fiasco from last night. Marley laughs and claps every time I mention Lane getting another look at my tits.

“I used bottled water to brush my teeth this morning and then went to work, totally forgetting to call a plumber,” I say, shoving the last bite of my cake into my mouth.

“Well, let’s see ‘em then,” Marley says, waving her fork in my direction.

“See what?” I ask.

“Your goods, the girls, the melons, if you will, though I think you’re closer to grapefruits.”

I sip my glass of wine and stare at her. Again, she motions with her fork.

“You want to see my tits?”

“It’s only fair. Everyone else has.”

“No. And not everyone else has seen them. Just my ex-husband and my neighbor. And this guy in gym class my senior year who happened to be at the right place at the right time.”

“But it’s not fair,” Marley whines. “You barely know him. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“I barely know you too! I don’t need to see yours,” I say. “You keep those,” pointing to her chest, “in your shirt, and I’ll keep Sandra and Dee to myself.”

“Sandra and Dee? Your boobs are called Sandra Dee?” Marley snorts before finishing her glass of wine.

“Sandra,” I say, cupping my right boob, “is the more rational of the two. She likes high necklines, nude-colored bras, and at least five dates before sex.”

Marley grins. “And Dee?”

“Well,” I say, moving my hand to cup my left boob, “Dee is a bit crazier—the party tit if you will. She hates bras, thinks nipples should always be visible through your shirt, and enjoys public groping.”

Marley breaks into a fit of giggles. She squints her eyes and points her fork across the table, directly at my chest. “I told you I liked you, Stella. But now, it may be love.”

I stack our empty plates and put them next to the sink. “Sorry, I don’t play for that team.” I lean against the counter and think about Ryder Willis, the hero in the last Alaina Taylor novel I read. “I like them tall, dark, and handsome with a side of mysterious. Those little indentations that cut in at the hips like an arrow to the promiseland? Well, those are good too.”

“That’s oddly specific, love.”

“Not when you read the books I do,” I offer. “Now what are we going to do about my water?”

Marley jumps up and runs to grab her purse. She fishes her phone out and holds it up as if she’s won a prize. “I know a guy!”

“Of course you do.”

“I don’t know what you’re insinuating, but I’m in real estate. I know a lot of guys,” Marley says while pressing buttons on her phone.

“Do they all owe you favors?” I ask with a smirk.

“Only the pretty ones. Jordan, love, it’s Marley,” she says into the phone.

I busy myself with packing up the cake and putting it in the refrigerator while Marley continues her conversation in the front room. I pour us each another glass of wine and take a sip of mine. The sweet burn slides down to my stomach and warms me from the inside out.

“He’ll be here in twenty,” Marley announces, stepping back into the kitchen.

“You’re amazing,” I say, clinking my glass against hers.

“You keep saying that, yet I still can’t see Sandra Dee.”

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Turns out, the repair is simple and only takes the plumber a few minutes. Marley flirts with him so much that he only charges me for the hardware. That girl is a whirling tornado of sexual energy and whimsy, and my lifeline here in Grace. She leaves me with a kiss on the cheek and the remaining cake.

Around midnight, I find myself standing over my kitchen sink eating another piece of cake, with no ulterior motives whatsoever. The window there just happens to have a direct view of Lane’s front porch and I just happen to keep my eyes glued to his door while eating.

Just when I’ve finished my cake and given up, Lane’s front door sweeps open and out he comes. He’s in jogging pants and a long sleeve t-shirt, earbuds tucked into his ears. I grin as I watch him stretch his arms high above his head. Lane bends his right leg, grabs his shoe and pulls it tight against the back of his thigh. He repeats this with the other leg and I am mesmerized, watching his ritual before running.

I rinse my plate off and cringe when the pipes make a loud sputtering and creaking sound as water comes out of this faucet for the first time since my water was restored. I glance to Lane’s porch and am relieved to see he’s already gone. Sighing, I wonder why I’m so intrigued by this guy. He’s at least ten years younger than me, a bit mysterious, and has an adorable dog. Sure he’s really attractive and seems sweet, and god that vocabulary. But

he's not the only attractive and sweet guy on earth. So when I look at him, why does it feel like he is?

I groan and shake my head. "Just go to bed, Stella."

*Knock knock.*

My heart pounds as I turn toward the front door and stare at it. Another knock echoes through the mostly empty house. I tiptoe to the front room and glance out of the window. Lane stands on my porch, his earbuds now hanging around his neck.

My stomach twists as I slide the chain free, turn the deadbolt and pull the door open.

"Hi," he says, giving me a wave. "I know it's late, but I saw you were up."

"You saw me?" I ask, my eyes adjusting to the lack of light.

Lane gestures in the direction of my kitchen. "Through the window."

"Are you spying on me?" I ask, hoping that he senses the teasing in my tone.

"Are you spying on *me*?" Lane asks in return. *Yes.*

"Of course not. I was eating cake."

"Cake?" he asks.

"Cake." I answer. "Would you like some?"

"It's midnight and you're eating cake?"

"It's midnight and you're going for a run?"

Lane chuckles, and holds his hands up in surrender. "You're right. None of my business. I just wanted to check on your water situation. Did you get it fixed?"

I lean against the doorframe and cross my arms to hide the fact that I'm not wearing a bra. Again. "I did. My friend came over and got it sorted out for me."

"Your friend? The girl with the pink hair?" he asks.

"You *are* spying on me," I tease. Lane shakes his head and gives me a shrug.

"She's kind of hard not to notice. Glad you got it fixed," he says. "I'd hate to think of you over here with no water."

"Do you think of me at all?" I watch his gaze slide down my body, lingering on my bare feet before returning to my face.

"Only when I'm awake," he says, giving me a wink. This is definite flirting and I'm more surprised than flattered. Still, my insides vibrate and

hum as my hands push against my ribs, trying to stay calm. The idea that this guy is attracted to me makes me wonder what he's willing to do about it. "Well, I better get going."

"Why do you run so late?" I almost slap a hand over my mouth in disbelief. "Was that rude? I'm sorry."

He gives me a grin that could melt me on the spot. Lane turns his head and the light from the streetlamp reflects his baby blue eyes. When he turns back, they are all I can focus on. "It's not rude. I know it's strange. You want to make sure you're not living next door to a weirdo or serial killer, right?"

"Right," I agree, returning his grin. "Though, if it's up for debate, I'd prefer a weirdo over a serial killer."

"I work from home," he says. "Overseas investments, which makes me keep strange hours. Going for a run is the only thing that winds me down, clears my head. So I can actually get out of work mode and get some sleep."

I nod. "I get that." Ten seconds of silence and staring and I can't take it anymore. "Well, have a good run. Thanks for checking on me."

"Goodnight, Stella," Lane says, before popping his earbuds back in and taking off down my steps.

"Goodnight," I say, as I watch him disappear down the sidewalk.

## 6

I'VE JUST SETTLED down on the sofa with a new book when there's a knock at the door. Groaning, I set down my wine glass and shuffle to the front of the house. I check my outfit to make sure I'm presentable, shrugging at my yoga pants and comfy sweatshirt. When I swing the door open, Marley is there with a huge canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. A gust of wind blows through the open door and I wave her in. "Get your ass in here, it's freezing."

"It's hardly freezing," she says. "You'll have to adapt to real winters sooner or later, love."

"It's probably going to be later, rather than sooner. You know, it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks."

"What does that mean?" Marley asks. "Did you just call yourself an old dog? You people and your weird sayings."

"You people? Who people? Where are you going?" I follow her as she stomps upstairs in her combat boots. Marley enters my bedroom, unzips the bag, turns it over and shakes out all of the contents onto my bed. "What is all that? And why didn't you call first? Us people always call first."

"A, if I would have called first, you would have said no. I mean, look at you already in your wool socks and sweatshirt. And B, all of this is my emergency preparedness kit."

I glance to the mess on my bed and back to her. "Said no to what? What emergency?"

"The emergency of you trying to become an old spinster, reading romance novels and spending evenings in, not wanting to get laid. We're going out tonight."

"Nope," I say, spinning on my heel and heading for the door. "Thanks for stopping by, but there's no way—" I'm cut off when Marley grabs the hood



on my shirt and yanks it back, pulling the neckline tight against my throat. “Damn. No need for violence.”

“Shut it,” she says, standing in front of me now. “You did not upend your whole life, leave that whoring ex-husband of yours and move cross country just to sit in this house every night. It’s not often I volunteer to be the designated driver, so take advantage. It’s just a lowkey wine crawl through downtown Grace. I’ll introduce you to a couple of my mates. It’ll be like a girls night out. I know there’s a party girl still left inside somewhere,” she continues, poking me in the chest now. “Get your arse in the shower and find her.”

“I never said I didn’t want to get laid. I’d just prefer—I don’t know—like a delivery service or something. Is there a catalog I can just choose from and Uber drops him off with a current medical background report and a pocket full of condoms?”

“Oh, UberDick. I like it. We should copyright that,” Marley says tapping her chin with her index finger. “Now get going.”

In less than an hour, Marley has me fluffed, buffed, and dolled up. I haven’t worn this much makeup since high school, but I have to admit it looks good—different, but good. She finishes curling my hair and sprays a bit of hairspray to hold the look. I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror while she sifts through the pile of clothes on my bed. A smile creeps across my face and I can’t help but feel a spark of something inside. Confidence, perhaps?

“You’re a size six, right?” Marley calls out from my bedroom. I join her there and look over the four selections she’s laid out.

“Why do they make such slutty dresses for toddlers? I can’t wear any of that,” I tell her.

“Like hell you can’t. It’s called stretch, love. I’m leaning toward the red dress for you, blue for me.”

I hold the red dress in front of my body. “You can’t be serious. This is not enough material to cover my ass, let alone my whole body.”

She snatches it out of my hand and rolls her eyes. “You are so dramatic. Fine. Put the purple one on and wear those strappy silver heels you have hidden in the bottom of the closet.”

I pull off my robe and hold up the purple dress in front of my body. “I can’t wear a bra with this.”

“Right. So Sandra and Dee fly free tonight. Big deal.”

“Also, how the hell do you know what I have hidden in my closet?”

“You took a little too long in the shower. I got bored. I said to find your party girl, not ride the pulse setting on your shower head to the promiseland.”

I snort. “How does this thing go on? It’s ridiculous,” I complain, wrestling the tiny criss-cross straps from around my neck.

“Nonsense, you can just let some hunk tie you up with it later.” Marley helps me into the dress. It’s backless except for a thin tie that laces up the back like a corset. She ties me in and spins me to face the full length mirror in the corner of my room.

“Wow,” I say. “I think I’ve found my party girl.”

Marley grins and smacks a kiss on my cheek. “Yes,” she says. “But you’ve got to take your knickers off. Nothing tackier than a panty line.”

“What? No. There are plenty of things tackier than a panty line. What am I supposed to wear... you know, down there?”

She laughs and waves in front of her crotch. “Nothing. You’re going commando.”

My eyes go wide at the thought. “And just let my Miss America hang out?”

“It’s just like you Yanks to nickname your vag after your country. The patriotism here is a bit overbearing.”

“And if I were to say something crude about the Queen?” I ask.

She whips her head toward me, eyes glaring. “Besides, darling,” Marley continues, ignoring my jab. “If your vag is hanging out of that dress, we’ve got bigger issues at hand than no panties. Now, get rid of them, let me throw on this red number and we’ll head out.” She slaps me on the ass and I curse in response.

I shake my head and remove my panties, tossing them in my hamper. Facing the mirror again, I slowly twist back and forth in the dress, watching the short skirt flutter around my thighs. My hands smooth down the front of the soft material, over my hips and drop to my sides. I don’t think about my ex-husband or my filthy ex-best friend, the first thought is how I wish Lane Holder could see me in this dress.

I smile and let out a chuckle, happy to have found this woman hiding inside me. Not that I’m willing to give up my wool socks and oversized sweatshirts, but this is invigorating. Still, I can’t stand the thought of going

anywhere without panties, so I fetch them out of the hamper and put them back on. Marley will have to deal.

I check out my reflection again and I see a glimpse of the old me, the one before a husband who took me for granted and a best friend who was no friend at all. And for the first time in a long time, I like what I see.

We arrive at a pub called Freebush ten minutes before the wine crawl is to start. When Marley checks her coat, people stop in their tracks to look at her. She's so vibrant and beautiful and it makes me a little nervous to take my coat off. But this is no time to be shy. I'm here and I'm going to embrace every bit of this new life.

I slink out of my coat and hand it over to the coat check girl. She gives me a ticket and I'm not sure where I'm supposed to put it. So, I tuck it in my cleavage and follow Marley into the pub. There's a decent crowd scattered throughout the space. The place has a real old world feel to it. Everything is dark, polished wood and brass. The decor is simple with black and white framed photos of different locations in Grace.

"Oh, sweet. They're here," Marley says, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the bar. We navigate our way through the maze of people, Marley parting the crowd while I shuffle to keep up. Lots of people wave hello or greet her with a hug and it's easy to see that she's no stranger to this place. She props herself against the bar and hits me with a sinful smile.

"Reagan, Kennedy, this is Stella." A brunette and blonde turn to spot us and immediately squeal before wrapping Marley in a hug.

"Hi, Stella. I'm Kennedy," the blonde says. "We've heard so much about you. Usually this event is pretty tame, but we're bound to change that. Glad you decided to join us tonight."

"You say decided, I say coerced," I reply.

"Strongly encouraged," Marley counters.

"Anyway, nice to meet you both." Reagan offers a little wave and smile, returning her eyes to the television above the bar. "Is it just coincidence that you both share names with former presidents?"

"Nope," Kennedy says. "We're sisters. Our mom is obsessed with themes. From every room in her house to her children's names. We have a big brother named Nixon."

I laugh as Marley nods and mouths "It's true." They're both beautiful girls, but completely opposite in looks. Reagan has dark hair, chocolate brown eyes and a smile that lights up the room, while Kennedy is blonde

with blue eyes and a bubbly personality. Reagan seems more reserved. Now that I'm looking closer, I can definitely tell they are related. They both have almond-shaped eyes, full lips and a button nose. Beyond that, the two sisters seem like night and day.

"Oh, come on, ref!" Reagan yells, slamming her fist on the bar and glaring at the TV. "That was clearly hooking!"

Marley rolls her eyes. "This raving lunatic is quite the sports fanatic. Anything and everything. Otherwise, she's quite lovely."

"I swear, if the Sabres lose this game because of blind refs, I'm going to drive to Buffalo tonight," Reagan says, facing us again.

"Road trip!" Kennedy calls out, wiggling her bottom and shaking her shoulders.

"So, I've never done a wine crawl before, unless you mean what I do after I've had too much of it," I say. "What happens here?"

"So, you buy a ticket and they'll give us all wristbands to wear," Marley says. "We stop at six places and at each stop, you get a free glass of wine. They usually offer a red and a white, so you get to choose. And they'll all have small appetizers too."

An older woman with short silver hair and horn-rimmed glasses approaches us. She's wearing a black dress with neon piping that looks like it stepped right out of the '80s. "Hello, ladies. Are you joining us tonight?" she asks, holding up her wrist to display a yellow paper bracelet.

"Hi, Linda," Kennedy answers. "We'll take four."

"That's \$20 a piece," Linda answers, unzipping her leopard print fanny pack to pull out wristbands and deposit our cash.

After we all take turns helping each other put our wristbands on, Marley groans. "We forgot to eat before we came. Rookie mistake." She shakes her head.

I shrug. "So, we stockpile hors d'oeuvres in my purse at each stop. We'll be fine. Twenty dollars is a deal for six glasses of wine and snacks. Also, I had no idea that Grace had six bars."

The three girls laugh. "We don't," Kennedy says. "We have Freebush and Lou's. The other stops are local businesses that open up for the night just for this event."

"We'll go to Kennedy's bakery, Sweet Things," says Marley. "That's her little place on Third Street. Then we'll move on to Lou's, Grace Garage, Grace Books, and end the night at Starlight Diner. And we will all have to

endure the Chance/Reagan tension.” Reagan crosses her arms and bites her lip. She looks to Kennedy for help, but her sister remains quiet.

“It’s a hate/hate relationship,” Reagan says. “We dated in high school. He was the bad boy and I was... sheltered. Took my virginity. Broke my heart. Blah, blah, blah.”

“I met him when I was looking for a job,” I say.

“You wanted to work *there*?” Marley asks.

“Why not? I’m good with cars. But he wouldn’t even give me a shot because I’m a woman.”

“Sounds like Chance,” Reagan says. “Women are delicate flowers that need to be taken care of and can’t understand the complex workings of something like a car engine. What a pig.”

“A hot pig that you totally want to shag,” Marley says.

There’s three seconds of silence before the group of us nods in agreement. We’re interrupted when the tinkling sound of a ringing bell cuts through the room. Linda jumps onto a chair so we can all see her.

“We’re officially on wine time, everyone. You may visit the back bar to get your glass here. We move in twenty minutes.”

The four of us are closest to the back bar, so we get there first. Marley and I each order red, while the sisters get white. Kennedy grabs us a table and we all take a seat.

“So, Kennedy, you’re a baker? That sounds like fun,” I say. “I always wanted to try baking, but there’s so much science to it. This has to react with that and the measurements have to be precise. I’m more of a throw-a-bunch-of-things-into-a-pot-and-hope-for-the-best kind of cook.”

She grins. “Yeah, I like having a recipe to follow. I’m not great at making anything edible without instructions. By now, I’ve made my own adjustments to things and most of my recipes are up here though.” She taps her temple and sips her wine.

I swallow down a sip of my own and love the woodsy, berry notes in it. “And what do you do Reagan?” I ask.

Marley sits up tall with a grin. “Oh, she’s our resident hippy.”

Reagan dismisses her with a wave of her hand. “I run a little homeopathic shop just outside of town. I make my own essential oils, organic beauty products, and aromatherapy candles.”

“Her clay mask is to die for,” Marley says.

“That’s great,” I reply, kind of feeling embarrassed that I don’t have my own business or even a trade or hobby that I’m passionate about. I push down those feelings and reassert that the whole reason I moved here was to leave behind my old life and rediscover who I am. I will find my place in the world, I’ve just got to start looking.

We all sip our wines in silence for a bit, enjoying the atmosphere and people watching when a funny thought occurs to me.

“So, together, you guys are the Brit,” I say pointing to Marley, “the baker,” I move to Kennedy, “and the candlestick maker?” motioning to Reagan.

“Holy shit,” Marley says with a laugh. “That is golden.” She lifts her wine and we all clink our glasses together. “To, Stella. I think we’ll keep her.” We all have a chuckle and before we know it, it’s time to move on to Sweet Things.

The walk to the bakery is short but chilly. I hold my coat closed and mutter under my breath. “Sheep balls, it’s cold out here.”

“Honey, you haven’t seen anything yet,” Marley says.

I spot Kennedy’s place on the corner and am so excited that we’re almost there. I’m so focused on my destination, that I don’t make the transition from sidewalk to cobblestone street very gracefully. Luckily, Reagan grabs my elbow before I go down.

“These streets are charming,” she says, “but dangerous.” Reagan gives me a wink and links her arm with mine as we make our way inside the bakery.

The place is small, but adorable. The walls are painted a soft pink color and there’s a wall mural of cakes and cupcakes painted behind the counter. White lights are strung up around a makeshift bar in the corner with a selection of two wines. On the front display, there are trays of miniature cupcakes and petit fours.

“Kennedy,” I gush. “This place is so cute. I can’t wait to try your treats.”

She guides me over and explains all the different sweets laid out. I choose a miniature banana pudding cupcake and shove the whole thing in my mouth.

“Oh. My. God. This tastes like home, specifically my grandmother’s recipe. Wow.”

She smiles and twists her hands together. “Thanks, Stella. This bakery is my life. I love bringing joy to people with food.”

“I don’t know how you look how you do, because I’d be the size of a house if I worked around this deliciousness all day.”

She smiles. “I work out. A lot.”

We all grab our wine and stand near the door chatting until it’s time to move on. Linda rings her bell and we look to her for instruction.

“On to Lou’s,” she announces.

As a group, we all make our way outside and move like a herd to Lou’s which is just two doors down. Glass number three and I’m feeling much warmer than when this journey started. Lou’s is a sports bar with lots of televisions and sports memorabilia. The wine here is my favorite so far. It’s a red blend from California and I make a note of the name and brand in my phone.

Reagan keeps checking the Sabres game on the televisions in between conversation. She starts to feel more relaxed and opens up around me. She gets so excited when talking about her products and working with natural ingredients that her excitement spills over to me. Before I know it, she’s convinced me to come by her shop for a consultation and some free samples.

Linda rings her bell again, shouting over the noise of the televisions. “Wine Walkers, we’re heading to Grace Garage.”

Reagan and I groan while Marley and Kennedy give each other a knowing look.

This time, I am an expert crossing the cobblestone street, or maybe the wine has installed a false sense of confidence in me. Either way, I make it to the sidewalk with no problem, the other three girls trailing behind me.

When I enter the shop, the same familiar smell of oil and engine hits me, but there’s something new too. Something smells absolutely delicious and my mouth waters as I search the space for food.

We take off our coats and place them on hooks by the door, along with the rest of the wine crawlers. I recognize Chance standing at the front counter greeting people. He looks very different all cleaned up and in a nice button up and jeans. Next to his desk, there is a table set up with already filled plastic wine cups of red and white wines.

“Hello, ladies,” he greets. “Hey, Reagan.”

She tries to seem disinterested, but there is an instant spark in her eyes that wasn’t there before. She stands a little taller and adjusts the neckline of her dress. The sexual chemistry between these two is tangible and I make a

note to get with Kennedy and Marley to give them a shove into doing something about it. Big talk from someone who seems to be sitting on the sidelines of her own life, I know.

“We have two offerings from the Castiel Valley winery in Napa,” Chance says with a wave of his hand. “And over here,” he says, motioning to the other side of the room, “we have an enormous charcuterie board put together by Mr. Lane Holder.”

I whip my head in that direction and find Lane there, explaining the offerings to other guests. My mouth goes dry at the sight of him and I wonder how to seem available but nonchalant.

Marley sneaks up behind me. “There’s your man, love. Now go get him before someone else snags him,” she whispers. She gives me a little push and after that, my feet carry me across the room on their own accord.

I smooth down the front of my dress and approach the table. When he turns to find me there, I see that signature crooked grin appear from the corner of my vision and I try to play it cool.

“So, charcuterie?” I ask without looking at him. All the food is laid out beautifully on a long piece of natural looking wood. It looks way nicer than anything I ever thought I’d find in this town.

“Yes,” Lane answers, surprised but happy to see me. “You know, an assortment of breads, cheeses, meats, and veggies mostly.”

“You put this together?” I ask, snagging a cracker and throwing it in my mouth.

“I did.”

“That’s impressive. I didn’t know you were fancy like that.”

Lane grins and shoves his hands into his dark jean pockets. “It’s not that fancy. It just appears that way because it’s in a garage.”

“Fancy by proximity?” I ask, twirling a piece of hair around my finger.

“Definitely.”

“Between you two and Reagan and Chance, I can barely breathe with all the suffocating tension in the room,” Marley complains as she walks by, dragging a giggling Kennedy with her.

Wine is forgotten as I let Lane show me around the assortment of goodies to eat. He has me try all of his favorite pairings, naming each cheese as we go and bragging that his grandmother made the fig preserves. Every few minutes, he’ll touch my arm or shoulder, one time being so bold as to wrap a hand around my waist as I reach for a piece of toasted rye. I never thought



I'd feel comfortable just shoving food in my face in front of a gorgeous man, but here we are.

Much too soon, Linda is ringing her damn bell. Lane helps me into my coat and straightens the collar. His fingers linger on my coat for too long and the heat from his hands permeates the material.

"Well, thanks for the lesson in cheese this evening," I say. "It was enlightening and delicious."

"My pleasure, Stella." His hand slides down my arm slowly, until he grabs my hand, squeezes and lets go.

"Stella! Reagan! Let's move," Kennedy yells when we're the last two guests lingering inside. I look over to find Reagan leaning on the front counter, her back to Chance as his eyes linger on the exposed skin of her back.

"Well, I'll see you around, neighbor."

"You certainly will," Lane answers, his smile showing off a dimple.

Marley motions wildly for us to catch up with the rest of the group. I'm so high from my time spent with Lane, that I don't pay attention to where I'm walking. One wrong step on a crack in the cobblestone street and my ankle twists. I let out a yelp and hit the ground hard.

The girls come running over. "Oh my god, are you okay?" Reagan asks.

I wrap my hands around my ankle. "I don't know. It really hurts."

Sharp, shooting pains travel up my leg and I take deep breaths to manage the discomfort. Marley disappears while the two sisters try to help me up. Once I'm upright and balanced on my good foot, I try to put some weight on the hurt ankle, only to go falling to the ground again. But this time there are strong, hard arms to catch me. I look up to find Lane's concerned face looking back.

"You should stay off of that," he says. He glances at my injured ankle and back. "It's already starting to swell."

The girls gather around us, while Lane picks me up, holding me bridal style. "I'm so sorry girls."

"Well, let's get you home," Marley says. "And sidenote, good thing you put your knickers back on, otherwise it would have been 'Hello, world. Here's my vag.' Would have had to make a *pubic* apology to the whole town." She pauses. "See what I did there?"

Lane shakes his head. "You girls can stay. I've got her. My truck is just next door and my duties here are done. I'll get Stella home."

“Are you sure?” Marley asks, but she’s looking at me, not Lane.

I nod. “Yes. You guys stay out and get sloshed. Drink some for me.” I look up at Lane as he adjusts his grip on me. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s no problem, really,” he says. “Goodnight, ladies.”

With that, he turns and carries me down the sidewalk toward a driveway where his truck is parked. I watch over his shoulder and Marley, Kennedy, and Reagan each give me a wave before heading off to catch up with the rest of the group.

In the dark alley, Lane gently puts me into his truck and closes the door before jogging around to the other side. He climbs in and starts it up, turning the heater on and moving two vents to point at me. All I can think about is that tiny gesture, moving those vents, making sure I’m comfortable. It’s something my ex would have never considered. There are big words and small acts, and each can make a woman feel like she’s special. Kindness comes naturally to this man and that warms me from the inside out.

“Now, let’s get you home,” he says.

The ride back to our neighborhood is quick and quiet. The silence is not awkward, but comforting. When you can just sit with someone in stillness and silence, those are the people you need to keep near.

Lane swings into his driveway, parks the truck and hops out. He’s at my door before I can even unbuckle my seatbelt.

“I’m sure I can manage from here,” I say. He gives me a look that makes me shut my mouth and not protest when he scoops me out of the seat and into his arms again.

“It’s okay, Stella. I’ve got you,” he says. His voice is deep and soft at the same time. It feels compassionate and like he wants to say more. I pray that is not just my imagination.

With no effort at all, Lane carries me through my door and up the stairs. His strong arms feel safe around my body while the scent of him leaves me intoxicated. The push of his chest against my ribs makes me imagine a more intimate position and I squeeze my thighs together in search of relief. He sets me down on my bed with my skirt nearly around my waist. We both reach to pull it down, but he yanks his hands back when I get to it first.

“There you go,” he says. “Can you manage from here?”

I nod and try to remove my shoes, but wince when the throbbing pain travels up my leg. “Damn. I swear I’m not always this damsel in distress.”

“I don’t see you that way,” he says, kneeling before me. “I see a strong woman.” One hand wraps around the bottom of my calf while his fingers unbuckle the tiny clasps on my shoe with no problem. “You don’t necessarily need help, but you aren’t afraid to ask for it.” He takes them both off and sets them to the side. Both hands come back to rest on my calves and all coherent thought is lost with his large, warm hands on my skin. They travel up and come to rest on my bare knees. I’ve never thought of knees as being erotic, but in this moment they are. “There’s strength in that.”

I eye my bruised ankle and frown. “I don’t feel strong. I feel like a hot mess.”

Lane looks up at me, his eyes so intense I hold my breath until my lungs burn. “Well, you’ve got the hot part right.”

Air rushes out in a sort of laugh and I feel dizzy. “I think I need to lie down.”

Lane nods, his lips forming a little pout as he gets to his feet. “You’re going to sleep in that?”

“Well, no. But I can handle it,” I insist. “Thanks so much for helping me... again.”

“Hey, let me run downstairs and get you some ice for that ankle before I go.”

“Okay, sure.” He heads for the door. “But then that’s it. You’re outta here. No more knight in shining armor duties tonight.”

By the time I finish my rant, he’s already out of the room. I slide off the bed and hop to my bathroom, knowing my comfy yoga pants and sweatshirt are on the counter. Eyeing my reflection, I decide that I don’t look so bad in this dress and I just might keep it for a while.

I lean one hip against the counter and grab the hem of the dress. Yanking it over my head, I think I’m in the clear, but one arm gets caught up in the ties. I turn toward the mirror, but it’s no help with the dress covering my entire head. Lane’s footsteps on the stairs stir a panic in me and I thrash against the supposed stretchy material, trying to free myself.

My heart thumps against my chest and a layer of sweat breaks out across my skin. You would think this would help to lubricate the situation, but the dress doesn’t budge. It is a twisted tourniquet squeezing tighter and tighter, forcing me into submission

“Stella?” I hear Lane call out from my doorway.

“Yes?” My voice is muffled by the stupid dress pressed against my face as I twist and shove my arm through an opening. Suddenly, my brain remembers that he always asks before entering my bedroom. And I just gave him permission. “Wait! Stop!” I yell.

It’s too late. I hear his gasp and force my arms down in an attempt to hide something, anything. The purple people strangler is now twisted into a tight roll around my upper arms and neck. With my vision back, I can see that Lane has turned his back, the bag of ice dangling from his hand.

“I didn’t see anything,” he says. “That I haven’t seen before.” I can hear the smile in his voice.

I grab a towel and wrap it around my body and the torture device dress.

“Are you an exhibitionist, Stella?” he asks with a chuckle. “Because, I’ve got to say, I have seen more of you than some of the girls I’ve slept with. Believe me, I’m not complaining,” he trails off and I hear a deep sigh come from his lips. “Is there some sort of secret life you’re not telling me about?”

I laugh, knowing my secret life is a bore compared to what he’s suggesting. “Yes, it’s a renegade tour. There are contortionists, drag queens, guys who make shadow puppets with their junk, and me. I like to travel from city to city revealing my boobs to those I find worthy.”

Lane turns his head—just enough so that I can see the curl of his lips and a dimple hidden in the scruff of his cheek. “I guess I’m lucky I’m worthy.”

“And I’m lucky I wore panties, or your show would have been X-rated instead of R.”

There’s a long silent pause and the dress is starting to cut off my circulation. “Are you okay? Do you need,” he pauses and exhales. “Help?”

“I think it’s best if you just leave the ice and go.”

“Are you sure? I can—”

“I swear to Jesus, Mary and J-Lo, I will cut myself out of this dress before enduring any more humiliation today.”

Lane holds up his hands in surrender and lays the bag of ice on my bed. “Goodnight, Stella. And for the record, you’ve got nothing to be humiliated about.”

I listen as he makes his way downstairs and out the front door and then I start the one-legged hunt for my scissors.

# 7

IT'S A LAZY Sunday afternoon and I am content to sit on my dock, curled up with a good book. I have a flannel blanket across my lap and my legs stretched out across the comfortable outdoor chaise lounge. My bruised ankle is feeling much better, but I still want to get as much rest as possible.

Right when I get to the good scene of Edward seducing Vivian into a ride on his boat—that's not even a euphemism, it's actually a boat—I hear a click-clack rhythm on the wood planks. I mark my page and fold the book closed, looking up to find Chap trotting down my dock. A smile takes over my face as he approaches. There's just something about that little cutie that brings me instant joy.

Chap walks up to my chair and sits, seeming to stare up with a smile.

"What are you doing out here, huh?" I ask, scratching under his chin. I look back at Lane's house and see no sign of my neighbor. "You want up?"

I pat my lap and Chap happily jumps up, sprawling himself across my legs. He's a lot heavier than I thought he'd be, the dense little furball. He lays his head on my stomach, his body supplying even more warmth on this chilly day. I really couldn't be happier. Opening my book, I continue reading, pausing every few minutes to give Chap a scratch and make sure he stays put. Though by the level of loafing he's doing, I doubt he'd go anywhere anytime soon.

Chap and I sit out there for a couple of hours. When I finish the book, I fold it closed with a sigh and set it down on the dock. I lay back and close my eyes, imagining a world where men like Edward exist—men who treat women with respect and completely give themselves over to the opportunities of love.

A yawn escapes and then a grin pulls at my lips as I imagine myself in Edward and Vivian's story, sailing across the ocean with the world at our

fingertips. Sorry Viv, you're out and I'm in like sin. Soft waves lap at the lakeshore beneath me and it's easy to let this daydream take hold.

I must fall asleep, because the next thing I know, Chap is scurrying to his feet and hopping off my lap. This jolts me awake. I'm a bit disoriented until I watch him take off down the dock to meet Lane. I smooth down my hair, wipe the drool from my lips, and hope I don't outwardly look like I was just having the most erotic dream about the man standing 15 feet away. Thank God for thick, baggy sweatshirts that hide traitorous nipples.

"Hey, buddy," Lane says, giving his dog a big smile. That grin, along with a quick glance in my direction is enough to make my lady parts stand at attention, waiting to pick up where my dream left off. "Is this where you've been all day?" he asks. "I've searched the entire street."

Lane makes his way to me as I stretch my arms high and flex the muscles in my back. The sun is setting now and it paints him in a warm golden, magenta light that looks like one of the covers of my books. I can just imagine the story. Mysterious and handsome investment banker with an adorable dog meets a jilted, older woman, falls madly in love, builds her a private library slash wine cellar and provides hours of orgasms. Now *that* sounds like happily ever after.

"Hi, Stella," he greets. Chap sits at his feet.

"Hello." I see Lane glance down to my abandoned book and back to my face. "I was just doing some reading when Chap joined me. I guess I fell asleep."

"Another Alaina Taylor fan, huh?"

"You know her?" I ask, sitting up taller.

"I know *of* her. Everyone in this town does. She's our only claim to fame, you know? Did you enjoy the book?" he asks, tucking his hands into his pockets, his piercing eyes holding me in place.

"Very much. Though I worry that these books may be giving me unrealistic expectations for men."

He squats down now, so that our faces are on the same level. Lane's hand reaches out. At first he gently squeezes my shoulder and I think it's just a friendly gesture. But then, his fingers slide down my arm and he takes my hand in his. "Don't say that. There are still good guys out there."

I lean into him now, a natural reaction to his nearness. The heat from his hand burns my chilled skin. It feels electric, like a spark igniting. "I suppose this is where you tell me that you're one of them?"

He grins and shakes his head. "I'd never claim to live up to fictional men. I'm not perfect."

"That's the thing," I say. "Neither are they. Alaina writes men who are real. Sure, they're flawed, but they are also smart and kind, brave, strong and vulnerable."

"Sounds hard to live up to," Lane says with a chuckle. He releases my hand and I frown.

"After what I've been through, I'd settle for someone who was trustworthy. And amazing in bed wouldn't hurt either, if you know what I mean."

Lane smirks, lifting one eyebrow. "I certainly know what you mean." Chap scoots forward and sticks his nose between us, refusing to be forgotten. I laugh and give him another scratch.

"I bet you're a good guy, huh Chap?" He barks and gives my hand a lick.

"Oh, yeah. He's just great—eats my food, takes up most of the bed. Supposed to be my wingman, but I have a suspicion that he's got ulterior and completely selfish motives."

Lane stands and holds out a hand, helping me to my feet. The blanket falls away and I am inches from his body, staring up into those bottomless blue eyes. He ducks his chin and his tongue peeks out, sliding across his bottom lip. My heart beats wildly as the breath I'm holding burns my lungs. Just when I think he's going to kiss me, Lane bends over and grabs my book from the dock.

"Don't forget this," he says.

I let out a sigh and try to keep the disappointment off my face. He's not a character, and I'm not in a romance novel. This is real life. I just happen to live adjacent to the hot, successful younger man who probably flirts with everyone and has taken pity on his old lady neighbor. He's not just going to take charge and ravage me. Hell, he asks permission before entering my bedroom, I'm guessing he'd need a password and 16 digit encryption code to enter my vagina.

"After reading that story, I could never forget that book," I say, pressing the book to my chest as we make our way down the dock. "It'll stick with me for days. I'd tell you all about it, but I'm sure you're not into romance."

"Tell me what made it so great," he says, as we step back into my yard.

"Really?" I ask, looking up at his serious expression.

"Yes. Humor me. I want to know what I'm up against."

“Who says you’re up against anything?” Lane hits me with a piercing look and I fold. “Fine, but can we chat inside? My ass is so cold, it’s numb. I can’t feel it at all. Is it still back there?” I ask, gesturing over my shoulder.

He moves around me. “Most definitely.” I laugh and head for my back porch as he follows. “How’s your ankle doing?”

“Much better. Just a little sore.” My cheeks flame at the thought of that entire night. I smile as I think about that poor dress cut to shreds in my bathroom trash can. I’ll have to get Marley a new one.

Lane holds the screen door open as I tuck my book under one arm and push through the back door. “You mind if Chap comes in or should I bring him home?” he asks.

“I don’t mind at all. Come on in, you two.” Having Lane in my space makes me a little anxious. He lingers close by, but not too close. Meanwhile, Chap has no boundaries and is already curled up on my ottoman. “Would you like some tea, or coffee, or hot chocolate?”

“Tea would be great, thanks,” he says.

I search through the cupboards, trying to find the box of tea Marley brought to keep here. “Please make yourself comfortable,” I say while moving things around in my search. “I know it’s here somewhere.”

Suddenly, I feel Lane lightly press himself against my back as he reaches over my head and grabs the box of tea bags. “Here you go,” he says, warm breath fanning down my neck. He smells like sunshine and fresh laundry. I resist the urge to push back against him just to feel his body against mine. Though a little ass to crotch oopsie could move this flirting along a bit faster.

I take the box from him and spin to face Lane. He barely moves, so there are only a few tension-filled inches between us. I want him to touch me, to lean in and whisper dirty words against my skin. Instead, I hold up the box and shake it.

“I have no idea how to make tea,” I blurt out.

He grins, wraps his hand around the box and takes it back. “Let me,” he says. “I saw a kettle right up here.”

“Sorry,” I say. “When we say tea in the South, we mean cold, sweet tea.” I step aside and take a seat at my table while Lane moves around my kitchen like a pro. After the kettle is on the stove, he takes a seat across from me.

“So, the book?” he asks.



“You were serious about that?”

“Of course,” he answers, pretending to be offended.

“Basically, the story is about Edward and Vivian. It’s what we romance readers call a second-chance romance. They were together in college and life just led them in different directions. Ten years later, Vivian returns to her hometown after a bitter divorce and they reconnect.”

Lane tents his fingers together on the tabletop. “Isn’t that a story that’s been told a million times?”

“You’re right. But not like this. Alaina has a way of giving new life to stories we’ve all read before. It’s big love in a small town. It’s learning to trust someone again. It’s a slow burn that has you cheering for their relationship so hard, you feel personally invested in their happiness.”

I realize I’ve become a bit over excited and drop my flailing hands into my lap. Lane gives me a lopsided smile and leans forward. “And what makes Edward so special?”

The kettle begins to whistle and we both hop up. I grab two mugs while Lane tosses a tea bag into each one and fills them with hot water. In synchronized movements, we carry our drinks back to the table and return to our spots opposite each other.

“I wouldn’t say he was special, just...” I sigh. “Edward is a genuine, good guy. You don’t really get to be in his head, because the story is told from Vivian’s point-of-view. But you know what kind of man he is by his actions. Men can say a lot of things, but nothing is truer than action.”

“So less talk, more action,” Lane says slowly as if absorbing this revelation. His voice drips with smooth innuendo and implied interpretations.

“Yes.”

Lane removes his tea bag from the mug and sets it on the table before taking a sip. I mimic his movements and enjoy how the hot liquid coats my throat and stomach, warming me.

“You know, I’m glad Chap encroached on your space today. I wanted to invite you to my annual Halloween Party next Saturday. Costumes are mandatory. I’ll provide the booze and snacks. You just bring yourself.”

I look down at my tea and back to his gorgeous face. While social situations do not always show my best side, a party at his house intrigues me. Any closer look into the man next door can count me in. But facing something like that alone, as the new girl in town, makes my anxiety spike.

“You’re having a Halloween party in September?”

“Yeah,” he answers. “It’s kind of my thing. The end of October is always super busy with work, but I love Halloween. This way I still get to party, just a month early.”

“Can I bring someone?”

He frowns and meets my gaze. “As long as it’s not a guy.”

My eyebrows shoot up, surprised at his forwardness. “No. It’s just my friend Marley. I have a feeling she lives for costume parties.”

“Good,” he says, a smile splitting his face. “Bring her.”

“Should I bring anything else? I was raised to never show up to a party empty-handed.”

“Nah. I’ve got it. Come on, Chap.” The corgi hops down and follows Lane to my front door. “Thanks for the tea and the...education. Just make sure you’re in costume or you’ll be turned away.”

“Damn. It’s like that?” I say, leaning on the open door as he makes his way across my porch.

“Absolutely,” he says with a wave.

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“AT THE RATE that you drop by unannounced, I’ll never be able to walk around with no pants on,” I say as I let Marley in my front door.

She pushes me aside and drops her stuff on my sofa. “I’d say you should not even worry about it anymore. At the rate you’re exposing yourself, you should embrace the no pants dance anytime you’re ready.” She laughs. “I’ve come to check on you, post boobie flashing 2.0 debacle. How you holdin’ up, love?”

“Better than your dress. Sorry about it, but that thing was a vicious torture device.”

Marley takes a seat, kicks her orange flats off and props her feet on top of my coffee table and my newest book. I scurry over and yank the book out from under her heels.

“Respect the books, you English muffin.” She waves me off as I place my book into a safe place on the shelf before taking a seat across from her. “And I’m fine. The ankle is still a bit sore and my pride is dashed to bits, but fine.”

“That’s fair,” she says. “I’m going to open a bottle of red. You in?”

“Sure. Make yourself at home,” I tease. She heads into the kitchen and reappears a minute later with two wine glasses filled to the top. “Well, that’s a generous pour.”

“I’m a generous person.”

“Yeah, with my wine.”

“Hey, I’ve got my own purse wine if you want to dig into that stash.”

“That’s okay. Save it for a special occasion like Tuesday. Thanks for checking on me. I saw Lane today.”

Marley sets her glass down and turns toward me now. Her eyes are wide as she motions frantically for me to continue. “Well, let’s hear it.”

“He invited me to his Halloween party next weekend. Even said you could come.”

There is a devious sparkle in her eyes that wasn’t there minutes ago. “Fucking yes!” she shouts. “Wait. Why so early?”

I shrug. “It’s his thing,” I say using finger air quotes.

“You are finally going to get you some Saturday night. I feel it. I mean, he’s seen the girls already, why won’t he take the bait?”

“Maybe he’s a gentleman, Marley. They might still exist—especially in small towns like this. Plus, I don’t even know if I want him to take the bait. Isn’t sleeping with your neighbor like a terrible idea? What if it gets awkward?”

“And what if he turns out to be the man of your dreams and you live happily ever after, like in one of your books?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for any kind of relationship.”

“Well, if you’re too scared to try, how will you ever find out?”

“And what if my ex cheated because,” I stop and take a huge gulp of wine, “I wasn’t good in bed. I’ve only ever been with him. I have nothing to gauge myself by except the confident, sexy women in my novels. And I am not those women.”

Marley rolls her eyes. “A, your ex-husband cheated because he’s a worthless, slimy piece of shit. And two, stop living through these books. Get off the page and live your life. I bet you’re a fantastic shag.”

“Thanks,” I say with a shrug.

“We’re going to do this big. It’s the one time a year where dressing like a slut is not frowned upon. Let’s go shopping now!” She checks her phone and grins. “We’ve got three hours until the stores in Hamilton Bay close. And I know just the place.”

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STEPPING INTO A party store just before October is a nightmare. There are kids chasing each other through the store with rubber knives and gorilla masks, people trying on wigs and tossing them aside, feather boas and velvet capes litter the floor and no one seems to be in charge.

Marley takes it all in stride while my anxiety has skyrocketed by the time we're done browsing aisle one. I just follow her lead, scanning the shelves for anything appealing. Every so often, she'll grab something and throw it in the cart. Meanwhile, I'm too concerned with not tripping over the mess to pay attention.

After we've made our way down every aisle—and only then—does Marley allow us to head to the dressing rooms. Surprisingly, this area of the store is quieter and I relax a bit as Marley unloads a pile of costumes into my room.

"Try each one on and show me," she instructs before pulling the curtain closed between the two of us.

Alone, in the solitude of the cramped dressing room and full length mirror, I take a deep breath and blow it out. There are at least six costumes to try on and I know better than to just pick one and go. Not only will Marley insist on this little fashion show to satisfy her love of movie montage scenes, but I want to look good for Lane. I want to make sure he sees me—and not just because I'm naked.

I go through French maid, sexy police officer and school girl, while Marley rates them each on a scale of 1 to 5. As I wiggle into the faux leather skirt and zip up vest of the biker babe, I immediately feel empowered. My mind drifts to The Skulls, the bad boys of Alaina Taylor's motorcycle gang series. I trace my silhouette in the mirror, imagining hopping onto the back of a bike with Nelson—the leader of The Skulls. I picture his protective arms around me, his tattoos and leather jacket, the chain that hangs from his belt. My reflection smiles back at me and I know I've found a winner.

As soon as I pull the curtain back, "Five!" Marley shouts. "I've got some fishnets and hooker boots that will be perfect with that. We'll grab a few temporary tattoos and make you the baddest badass of the night. Oh god, that neighbor of yours is going to be like putty in your hands. Honestly, I'm barely holding myself back as it is."

I bounce on my toes and give her a grin. “What about you?” I ask. She holds up a bag containing a costume for an overweight lunch lady, complete with hairnet and a food-stained apron. “I thought you said this is the one day a year where we can dress slutty without judgement?”

“Ha,” she laughs. “I do that every day of the year. Pink hair, don’t care. I figure for Halloween, I’ll go funny. I wouldn’t want to distract from you anyway. You know how I hate being the center of attention.” For six seconds she keeps a straight face before bursting into a fit of giggles.

“You are ridiculous.”

“You love me and you know it,” she says. “Frankly, I’m surprised that you’re into this. You keep surprising me, Stella.”

I spin and face the mirror before turning back toward Marley. “It’s easy. I’m just picturing myself as the main character in one of my favorite motorcycle gang books. It’s easy to get on board when I think about all those hot guys and hot rides—all that power vibrating between your legs while holding on to your man. Whew!” I fan a hand in front of my face.

Marley throws both hands in the air. “Stella, darling. I’ve got enough vibrating power in my nightstand to trigger the Richter scale on a good night. You have got to forget about your books and focus on real life. You’ll never get what you want if you try to make men live up to those expectations. Just the covers are enough to keep *me* away. I’m not opposed to the shirtless men and washboard abs, but the hair blowing in the wind, the heaving bosoms, the woman’s clothes being ripped away... it’s all a bit fairytale and in dire need of a lesson on consent. Believe me, I’ve been through a lot of guys and no one has all the qualities to make it into one of your absurd books.”

Propping my hands on my hips, I level her with a look that keeps her quiet. “First of all, the covers you’re referring to are what my grandmother used to read. While there is still a market for those books and I would never shame anyone for reading what they like—that’s not what I read. Romance novels today are...refreshing, hot, modern day love with realistic characters.”

“Realistic characters? How many horny, good-looking billionaires can there be in the world? And are they all looking for a plain Jane waitress with a heart of gold? Realistic is a moderately employed man with a bit of a beer gut whose best line is ‘I’m new in town. Could you give me directions to your apartment?’”

I roll my eyes. “There’s so much more out there. You just haven’t looked. I’ll get you to read at least one of these books and then you’ll be hooked. You’ll see. Even if I have to tie you down and force you to read.”

She stands and urges me back into the dressing room. “You say the kinkiest things, love. Now get in there and take that off before I have my way with you on top of the balloon counter.”

I PUT THE second large hoop earring in and swing my head back and forth to see how they look. My thick-lined eyes and long lashes compliment the pop of red lipstick on my mouth. Marley has styled my hair in a cute pinup style, complete with a red bandana headband to hold it all together. My red lacy bra barely shows under the pseudo leather vest—the zipper lowered just enough to show some cleavage. I’ve got fishnets on under the skirt that is so tight and so short it could be considered a form of bondage. Marley’s boots cover most of my legs, ending right above the knee. And the three-inch heels give my ass a nice lift.

“I’m going to freeze in this outfit. Do I look ridiculous?” I ask, running my hands down the front of my vest.

Marley emerges from my bathroom in her costume and laughter bursts out of me. “You’re supposed to look ridiculous, love. It’s Halloween,” she answers.

“Well, I’d say we’re both in good shape then. Seeing all that pink hair confined to a hairnet is amazing.”

“Oh, shut it,” she says, leaning against my bed with her overstuffed bum. “You look edible. If anyone besides Lane tries to get in on that, let me know. I’ll be your cockblocker tonight.”

“In that costume, I don’t think you’ll have any trouble.”

She points a finger at me with one hand while adjusting her fake butt with the other. “Hey, this shit is funny. I’m your winglady. I’m the Goose to your Maverick.”

I spin to face her and prop my hands on my hips. “I didn’t think you were old enough for ‘Top Gun’ references.”

“What can I say? I’ve got a thing for young Tom Cruise—pre-Scientology, of course.”

“Of course,” I agree.

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FIVE MINUTES LATER, we are standing on Lane’s porch. My pulse beats in time with the thump, thump, thump bass rhythm of the music inside. The door is propped open, a welcome sign for guests, and yet I don’t move.

“What are you waiting for?” Marley asks.

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. These boots are making my legs sweat and I’ve lost all feeling in my little toe. Everything is so tight and you can see my bra in public. My momma would just die.” I look down at my costume and run my fingers over the temporary tattoos littering my arms. I tell my feet to move, but they seem to be glued to the floorboards. Marley is not having it.

She steps around me, grabs my hand and pulls me inside. I love my house, but this place is spectacular. It’s got all the old charm of my home with all the modern amenities—like recessed lighting and granite countertops. The floorplan is open and spacious, allowing us to get a good view of the crowd before we enter the room. Familiar art prints hang on the walls, mixed in with what I assume are a few local pieces. Two cream-colored oversized sofas center the room, a beautiful textured rug beneath them.

Minimal Halloween decorations are scattered throughout the space, mostly pumpkins, fake gravestones and lots of candles. With the overhead lights turned low, the candlelight gives a warm, glowing movement to the room.

There are small groups gathered around—zombie couples, a sparkling vampire, cheerleaders, and even a slutty nurse. I wring my hands together before tugging at the hem of my skirt.

“Look at that,” Marley stage whispers. “Everyone *is* in costume. Oh, check out that guy dressed as Joe Biden. I love it!”

“I think that’s supposed to be Anderson Cooper.”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. He’s a silver fox.”

I scan the room for Lane, but don’t find his familiar face among the guests. Still, I follow Marley in and smile as she wedges us in and introduces herself to the first group we encounter. “And this lovely dime piece right here is my mate, Stella. Say hello, Stella.”



Blushing, I give the group a shy wave. “Hi. I live next door,” I blurt out, not knowing what else to say. The guy dressed as Clark Kent with an open shirt and the Superman emblem underneath is definitely checking me out. His eyes rake down my body and snap back to my face.

He grins and tips his drink in my direction. “Welcome to the neighborhood, Stella. I’m Tate. I’m just across the street from you. If you ever need anything, I—”

“Nope,” Marley says, shaking her head and moving herself to stand between Tate and I. His jaw drops and I want to laugh at the stunned expression on his face. “Just going to cut this off right now.”

Everyone else introduces themselves, but I don’t hear a word of it, because I finally spot Lane across the room. All I can see is his profile, but my pulse races at the sight. As if he feels my presence, he turns and finds me. Our eyes hold each other as a smile curls up the left side of his mouth. A guy dressed as The Joker is talking to Lane, the whole time his gaze burns into mine. Lane nods and even sips his beer, but never looks away. The attention he’s giving me is warm, melted wax poured over my skin, sliding down every surface and pooling at my feet.

When I can’t take it anymore, I glance to the ground, but knowing he’s still there—waiting, watching—makes me look up again. And I am not disappointed. Lane runs a hand through his hair as he chews on his bottom lip. He looks like I feel, ready to pounce.

“Excuse me,” I say to the group. My boots carry me across the room, ignoring everyone and everything between us. That is, until a short little furball in a leather vest runs across my feet. I laugh and watch Chap trot through the room. His costume says “Bad to the Bone” with a skull and crossbones on top.

“Stella.” Lane’s voice cuts through the white noise when we meet near the bar. He is dressed in a leather vest, white t-shirt and jeans, metal chains and boots. His hair is slicked back and one arm is a colorful sleeve of tattoos. My eyes get stuck on the vibrant ink spilling over each curve and dip of muscle. “I’m so glad you could come tonight.”

“Well, not yet, but I believe the night’s still young,” Marley mutters. I choke on my saliva. If Lane hears her remark, he doesn’t acknowledge it.

“We match,” I say, waving a hand between the two of us. “You *are* stalking me. I knew it.”

Lane's smirk grows into a full smile. "I'll admit nothing," he says. "You look... wow."

"You too," I say, my stupid hands tugging at the skirt again. "Are your tattoos real?"

Lane looks down at his arm, flexing and turning it over so we can see all of the design. "Yeah. Been working on it for a while now. Eleven hours of work so far, about four more until it's finished."

Without thinking, my hand shoots out and my fingertips drag down his forearm over reds and blues and thick black lines. "It's beautiful," I say. "And not something I'd ever expect to see on a banker."

"Yes, well, working from home has its advantages. And when I do have meetings, I'm always in a suit. All buttoned up with no one knowing what lurks beneath." Lane's expression is devious and sends a throbbing kind of need throughout my body. Now I'm picturing him in a suit and am barely able to stay focused on our conversation.

We glance back and forth between the three of us until it feels awkward and Marley has cleared her throat twice. "Well, I'll leave you two to it then. Gotta work the room. See if anyone here needs a real estate agent or is willing to shag a lady in a hair net."

Lane chuckles as Marley heads for another group of guests. I can't help but laugh too as I watch her stuffed butt shuffle back and forth, moving independently from the rest of her body. She wedges herself between a scary clown and a pirate, and inserts herself right into their conversation.

"She's colorful," Lane finally says. My head whips back to him and I am struck by how gorgeous he is all over again. There's a fake scar drawn down his left cheek and it reminds me of Nelson from The Skulls. A current shoots through my body and settles in my barely-existent panties at the thought of Lane on a motorcycle, purring sexy words into my ear as we fly down the highway. I force myself back into the real world and the very real man standing before me.

"That's a good word for her," I agree. The two-day scruff covering his jaw makes me imagine the feel of it in my most delicate areas. Just as I'm wondering if you can get brush burn between your thighs, Lane holds out his hand.

"Can I get you a drink and show you around?" I nod and slide my palm against his.

After a visit to the bar, I've got a glass of wine and he's grabbed a beer. He plucks a leather jacket from a hook on the wall and pulls me through a set of open french doors. There are a few people chatting outside, some lounging in the comfy looking patio furniture while Fred and Velma from Scooby Doo sit on the wooden steps leading down to the dock. Torches light up the space and cobwebs stretch along the fence. Chap shoots past us, down the steps, and barks at one of the flickering shadows in the grass.

"Chap! Quiet, boy."

The dog runs to us and rolls over, exposing his white belly. As dangerous as it may be in this costume, I can't resist him. I squat down, keeping my knees together, because I am a damn lady, and give him the belly rub he's looking for.

"So, you're a biker dog, huh?" I ask him, scratching under his chin. His short little legs fold over and hang limply as he enjoys the attention. As soon as I stand, Chap flips over and takes off in search of the next person willing to play.

"This is the backyard. About the same as yours," he says. "Nothing much to it, but the deck and firepit. My boat is stored next to the dock." A shiver runs down my body and I lean into his side. "Are you okay?"

"Freezing," I answer. "Too much cold and not enough costume."

"You want to head back inside or over to the fire pit?" I notice the fire is free of other guests and motion to it. Lane guides me down the steps, making sure I've got my footing. Just when I'm thinking about how sweet he is, we step into the yard and my heels sink into the grass.

"Shit," I say. Lane keeps moving, but when I don't follow he stops and turns. "I'm stuck. My heels are literally stuck in the ground." I try to yank my foot free, but it doesn't budge. I slap a hand to my forehead before dragging it down my face in mortification.

He laughs, his smile momentarily making me forget my embarrassment. "Let me help."

I close my eyes as he sets his beer on the ground and wraps two hands around one of my ankles. "Another rescue," I say with a sigh, gripping my glass a little tighter to keep from spilling. "Maybe I *am* a damsel in distress."

Lane pulls my foot free and I shift my weight to that leg, balancing on the toe of these boots made by Satan. He frees my second foot with a tug. "Well, it's a good thing I'm always around for a rescue, huh?" As he stands,

Lane runs his hands up my legs, pulling away right before he reaches my fishnets. I curse these boots again for being so tall.

I tiptoe over to the fire. He grabs his beer and takes a seat on one of the benches, pulling me down next to him.

“This may be the only quiet place at this party,” I say. Lane nods, half his face lit orange from the flames. I sip my wine and set it down next to me so I can cross my arms to keep warm. “Beyond quick rescues and smalltalk, we really haven’t had a chance to chat. So tell me all about yourself.”

He looks into my eyes and lifts one eyebrow higher than the other. “There’s not much to tell. I’m in banking, international investments and such. I keep strange hours. I have a dog and a boat and the hottest new neighbor who keeps teasing me with an insane amount of nudity.”

I look down to our joined hands resting on my lap, my face heating from the fire and his words. “Way to keep things vague, Mystery Man.”

“I’m not a mystery. Just a simple man trying to live his best life. Besides, I don’t know much about you either. But I know I want to know more. Like, where are you from? Do you like chocolate? What’s your favorite song? If you could meet any famous dead person, who would it be?”

I smile at the flickering flames a few feet away. “Savannah, Georgia. I like chocolate, but not necessarily chocolate cake or ice cream. Free Falling by Tom Petty. And Emily Brontë.”

“Well, that was easy. Does that mean you’ll answer *anything* I ask?”

I shake my head. “Lane, I don’t know if this is innocent flirting, or what you’re looking for, but my past is...complicated. And I’m not sure I can jump into anything serious. Hell, I’ve only ever been with one man my entire life.” I suck in a breath and press my lips together, not exactly meaning to say that out loud.

His eyes go wide and he fakes a cough to cover his gasp. “Your past is your past,” he says, using two fingers to lift my chin. Our eyes connect again. “Let’s abandon the serious talk and just have fun tonight.”

“Yeah. Fun.” I cross my legs and then uncross them, wiggling on the bench. “Well, as much fun as you can have with a thong sawing your ass in half.” Lane grins and I can almost see the thoughts playing out in his head. “Sorry. Marley keeps talking me into ‘trying new experiences’,” I say using air quotes, “and they don’t always work out.”

“Well, lesson learned, right? No thongs for Stella.”

“Lesson learned, indeed. But I know to at least wear something. My last social outing taught me that. Even if it’s a torture device, I will always have on underwear in public.”

He lays his arm along the back of the bench. I move in closer to his side. “Hey, there’s a silver lining. You’re learning and experiencing new things. In my opinion, that’s the best part of life.” We both sit and watch the fire dance in the light breeze. Tiny flecks of wood float up into the sky like fireflies before burning out and disappearing.

Suddenly, he starts chuckling. “I’m sorry. I just can’t stop picturing you tied up in that purple dress the other night. You poor thing.” His hand wraps around my shoulder and I exhale at the contact. “Your skin is freezing, Stella.”

I lean away as Lane shrugs out of his leather jacket. He lays it over my shoulders and I am engulfed in soft leather filled with his body heat. It smells like Lane, which is a clean, soapy scent. I inhale deeply and hold the air in my lungs memorizing the fragrance and the way it tastes on my tongue.

“Won’t you be cold?” I ask, after exhaling.

“Nah. I’m used to it. That’s how it is when you grow up here. I’m sure if I went down south, I’d suffer.”

I try to form a response, but my brain keeps circling around the words “if I went down south” and it is not referencing a geographical location. Clearing my throat, I try to shift my mind out of the gutter and focus on the man whose arm is, once again, draped over my shoulders. Marley’s voice screams in my head to use my charm and flirt, but I’m not sure if I remember how. Figuring I can’t be embarrassed any more than I already have been, I just go for it.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I bet you’d like it down south. Takes a real man to know his way around, but once he does, I’d be inclined to hold onto him.”

Lane cocks his head and gives me a sinister grin. “I gotta say, I’m impressed at your innuendo game. Got anymore where that came from?”

“Eh. I figure I ought to space them out. Don’t want to reveal all my talents up front. Gotta make you work for them.”

“Work for them, huh? Well, there’s a time clock I’d like to punch.” We both laugh and he pulls me in tighter to his side. “Okay, that was lame. It totally didn’t work.” We’re so close I can feel his ribs expand with each breath and the rough denim of his jeans against my fishnet-laced thigh.

I nod. "You're right. But don't worry. Maybe you can learn from the master."

He turns his face toward me now, merely inches apart. His eyes drop to my mouth and my tongue slides over red painted lips. The fire crackles beside us, people chatter all around, but all I see is Lane and his penetrating blue eyes holding me in place.

"Holy fuck!" Marley says, jumping between our bench and the fire. Her shadow casts darkness over us, and we both sit back with a sigh. "I just met the most pretentious, stick-up-his-ass, buttoned-up, know-it-all. Stella, you've got to come meet him. My mere presence is enough to unravel this man. It's so much fun to watch him squirm!"

Her gaze bounces between us and realization dawns. "Aww, damn. Am I that clueless arse who shows up at the worst possible moment?"

"The worst," I say, leveling her with an icy glare.

"Sorry, but this is just too good. It's entertainment at its finest. Oh, and there's a little vein that bulges in his temple when I bring up my 'Harry Potter & Draco were lovers' theory."

"That must be Joshua," Lane says.

"Yes!" Marley shouts. "Joshua. Even his name is pompous. I tried to call him Josh and his eye twitched."

Lane chuckles. "That's him alright. Are you torturing my guests for amusement?" he asks.

"Just one," Marley says, batting her eyes. She folds her hands together and twists one foot inward, looking up through her lashes. "I promise I won't leave any permanent damage. Stella, come see."

I don't move from my spot, too cozy and warm, but all the wine in my bladder is screaming at me. "I need to use the restroom anyway," I say. I stand and immediately miss the feeling of being tucked into his side. I start to remove Lane's jacket, but he stands and wraps his hands over mine, keeping it on my shoulders.

"Keep it," he says. "It's only going to get colder." He gives me a smile that warms me so much I might not even need the jacket. "The bathroom is the first door on the left down the hall. I guess I better do some mingling."

Marley drags me away. I only stumble once, my heel catching on one of the steps. Luckily, she is there to keep me from going down. "Go pee and then come find me," she says before motioning to the far corner of the room.

I make my way down the hall and try the door. It's locked. I lean against the wall and squeeze my thighs together. After a few minutes, I feel like I'm going to burst. Rocking side to side, I try to focus on anything else, but all I can hear is Brea shouting "waterfalls, pouring rain, sprinklers, swimming pools" in my head. How that girl loved to torture me. Another minute passes and I can't take it anymore. There's got to be another bathroom somewhere.

Back in the main room I stop the first person I see and ask. They direct me upstairs. I round the banister and climb those steps as fast as my feet can move. I try every door. The first looks like an extra bedroom, the second is locked, the third is a bathroom. Throwing myself inside, I make it just in time.

When I'm finished, I wash my hands and dry them on the softest green towels I've ever felt. Ducking my face inside the toasty leather of Lane's jacket, I inhale deeply. I close my eyes and revel in the smoky fire scent mixed with hints of Lane. Blue eyes flash through my mind and there's something so honest and not entirely wholesome about the way he looks at me.

I check my makeup to make sure everything is still in place. The last time I wore red lipstick it kept wearing off and I'd end up with a ring around my bare lips. Tonight I don't have that problem. I'll have to check with Marley on the brand. I give a smile at my unrecognizable reflection and wonder what my ex-husband would say if he saw me like this. He'd probably call me a slut or some other derogatory name, but that's not what I feel like.

I feel empowered, beautiful, sexy and needing a release. I don't want to overthink this thing with Lane. It's obvious we both want each other, and if it's purely physical, then I think I can handle that. Just the thought of being intimate with him sends a buzzing sensation into my gut. My inexperience rears its doubtful head and I wonder if maybe Lane would be disappointed.

Taking a deep breath, I release those feelings and grab on to what I know for sure. He wants me. I want him. And so what if a fling with your neighbor is the worst idea since the Shake Weight, the worst that could happen is things don't work out and there's just awkward waving across the yards for the rest of our lives.

I adjust my boobs in the push-up bra and give them a little shake before exiting the bathroom. I head left, and walk a few steps before realizing I

came from the other direction. When I turn around, Lane is there.

“Shit!” I yell, slapping a hand over my racing heart. “You scared me. Were you trying to be a shadowy figure just lurking in the dark waiting for his next victim? Because you are at some Michael Myers level shit right here.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Well, it is a Halloween party. But I didn’t mean to. You were gone a while, so I thought I’d come looking for you.” Lane stalks forward now until he’s got my back pressed against a door. He leans in, one hand resting next to my head. “Have I told you how amazing you look tonight?”

“Yes.” My answer is a light breath between us, barely a sound.

His other hand wraps around my waist and he presses his body against mine. I can feel every inch of his hard, runner’s body pushing against my soft, wine-drinking body. He hesitates and I wonder what is keeping him from closing the gap between us. And then I remember, he needs an invitation.

I wrap my hand around the back of his head, scraping my nails through the short hair at the nape of his neck. Pulling him down to meet me, our lips finally connect and it is everything I imagined. This kiss is powerful, but soft, each of us taking the time to learn each other. He swallows every sigh and whimper that escapes, feeding off my desperate need for this—for him.

Lane's hand comes up and holds the side of my neck so gently, his thumb lined along my jaw, sweeping up over my cheek. The energy between us builds until it binds us together into a single mess of roaming hands and body friction. My lungs burn from lack of oxygen and my head swims, but I refuse to pull away. His tongue slides over my bottom lip and I finally exhale.

Without thought, my hips shift forward, seeking him out. Lane returns the gesture, pressing me harder against the door while one hand slides down, wraps around my thigh and hitches it up around his hip. The cheap skirt lets out an awful creaking sound and I just wait for it to rip in half. Luckily, it holds out. Between panting breaths, I let out a wanton moan as he leans into me while placing kisses along my neck.

“God, Stella. Who knew you would taste so sweet? I don’t want to stop,” he whispers, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear.

His rock hard erection presses into my stomach and ignites something long dormant. An electric kind of trembling fills my body, desire shooting



across my skin like sparks. I don't remember wanting anything—anyone—more than I want him. The feeling blooms and grows, taking over every cell, every thought, until I feel as though I'm drowning in Lane Holder.

"But we probably should stop," I say, trying to catch my breath. "I mean, this *is* your party."

Lane groans, releases my leg and drops his forehead to rest on my shoulder. "Ah, the voice of reason rears its ugly head."

"I'm barely hanging on to any self-control here. We should get back downstairs." Lane lifts his head and pushes away from me. "You've got lipstick on your mouth," I point out.

He lifts the bottom of his white t-shirt and wipes his face clean, revealing a set of abs I've only imagined while pleasuring myself. I blush and look away.

"Yours is smudged just below..." Lane says, swiping beneath my bottom lip with his index finger and wiping it on his shirt to join the other red splotches.

"How is it now?" I ask, looking up into his intense gaze. My heart thunders with the look he's giving me.

"Perfect. You're gorgeous." My smile grows. "Can I take you out sometime?"

"Like on a date?" I ask.

"Yes, Stella. Like on a date."

I blow out a breath as my fidgeting hands smooth down my hair and adjust the red bandana. "I don't know. I'm not sure I'm ready for dating. And the age difference..."

Lane's eyebrows fall heavy over thick lashes. His lips mold into a pout, but he nods. "Age is just a number. Were you thinking about that number a few minutes ago when I had you pinned against the door?" I shake my head at his smirking face. "But if you're not ready, I get that. Just means I'll have to convince you to take a chance."

"On what?"

"On me," Lane says, placing a hand over his heart.

"Oh, good Lord, you're the cutest thing." Dread sinks inside my body, like I swallowed a boulder. Am I making a mistake? Because walking away from him feels like a mistake. My feet are lead as I drag myself toward the stairs. Stupid boots.

"I've got a cute dog too, if that gets me more points."

“It would be so stupid to fall for you,” I whisper with my back to him. I turn my head just enough to see him leaning against the wall. “I’ve got to go find Marley. Thanks for the jacket.” I remove his jacket and lay it on the top of the banister. He crosses his arms now—bulging stacked muscles alternating blank skin and colorful canvas. I worry that I’ve offended him. “Are you coming?”

He shakes his head ever so slightly. “I’m going to wait a few minutes. Try to think of my grandma naked or something,” he says waving a hand over the prominent bulge in his jeans.

I turn to go and spot Marley at the bottom of the stairs, pretending not to eavesdrop. She gives me a big smile and waves for me to follow her.

I start down the stairs. “I’m coming,” I tell her. “Talk to me, Goose!”

THE PHONE PRESSED between my shoulder and ear is beginning to make my neck ache. Brea woke me up this morning with a phone call that started in tears. I've finally calmed her down and decided to start breakfast since this call could last all day. I grab the butter and eggs from the refrigerator while Marley loads a pod in the Keurig.

"You want?" she asks, while I listen to Brea complain about her husband's lack of sympathy for a very emotional pregnant woman. I nod.

"You've just gotta tell him how you're feeling, Brea. He's not a mind reader and your hormones are making you crazy right now. Cut him some slack. You know he's a good guy. I know he's a good guy."

"I know," Brea says with a sigh. "But sometimes he's just a fart blossom." After a couple seconds, we both break into giggles. "I'm sorry, I wanted to hear all about last night."

"It's okay," I tell her. "I'll call you back this evening to tell you about the party. I've got company and we're starved."

We end the call with our standard 'love yous' and promise to chat later. I place my phone on the counter and stretch my neck back and forth.

"Speaking of the party," Marley says, grabbing her full coffee cup and taking a cautious sip. "You had quite a good time with Lane. I had a good time torturing Joshua. I'm going to call this one a win."

"That poor man."

"Hey, he could have walked away at any time. He just let me push his buttons all night." She sips more coffee and leans against the counter. "Did you see his nose flare when I said the American moon landing was fake?" Marley chuckles. "I've never met such a hot guy that is so uptight. It was too easy to mess with him. And those arms? He definitely works out."

“I’m telling you, Joshua is exactly like a character named Joshua in an Alaina Taylor series. He’s even a doctor, Marley. Just like real life Joshua,” I say, as I stand at the stove, cooking us eggs for breakfast. “Do you think she’s using real people in town for inspiration? That would be crazy.”

Marley grabs the toast as soon as it pops up and shoves a bite into her mouth. “That would be awesome. What do you think I’ve got to do to get into one of these books?”

I flip the eggs and shake the frying pan a bit to make sure they’re not stuck. “She’s such a recluse, I imagine you probably would have had to live here your whole life. Like, she knows who she knows and that’s it, right? I feel like I need to go back and reread them all now.”

“If it is based on him, I would assume that it is an extremely loose interpretation of Joshua. I don’t think the best word wizard in the world could spin that man to be a romantic lead,” Marley says, taking a seat at the table. I slide a fried egg onto her plate and one onto mine. “I miss a proper breakfast.”

Taking a seat across from her, I shake my head. “If you’re talking about beans for breakfast, that’s gross.”

“To each their own, love. You don’t hear me complaining about what you people call bacon, do you?” she asks, holding up a piece of turkey bacon. “This is all floppy and weird.”

“To be fair, real bacon is crispy and delicious. But this stuff is only 20 calories a slice, so we sacrifice.”

She takes a bite and chews while holding my gaze. “I don’t like sacrifice. It’s weird. And floppy.”

“You said that.”

“Speaking of floppy. Did you get a look at Lane’s...bacon?” she asks with a grin, holding up a slice that promptly folds over.

“No, but I felt it and I gotta say it made me a little nervous.”

Her eyes go wide. “Oh, god. It’s not fair. He’s good looking, seems like a decent guy, and has a huge cock? Some people have all the luck.”

I finish off my toast and wipe my mouth with a napkin. “Do you have penis envy?”

“No,” she says, crossing her arms. “I have neighbor envy. Mine’s just a cranky old lady who stares at me from her kitchen window along with her bird.”

I sit up taller, eyes wide. “Her bird? Like a real bird?”

Marley waves her hand around. “Yes. You know, one of those white fluffy things that have feathers that go up like this?” She puts her palm against her forehead and holds her fingers straight up.

“Oh, yeah. That clears it up.”

“Anyway, the bird lady is like a creepy old witch, just watching me all the time with her disapproving frown. Never leaves the house unless it’s Sunday. I assume to go to witch church or something. I’m just waiting for her to offer me a poisoned apple. But she does have these gorgeous flowers that grow around her house in all different colors. They look like roses, but fluffier. My favorites are the white ones with bright pink edges. And she has a huge greenhouse that takes up most of her backyard. Probably all her herbs and roots to brew potions.”

Swallowing down the last of my orange juice, I stare at Marley. “You are *so* strange.”

“I know, right?” She grins and throws the last bite of toast into her mouth. “I still can’t believe you didn’t bang your neighbor last night. He was down. I could tell he was totally down to hit that. And you just said no?”

“He kissed me and then asked me out, Marley. Was I supposed to provide a counter offer of no date, only hot, dirty sex?”

“I don’t see why not. You’re never going to get what you want unless you ask for it. If you’re not interested in dating a much younger, super-hot, intelligent, sweet man, then that’s your ignorant ass business. But I’d at least let him hit it and quit it.”

I pick up both of our plates and drop them in the sink. “That’s the problem. I don’t know what I want. I’ve been through a lot in the past year. I don’t want to put all that baggage on him.” I cross my arms and stare out of my window. Lane’s porch still holds a few Halloween decorations, but no Lane.

“Listen to yourself,” Marley says. She hops up from her seat and grabs my shoulders, giving them a little shake. “Everyone has a past. This man is clearly interested. So, stop pretending that this is about being self-sacrificing and all about him when clearly you’re just scared.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. I am scared. After what I’ve been through, I feel like I have the right to be afraid. But then again, when I moved here, I vowed to be a new woman. I want to take hold of life and grab what I want—mostly Lane’s ass. I don’t want to be gutless anymore.

“So what’s your story? You ever going to settle down or is it balls to the wall forever?” I ask, trying to take the spotlight off of myself.

Marley releases me and grabs her mug, swallowing down coffee. She looks over my head as if imagining a scene playing out there. “I don’t know. I’m not a planner. I just go where the wind blows.”

“You ever had a steady guy?” I ask, noticing the slightest shift in her expression.

She pushes her bangs out of her eyes and sighs. “Yeah. Followed him around like a puppy—from London to Brooklyn, then up here. Then he was gone. Said I was too wild for him. He wanted to settle down with a nice American girl.” Marley clicks her tongue. “Good riddance, mother fucker. Good luck with that, given your bad credit and crooked knob. Besides, it’s not so bad having a new guy in your bed every week. Variety is the spice of life.”

“So is venereal disease at that rate.”

“What’s on the agenda today?” Marley asks, after flipping me off.

I rinse off our dishes and load them in the dishwasher. “I really want some fall decorations for my porch. Some pumpkins or something, you know?”

“Cool. I can help with that. You going to be handing out candy for trick or treating next month?” she asks while propping one foot up onto my kitchen counter and folding herself over to stretch like a ballerina on her barre.

“Oh, yes! My first Trick-or-Treat! I’ll get the good candy so the neighborhood kids know what’s up.”

Marley laughs. “I’m not mad at that. At that age, my affection could certainly be bought for full-size chocolate bars. Come to think of it, that’s how I landed my first kiss.”

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I WALK INTO work Wednesday morning with a big smile and some pep in my step. Becca grins from behind the counter as soon as she sees me.

“So I assume you’ve heard the news?” she asks, as I join her and tuck my purse into the desk drawer.

“I got the email newsletter this morning.” Pulling my phone from my pocket, I read the email aloud. “Announcing a new series from *New York*

*Times* Bestselling Author Alaina Taylor. Set in the seedy world of Las Vegas, this team of high-roller ladies hold all the power when it comes to their company. But will they raise the stakes and take a gamble when it comes to love?"

"Sounds great, doesn't it?" Becca asks.

"It does," I answer, pressing the phone to my chest. "I can't wait to get my hands on it."

"You won't have to wait as long as everyone else."

"What?" I screech.

Becca cringes and presses her hands over her ears. "If I tell you that I've managed to wrangle you an autographed advance copy are you going to explode or something? Because that shit is messy."

Pure joy radiates from my body as I bounce on my toes and clap my hands together. "Oh my god! I love you! Thank you!" I pull Becca in for a hug as she laughs at my excitement. "And I don't want to know how you know exploding humans are messy."

"It's my pleasure," she says after I release her. "Don't worry. My secrets are my secrets."

"I could die right now. Honestly."

"Don't die. I need you to cover your shift. I've got to run errands today."

"I'm okay. I'm okay," I repeat, trying to convince Becca and myself.

"Okay. I'll be back after lunch. If you need something to work on, I'd like a new display in the front window. Whatever theme you want," she says. "Hold down the fort?"

I snap off a salute. "Aye, aye, Captain and new favorite person."

With no customers to distract me, I decide to work on the window display. I pull down everything in there, clean out the area, and stare at the empty space and glass window. Just then, I see a couple come out of the diner across the street. They're holding hands, wrapped in jackets and scarves, and wearing matching smiles. That's when it hits me.

I run to the stockroom to look for supplies and am busy digging through a box of paper and ribbon when I hear the front door chime. I load my arms up with what I need, grab the scissors off of Becca's desk and head for the store when the stockroom door swings open.

It's Lane. He's looking around the dimly lit space. When he spots me, his grin and dimple make an appearance. I swear I'm having hot flashes.

"Hey," he says.

“Hi.” He’s wearing a dark green button up shirt and jeans. His bright eyes shine from the overhead fluorescent light. “If you’re looking for Becca, she’s out running errands.”

“I wasn’t looking for Becca,” he says, his voice low and gritty. He starts toward me and I stay there like it’s my job to stand in this very spot. A few feet away, I feel his intention. He’s coming for me and he’s not asking permission this time. That’s okay, because he knows he’s got it.

Just before Lane reaches me, I drop everything to the ground. My hands go to his shoulders and I jump up wrapping my legs around his waist as his arms hold me. Our lips meet and this kiss is more exciting, more electric than the one before it.

He moans into my mouth as his tongue caresses mine and his hands pull me harder against his tight body. When Lane is touching me, he is all I can think about. Every worry, every thought just disappears. All I know is that I want more, need more, always more.

Lane walks us to a stack of boxes while never coming up for air. He sets me down on the boxes while pulling my long, flowy skirt up. His hands immediately go to my legs, warm fingers sliding up and down my thighs. This time, I moan as he pushes my knees wide and presses in against me.

“You feel that, Stella?” he growls. “That’s what you do to me. You turn me into a hormonal teenager with no self control.” His hardness presses against the soft, thin material of my panties and I want to tell him that I feel it too, that I want him too. Instead, I simply roll my hips forward, grinding against the front of his jeans.

“Fuck,” he grunts, his lips leaving mine as he rests his forehead on my shoulder. Lane’s hands slide around my waist under my skirt, his fingertips skating the edge of my panties. When he slips his hand inside and grabs ahold of my ass, I let out a wanton whimper.

I am putty in his hands, literally. He moves my body against his, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass as he pulls me to him again and again. Our breaths come fast now and I cannot get enough. I tug on his neck bringing his lips back to mine where he devours me like a starving man.

The front door chimes again and we break apart, both panting and wearing matching grins. He backs away from me and rubs at the back of his neck with one hand.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Shit. That is *not* why I came here.”



“It certainly wasn’t listed under ‘Benefits’ in the employee handbook,” I tease. He blows out a breath and drops his hands to his sides.

“Can I take you out on a date, Stella?”

I hear Becca’s telltale humming coming from just outside the stockroom. She’s probably searching the store for me.

“I’ve got to get back out there,” I say, hopping down off the boxes and straightening my shirt.

Lane’s mouth forms a little pout, he opens his lips to say something and changes his mind. “I’ll keep her busy,” he says, turning on his heel and heading out of the stockroom.

“Lane!” she says. “What are you doing here?” Becca asks.

“Looking for you, of course.”

I hear this exchange while I gather all my materials from the floor and head back into the store. By the time I make it out there, they are in Becca’s office.

I start organizing my supplies for the window display, laying everything out on the front counter. I’m lost in cutting paper and rolling out string when Lane passes the front counter on his way out.

“See you later, Stella,” he says with a tight smile before pushing through the door and disappearing down the sidewalk.

Becca makes her way out of her office, straightens a couple of books on an endcap and joins me behind the counter.

“Any particular reason your neighbor wanted to keep me distracted in my office while you were nowhere to be found?” she says.

My stomach drops and my mouth bobs open, but no words come out. “I was just gathering supplies in the stockroom for the display,” I answer, though it sounds much more like a question.

Becca hits me with a look that makes my blood run cold. I don’t want to lose this job. Just when I think I’m going to have a panic attack, she cracks a smile which turns into hysterical laughter.

“Oh, you two,” she says. “You should have seen your face just now. Trying to act all innocent. Honey, I’m not mad. If Lane Holder wanted to do dirty things to me in the stockroom, I’d be a willing participant too.”

I let out a breath and press a hand over my thunderous heart. “God, Becca. I almost had a heart attack. And no one said we were doing dirty things back there.”

She walks past me with a dark grin. “Next time you’re trying to convince someone of that, you might want to make sure your skirt is not tucked into the back of your underwear.” More cackling as I gasp and reach behind me to find my ass completely exposed. My cheeks—both sets—burn with embarrassment as Becca closes her office door.

I eventually get over my mortification, grab a quick lunch from the diner, and get to work on the front display. Becca leaves again, giving me a wave through the window.

I work all afternoon on the display, using my supplies from the stockroom, books that fit the theme and even brown and orange leaves from the sidewalk outside. Squeezing myself inside to adjust something, my shirt snags on a thumbtack. I reach for a book in the bottom of the display, but my shirt is really caught and the tack is not budging. A few people pass by on the sidewalk outside. I smile and wave like I am part of the display, which is the actual situation right now. Bending and stretching my arms as much as possible, I can’t reach the damn tack.

Not wanting to rip a hole in my shirt, I decide the only way out is to pull my arms inside and slide out of it. It’ll be fine to be in my camisole just long enough to detach my shirt and throw it back on. I bend my knees and duck my head through the opening, leaving it hanging on the backboard. I climb into the window now for a better angle and get the thing unhooked in a few seconds. Feeling victorious, I throw my hands in the air and do a little dance, shaking my ass back and forth.

Suddenly, a knock on the glass startles me. I whip around to see a group of teenagers watching me. One holds a phone up as if he’s taking a photo—or worse, video. What’s done is done, so I smile and throw up a peace sign as they break out into hysterics and move on.

By the time Becca returns late that afternoon, I’m just finishing up. I watch her through the window. She’s loaded down with shopping bags, but stops and looks everything over. She grins and gives me a thumbs up with her free hand before coming inside.

“Fall in Love,” she says, reading my autumn-themed header. Leaves dangle from clear string all over the display and a pile of them scattered around the bottom surround a variety of romance books. I tried to keep it unbiased, so there’s only two Alaina Taylor novels in there. “I like it. It looks great.”

The sidewalks have been full of people all day, everyone seeming to be in a great mood. "Lots of people out and about in the middle of a Monday."

"Yeah, well, it's the Fall Festival this weekend. People will be prepping all week. There will be cider, carnival rides, funnel cakes, apple bobbing. All the good stuff."

"Geez. That sounds like it's right out of a Hallmark movie," I say.

"Small town life, kid. It's real alright. And just wait until the shenanigans start. There's always a fight or two and someone always ends up spiking the cider. Folks roll in from even smaller towns surrounding us and the people watching is phenomenal."

I lean my hip against the counter. "I look forward to it, then. I'm sure my friend Marley will want to go. She loves shenanigans. Actually, she *is* shenanigans."

"Sounds like my type of broad," Becca says.

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THE AIR IS crisp tonight. It's cool, but not so much that I need a jacket as I sit on my front porch swing with a book and a glass of wine. The stack of pumpkins and miniature bail of hay on my porch really make it feel like fall. I grab my glass of wine from the porch railing and take a sip, when I hear footsteps on the stairs. I look up and don't see anyone. Then, Chap appears, wearing a red hoodie sweatshirt.

"Hey, buddy," I say, scratching behind his ears. I look over at Lane's house and see no signs of life. "Did you escape the backyard again?" I pat the spot next to me and he jumps up on the swing. Chap quickly makes himself at home, resting his head in my lap.

I swing back and forth, petting Chap and finishing my glass of wine. When my eyes get tired of reading in the dim light, I decide to call it a night.

"Ready to pack it up?" I ask Chap. His eyes move to my face, but everything else stays put. "Come on. Let me get you back home, you loaf."

Chap hops down and stretches his short little legs while I put my glass inside. He follows me down the steps and over to his house. When I knock on Lane's front door, Chap barks. I'm not sure what to do with him if Lane isn't home. I guess I could keep him for the night. I look down at his adorable face and know it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Lane's door swings open and he flips on the porch light. I squint my eyes, adjusting to the sudden brightness. When they do adjust, I find Lane there wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. His hair is a mess as if he's been running his hands through it over and over again. Black-rim glasses sit on his face and make him look like a modern-day version of Clark Kent. Just when I thought he couldn't be more attractive.

"Hi," I say. He smiles until he sees Chap at my feet. Lane's smile falls and he shakes his head. "I think your dog likes me."

"Ha. I think he does too." He steps onto the porch with me now, bare feet sticking out from the bottom of frayed jeans. "But who could blame him?"

"I don't know. I think he just likes me because I'm soft. He always wants to lay on me."

"Again, who could blame him?" Lane smirks and it is my own brand of kryptonite. "Chap, get inside." The dog follows his command without question, disappearing into the house.

"So, Becca is totally on to us," I say, tucking my hands into my back pockets before I lose control and reach for him. "I had a complete wardrobe malfunction that was all your fault."

Lane pushes his glasses higher on his nose and grins. "Sorry not sorry. I've been so swamped with work, you were the best part of my day."

"Ah," I say, taking a step back as he moves forward. "Well, if you're busy with work, I better go."

"I can take a small break."

He backs me up so that I'm leaning against his porch railing. A cool breeze blows through, sweeping fallen leaves across wooden floor planks in a shushing sound I've grown to love. Lane's tattoos are on display tonight with his short-sleeve shirt and I want to trace every line of ink and have him tell me their story.

"Thanks again for inviting me Saturday." Lane leans forward, resting his hands on the railing on each side of my hips. "You should have seen Marley and Joshua. They're like a lit match and gunpowder—dangerous, but so entertaining. I had a good time."

"Just a good time?" he asks, one eyebrow arching over the rim of his glasses.

Without thinking, my eyes drop to his mouth. "Okay. Some parts were better than good."

He smiles and it makes my heart pound against my chest. Lane is all perfect white teeth, crooked grin, and eyes that shine in the glow from the porch light.

“Which parts? Be *very* specific.”

I can’t help but return his smile now. This man, with all his sweet, is a bit devious too. I want him so badly, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. A chill races down my spine when his thumb sweeps against my wrist. The energy between us is palpable. I can taste the air mixed with a bit of Lane and I can’t deny him anymore.

“Fuck it,” I say, before reaching for him. My greedy hands pull Lane down to meet me and our mouths collide in a hungry and desperate kiss. He hums when my nails scrape up into his hair, pulling him harder. He tastes like coffee and mint and I want to never stop kissing him. I feel this kiss in every inch of my body and for a split second I recognize that I’ve never felt this way before.

I’m conflicted by that feeling. While I am grateful to have it now, I’m bitter that I haven’t been kissed like this my whole life. I’ve been missing out on passion, on unhinged desire. And while I know this is still new, I can’t help but feel that Lane would kiss me this way until his last breath. This distracts me and it’s too late to recover when I realize my lips have stopped responding to him.

Lane places two quick pecks on my lips, before pulling away. He looks into my eyes, searching for something. I feel it deep inside, like he can see right through me to the coward lurking beneath the surface. “Why are you fighting this, Stella?”

I look away, staring into the dark and quiet street. Biting my bottom lip, I stay quiet, not knowing how to answer him. I don’t want to admit anything. I don’t want to own up to wanting him more than anything I’ve ever known. I don’t want to admit that I’m scared to get to know him, and that I feel like he’s more than I deserve.

“Can I take you out? On a date? How many times are you going to make me ask?” he asks. “You know, where we could share a meal? And maybe end the night with another one of those kisses that I can’t get enough of?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why would it be stupid to fall for me?” he asks.

I scrunch my face up and duck my head. “You heard that, huh?”

He lowers his face to meet my gaze. "I did. You're in your head too much. Just let go. I promise you won't regret it." Lane leans forward, his hot breath fanning across my collar bone. "Let me in, Stella."

I lift my chin and look him in the eye, knowing I need to say this so that he really hears it. "I was married to the same man for 20 years. He cheated on me with my best friend. I left him, sold everything and moved up here to start new. And I'm not even sure how to start new, because I don't know who I am outside of that former life." I take a deep breath and blow it out toward the sky. "Are you ready for all that baggage?"

Lane grins, flexes his arm, his bulging biceps catching my attention. "Stella, I am built to carry that fucking baggage."

I place my hand on the side of his face, my thumb tracing the curve of his smiling lips. "Pick me up Saturday at seven."

| CLOSE MY eyes and let Marley paint a face mask onto my skin.

“So, this will work to clean your pores, tighten the skin, and get you laid.”

“I doubt that’s on the label,” I say, through tight lips.

“Is too. Don’t judge Reagan’s products or her marketing tactics. Sex is a great motivator. All done.”

I open my eyes and feel the mask tightening on my face. Pulling the bottle from her hand I flip it over and pretend to read the directions. “All organic ingredients. Rejuvenates skin. Oh, see here? It says this product is rendered ineffective when applied by a smartass.”

“Well, that leaves us both out, doesn’t it?” Marley asks, sticking out her tongue.

“This mask is intense,” I say, sliding my lips back and forth to loosen it up. “Kind of like your cleavage tonight.”

Marley points her brush at me. “Hey! There is no judgement on girls’ night in. I’m comfortable. If my boobies make you uncomfortable, then maybe you could just show me Sandra and Dee and we could be on a level playing field.”

I throw myself back on the sofa and look at the plaster ceiling. “Why are you so obsessed with my boobs?”

She paints the rest of the mask on her own face, using a tiny mirror propped up on my bookshelf. “Because I feel left out. Look, I’m just here for skincare, manis and pedis—to get you ready for your first date in twenty years. Do you want my infinite wisdom or not?”

“I do.” I close my eyes and my imagination plays out a night of awkward talk over dinner between me and my gorgeous neighbor. I imagine long pauses in conversation and spilled drinks and maybe even a bit of

oversharing on my part. Hopefully Chap will be around to distract me when I come up with nothing for conversation. “Okay, lay it on me. What’s the secret to dating?” I ask.

Marley looks at me, her face bright green from the mask. “Always keep them guessing, mystery is the key to being desired. You call the shots on how far you’re willing to go. Don’t feel ashamed if you want to polish his knob right there under the kitchen table. Never wear your period panties. Wear the good stuff. Bring cash, so you can split the check if he’s into that kind of thing. And carry a purse big enough for the essentials: makeup wipes, lip balm, safety pins, condoms, battery backup for the phone, mints, and matches.”

“Matches?” I ask, tilting my head in her direction.

“Yep. If he turns out to be crazy, light his ass on fire and run.”

“Why am I even asking you?”

She leans over me now, our faces inches apart. “Because you’ve been out of the game too long and I’m a goddamned professional.”

I eye my pretty red nails and matching toes. “Okay, so the physical stuff is good, but what about everything else? What do we talk about? Do I bring up my ex? Do I ask about his exes? What is appropriate date talk? Do we speak in hashtags and acronyms?”

Marley sits on my coffee table, facing me, her expression serious. “You’re not texting for god’s sake and he’s not *that* young. Jesus, Stella. This is all about what you’re comfortable with. Though, I have to admit, I’m curious about his previous girls. And if he’s exclusively into cougars. And his thoughts on threesomes.”

I cross my legs and sip my wine, the mask feeling so dry and hardened on my face. “Threesomes are not an option. Nope. And I am not a cougar. I’m not even forty yet, you tart. We haven’t discussed numbers. I don’t know how old he is, but I know it’s much lower than mine.”

“So what,” Marley says. She swallows down the last of her wine and sets the glass aside. “He doesn’t seem to care, so why should you?”

“You’re right. It’s my thing. I need to get over it.” I lean back and throw my arms out. “But he’s so fucking hot, and sexy, and smart, and sweet, and I know there’s a bit of bad boy lurking inside him. I deserve this, right? I need to just embrace it.”

Marley places her hands on my knees and leans in with a weighty expression painting her green face. “That’s right. You deserve to put those



heels to Heaven and explore every inch of that man's amazing body. Side note: let me know if there are anymore hidden tattoos. I'll need details—extreme details, like Morgan Freeman narrating a documentary details. Take notes if you have to.”

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MARLEY IS GONE and the house is quiet. I've just finished a phone call with Brea for my third pep talk of the night. She's not much help having married her high school sweetheart like I did. The difference is, hers actually remained a sweetheart. I'm wearing a cute sweater dress and boots while I wait for seven o'clock to arrive. My nerves rattle inside my body, making my foot bounce and kick the coffee table. It sounds like the ticking of a clock, the countdown on a bomb. I guess we'll find out which one of those is accurate later on.

Unable to sit still any longer, I jump up from the sofa and pace the room. My steps keep up the ticking rhythm as I twist my hands together and try to calm my thoughts. It seems like every memory I've ever had swirls around inside my chaotic head. From the time I fell off of a horse in fourth grade all the way up to the moment I caught my ex-husband and ex-best friend in bed together. I imagine every one of these memories falling out of my mouth in a sort of word vomit as soon as Lane shows up.

I take a deep breath and run my hands down my dress, tugging at the hemline. It's a little shorter than something I'd normally wear, but I don't even know what my normal is anymore.

A knock at the door makes my stomach drop to my feet. I take another deep breath, exhale, wipe my sweaty palms on the sides of my dress and answer the door.

Lane stands there, looking so casual, like he's not the most attractive man in the state. He's wearing dark jeans, a black button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and black shoes. His eyes slide down to my boots and back up as he gives me a smile.

“Are you ready?” he asks, holding out his hand, palm up. I nod and slide my hand into his. Grabbing my purse from a hook beside the door, I lock and close the door behind me.

He leads me down the sidewalk and I catch a new scent, some kind of light cologne that makes me want to breathe deeper. “Where are we off to

tonight?" I ask.

"My house," he says, looking down at me. "I'm cooking dinner for you. I hope you don't mind staying in."

I grin. "Not at all. I'm not sure if any man, besides my father, has ever cooked me a meal."

"That's a shame," he says, pulling me inside his front door. Chap greets us with a single bark. "I love any excuse to cook. I guess it's a hobby of mine." I bend over to give Chap a scratch as he rubs against my legs like a cat. "Stop flirting, you shameless dog," Lane says.

I laugh and follow Lane into the kitchen. The whole house smells amazing. The scent of garlic and spices makes my empty stomach growl. On the kitchen island, he's set out a small board of different cheeses and crackers.

"Wow," I say. "This is fancy. It's like a smaller version of what you did at the garage, right?"

"Help yourself," he replies with a nod. "Red, I assume?" Lane asks, holding up an empty wine glass. My grin answers.

I look over all the choices on the board and rub a hand over my grumbling stomach to keep it quiet. "I have no idea where to start."

"Here," Lane says, handing over my filled wine glass. "Let me help. First, I like these little baguette slices the best." I'm mesmerized as he picks one up and spreads a creamy cheese across the top. "Then a little bit of fig preserve, and top it with these candied pecans." His bite-sized creation looks like a professional chef put it together and I am impressed.

He moves the treat toward my mouth. I open up and take a bite. All the flavors and textures mix together, creating the best thing I've eaten since I moved out of the South.

"Oh my god, that's delicious."

"It's called a canapé. And the best part? Now take a sip of your wine." I do as instructed and am surprised at how well the flavors combine.

"That's impressive," I say. "Not many guys your age would know anything about this unless it were their career." Lane shrugs and lifts the lid off of a pot, stirring the contents inside. "How old are you anyway?" Not the most subtle way to get to it, but I can't stand not knowing. He gives me a sly look and for a moment, I think he's not going to tell me.

"Twenty-eight, but I had to grow up fast. I had a deadbeat mom who left me at my grandmother's house one day and never came back."

“Oh my god, that’s awful,” I say with a hand clutched over my heart.

“Eh,” he shrugs. “I think I was better off. My granny raised me. She used to say I was an old soul trapped in a kid’s body.”

“I can believe that,” I say, finishing off my canapé. “So, you’ve never heard from your mother again?” I know it may be rude to ask, but my curiosity wins out.

“Nope. I believe she was on abusive boyfriend number four by the time she left. I was six years old and was pretty good at taking care of myself even back then. My earliest memories are not of her, but of these terrible, controlling, drunk men who ruled our lives. They could never be in one of your romance novels.”

“No, I guess not.”

He places the lid back on the pot. “Hey. Don’t be sad for me. I turned out okay.” I give him the smile and nod he’s waiting for. “Plus, Granny didn’t want this big old house, so she downsized and I bought this from her and did some refinishing.”

“I love your house,” I say.

“Thank you. I had a lot of help, so I won’t take all the credit. Is this the part where you make me ask how old you are or are we going to keep that a secret?”

I set down my wine glass and take a deep breath. “No games. I want to be honest and keep everything out in the open. I’m thirty-eight.” I watch his face closely for a reaction, but he gives me nothing. Lane takes a swig of his imported beer and grins.

“Nothing but a number, Stella.” He moves around the island and tips his beer toward my glass. We clink them together and each take a sip. “To new neighbors and new starts.”

“To Grace,” I say.

Chap’s nails click along the hardwood floors as he makes his way into the kitchen sniffing every inch of the floor. “And to adorable dogs and their masters.”

Lane laughs and sets down his beer. He takes my wine glass from me and places it on the granite countertop as well. His smile morphs into a straight line, paired with an intense gaze that holds me in place. “Can we just get one little thing out of the way so I can think more clearly?”

His hands come to rest on my hips and I tilt my chin up, realizing how desperately I need this. Lane’s lips meet mine and even with this not being

our first kiss, there is still so much heat and magic to it. It still steals my breath and makes my head spin. I feel it everywhere.

When he pulls away, I can't help the smile that paints my face. "Yes," I say in a breathy voice. "Glad we could get that out of the way and focus."

He grins and moves back into the kitchen. "With your permission, there's going to be so much more of that later." I choke on my sip of wine and cover my mouth to keep it from flying out. Once I get my coughing under control, I finish off the glass.

"And what about you, Stella? Would your childhood fit into an inspirational book or horror novel?"

I laugh as he refills my glass. "I love that you're trying to speak my language," I say. "My childhood was pretty standard, I guess. My parents loved each other, though my mom is a bit of a tight ass, very overprotective, but in a caring way. I was closer to my dad."

"Was?" he asks, popping a piece of cheese into his mouth. I get distracted for a few seconds by the way he licks his lips.

"He passed away a few years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear."

I nod. "Thank you." Silence stretches between us and I search my brain for anything to say.

"The first time I started my period, I was wearing white shorts. Oh lord, why did I just tell you that?"

He chuckles and leans over the counter, resting on his elbows. "Well, let's hear it then. What happened?"

"We were on a bus on a field trip. As soon as I stood up, I knew something was wrong. One of the teachers pulls me aside and into the bathroom before we even get into the zoo. She gives me this enormous pad, tells me what to do and leaves."

"Damn, that's cold."

"Well, she was responsible for the welfare of many other teenagers. I cleaned up as best I could but still had this big red spot on the seat of my shorts. I came out of that bathroom and just clung to the wall while everyone else was horseplaying and lining up to go in."

"So you had to walk around like that all day?" Lane asks, eating another piece of cheese.

I sip my wine and shake my head. "No. A boy in my class came over and offered me his shirt to tie around my waist. He just wore his t-shirt for the

day and I gotta cover my bum.”

Lane stands and holds his arms out wide. “Now see there? A nice guy. Whatever happened to Mr. Niceguy?”

I pop an almond in my mouth and quirk an eyebrow. “I married him.”

Lane’s hands fall to his sides and his smile disappears. “On that note, let’s eat.” He serves our dinner of a Bolognese sauce over pasta with freshly grated parmesan on top. It is plated beautifully and tastes delicious.

“I think you may have missed your calling. This is so amazing,” I say, taking another bite.

“Thank you. But I could never cook as a professional gig. Too much stress. Have you seen any of those chef competitions on television?”

I laugh. “Yeah. It seems like a crazy life. But your job must be stressful too?”

Lane chews and swallows, sipping his water before answering. “At times it is. But being my own boss and working from home kind of balances that out. What about you? How is bookstore employment treating you?”

“Good,” I say. “I love being surrounded by books all day. Becca is easy to work for. And I even get to be a little creative. I think I’m going to redo the Alaina Taylor display next.”

“How idyllic for you.” He grins and sets down his fork. “You know, your eyes light up when you talk about books. It’s special to find something that brings so much joy. I love your enthusiasm for reading.”

I swallow my bite and lean forward, excitement propelling me. “It’s not just for reading. I have such an appreciation of the process, the storytelling, the way characters grow and change. I could never do any of it, and I am enamored with people who can.” I finish off my wine and lean back in my chair. “Hence my adoration of Alaina Taylor. Something in her books especially connects with me. I read a lot, but I read absolutely everything she publishes.”

Lane nods his head and covers my hand with his own, strong fingers wrapping around. “I don’t know if Becca has told you or not, but you know you’ll probably never meet her, right? Living here gives you no advantage as far as that goes.” His expression is serious and sympathetic.

“I know,” I tell him. “But Becca was able to snag me a personalized autographed copy of her next book.”

He smiles now and releases my hand. “Well, that’s something, right?”

“It is.”

We finish our delicious meals while chatting about random stuff. As much as I like him, it always feels like he's keeping me at a distance. And maybe that's for the best, because can you fall head over heels for a man you barely know?

Lane tells me he'll help prepare my house for winter and gives me a few tips on dealing with the snow. The thought of snow excites me, but he says I'll probably get over that after a couple of weeks of shoveling it.

When we're finished, he says to leave the dishes and he'll get them later, asking if I want to move to the main room.

"A man who cooks and washes dishes? Be still, my heart," I say, as he refills my wine glass.

He puts some music on and takes a seat on one of the large sofas. I sit next to him, leaving about two feet of space between us. As much as I love being near him, I want to get to know him better. And the closer I am, the more chances that there will be zero talking and all kinds of everything else. I make a vow that there will be no more kissing until he tells me more about himself.

Lane doesn't restart the conversation after we take a seat. He just sits there watching me, a sexy smirk in place. I wrack my head for something to say, anything to kill the silence. I feel like he does this on purpose so that I'll have to talk about myself. Or maybe he's completely comfortable in silence. Either way, I speak first.

"So, are there any crazy ex-girlfriends I should worry about?"

He throws back his head and laughs. "Not exactly. I don't usually date girls from Grace. I just never had romantic feelings for someone I've grown up with my whole life, you know? It's hard to crush on a girl you watched eat glue in kindergarten. I've only had two serious girlfriends and they've both moved on. Married with kids and all."

"Is that something you want?" I ask, sipping my wine and embracing the warm fuzzy buzz it brings. I feel myself relaxing, getting more comfortable in his space.

"Whoa. First date and you're already asking if I want kids?" he teases.

"Well, at my age it seems like a valid question. In fact, it should probably be included in the preliminary questionnaire I send out before dates." Lane grins, watching my finger trace the stitched pattern in his leather furniture.

"I did not receive a questionnaire," he says, offended. "What's up with that?"

I scoot closer now. “That’s right. Marley was supposed to come over and do an in-person interview, but I believe her exact words were ‘Just bone him and get on with it!’”

We both laugh and he moves toward me, his thigh pressed against my leg. He sets down his drink on the side table and I do the same with my glass. The tension pushes us together and neither one of us can fight it any longer.

Before I realize what’s happening, Lane has picked me up and set me on his lap. He wraps me in his arms and places soft, sweet kisses along my collarbone and neck. I hum and then giggle as his hair tickles my cheek.

“Stella,” he says, his breath fanning over my skin. “You smell so good.”

“You feel so good.” My resistance is quickly fading away. “But I promised myself that I wouldn’t kiss you again until you told me more about yourself.”

Lane's head whips up, his eyes meeting mine. We are two people, turned on to the point of spontaneous combustion, waiting for someone to lose control. Then, one of his eyebrows lifts higher than the other and a devious grin pulls his lips tight.

“There are other things to do besides kissing.”

I swat his shoulder and crawl off of his lap, settling next to him again. “You’re bad,” I say. “Very good at distraction. But so bad.”

He leans forward and presses his lips to my ear. “You have no idea how bad I can be.” I place my hands on his shoulders, but he scoots away on his own.

“You’re going to kill me. Seriously, these panties have probably disintegrated by now. But the force is strong with me,” I say, poking him in the chest. “And I will get what I want.”

“I’d give you anything, Stella. All you have to do is ask.”

“I know your name is Lane Holder. I know that you’re in overseas investment banking, but I can admit I have no idea what that means. You help Becca with her accounting. And you have an adorable dog who seems to be my biggest fan. You keep strange hours and you’re a runner. Besides our pre-dinner conversation, that is literally everything I know about you.”

Lane lays his hand across the back of the sofa, resting near my head. He finishes his whiskey and turns to me with a grin. “What else do you want, Stella? What else do you need to know before I can touch you? What information is the key to opening you up?”

My body ignites at his words, not having an answer and not even wanting one anymore. Questions and thoughts race through my mind and I try to pluck one from the space and ask it, but nothing comes. We are in a standoff, one that he will win any second now.

“Were you born and raised in Grace?”

“Yes. My granny lives on the other side of town. I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else,” he says. “And you? Born in Savannah?”

“Born and raised. And married and miserable and cheated on and betrayed.”

He nods. “So, you’re saying that you might have some trust issues?”

My eyes meet his and I have to say I’d never thought about that before, but he’s right. It’s why I’m so cautious with him. It’s why I’m holding back when I want to dive right in. “Maybe.”

“Noted. Next?” His gaze is intense as he challenges me, but I don’t back down.

“Tell me something about yourself that would surprise me,” I say.

Lane looks away, his eyes landing on the door to the garage and back to me. “I own a completely restored 1955 Harley Davidson Panhead.”

My eyes grow wide and my imagination runs wild. “Wow. A Bobber or FLH?”

It’s Lane’s turn to be shocked. “You know motorcycles?” he asks.

“I know engines. Grew up working on them with my dad. He specialized in anything vintage.”

“It’s FLH. Former police department bike. Only one of 1004 ever produced.”

“So you really are a biker?” I ask. My heart races as I imagine him on that bike with me behind him, flying down a winding mountain road.

He shakes his head. “I’m not in a gang or anything,” he says chuckling. “But I do ride with a couple of friends. When the weather is warmer, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeat. “Can I please see it?”

He hops up and holds out a hand. I let him pull me up and guide me to the garage. When he flips on the light, the fluorescents flicker for a few seconds before illuminating the space. The garage is clean and organized with the bike covered next to his truck.

Excitement builds, every muscle in my body is tense waiting for the reveal. Lane whips the cover off and I have never seen a more beautiful



machine. My steps carry me toward it and without even asking permission, my fingers slide over the beautiful chrome.

“A two-cylinder, pushrod V-twin, with 74 cubic inch displacements and a 3-speed transmission?” I ask, running my eyes over the entire bike, taking in every little detail.

“Yes,” Lane says, his voice low and slow. “God, it’s sexy listening to you talk engines.” I keep my eyes on the bike, inspecting every inch of this exquisite machine. “Upgraded to progressive shift.”

“She’s beautiful,” I say, turning to lean against the leather seat. “You’ve found a rare gem.”

His expression turns from bewilderment to complete lust before my very eyes. “I sure have.”

He charges toward me, dipping my head back while supporting my neck and kisses me until I’m breathless. Lane’s large hands slide over my hips to the hem of my dress. He fists the material and slowly raises it, until we have to separate to remove it. He lifts me and sets me down on the leather seat of his bike, his hands resting on either side of my thighs as his chest heaves in sync with mine. Our eyes hold each other in place and I am desperate for more of him.

“You are stunning,” he says.

His hands move along my bare skin to my back where he unclasps my bra like a professional. It falls loose and I pull it from my body. Lane’s arms support my back as he leans forward and attaches his mouth to one of my nipples. I let out a gasp as my hands fly to his hair to keep him there. I throw my head back and close my eyes at the sensation. The ends of my hair brush along his hands as his fingers grip my back tighter. My whole body comes alive, alight with a new kind of energy. It ebbs and flows through each part of me before settling in my center.

Lane’s tongue and teeth work me over before switching to the other breast. I sigh when the cool air hits my wet skin. He turns us, throwing one of my legs over the bike as he straddles it facing me. Lane hovers over me, never removing his mouth from my skin.

Just when I think I’ll climax from his mouth on my breasts alone, he pushes my wet panties to the side and drags his thumb up my slit. I gasp when two fingers push inside me and his thumb presses against my clit. Every time he slides out and back in, I let out a whimper at the pure ecstasy of it. My back arches when Lane increases his pace and I feel like I am

flying. I am on the edge of something beautiful and amazing when he leans forward and whispers the words that send me flying over the edge.

“Come for me, Stella. Give me what I want.”

I let out a deep moan as an orgasm rips through my body. Every muscle pulls tight. My breath stays caught in my lungs as I ride out the most intense thing I’ve ever experienced. His fingers keep moving, keep pushing until I beg him to stop.

He places a grinning kiss on my lips. A soft and chaste kiss, that makes me want to worship at the altar of Lane Holder. I slap a hand to my forehead and smile so wide at the garage ceiling, I don’t feel like I’ll ever come down from this high. My heart beats wildly.

“That was...” I say, but can’t find the words.

“Beautiful,” Lane finishes. He holds himself up over me, his eyes never leaving mine. “I want to see that over and over again. I swear I’d never get tired of watching that.” I sigh and kiss his lips again. “And everytime I get to see that, get to watch you become so vulnerable and trusting, you belong to me a little bit more. Regardless of your past.”

His words seek out the cold and frigid parts of my abused heart and work to heal them over. I can feel his hardness against my leg and I reach for him, but he stops me.

“Tonight was about you, Stella. I wanted you to know that just because you’ve only been with your ex doesn’t mean you’re not worthy of so much more. Now, if you want to move this to my bedroom, I’d be happy to spend the next several hours making sure you believe that. But if you’re not ready, then I can certainly take care of this on my own.”

My mind and body war with what I want and what I think is right. It is a hard fought battle that my head ends up winning.

“You’re right,” I say, sitting up, pressing my bare chest to his and wrapping my arms around him. “I’m not ready. Maybe I’m old school, and I know we’ve already messed around, but sex is such a big step in a relationship. That doesn’t mean tonight wasn’t incredible.”

I inhale deeply, getting to know the scent of him, and me, and us mixed together. There’s a light practically radiating from my skin. I feel revived from my past and given new eyes. I can see again.

“I know,” Lane says, giving me a warm smile that reaches his baby blues. “I’m going to head to the bathroom,” he says, climbing off the bike. “Feel free to come back inside when you’re ready. It’s pretty chilly out here.”

While Lane is gone, it gives me a chance to put my bra back on and slide back into my dress. Though, my body is so warm right now, I find it stifling. I let myself back into the house and we meet in the foyer. I can see he is still hard.

“That looks uncomfortable. Are you sure I can’t help?”

He shakes his head and takes me into his arms. “Stella, when you’re ready, and I get you where I want you, it’s going to be a long,” he pauses and places a kiss on my forehead. “Exhausting,” another kiss on my nose. “Fulfilling night,” he finishes with one last kiss on my cheek.

I smile and blush at his words, not understanding how he can still make me feel shy even after he’s seen everything. “Well, I better go, then.”

Lane walks me down the sidewalk, leaving me with one more kiss on my front porch. I unlock my door, but wait until he’s back inside his house before going in. Once inside, I lock the door and lean against it. So many emotions, thoughts, and feelings bubble up inside me that I let out a shouting kind of laugh until it echoes through my home.

This is your new life, Stella Locke. Welcome to it.

I PULL MY jacket closed and stuff my hands into the pockets. Pipe organ music plays from somewhere, but it's not alone in the many melodies surrounding us. An old rock classic blasts from one ride while game peddlers shout that you can win the giant stuffed bear for only two dollars. Children run past holding balloons and cotton candy. The scent of cider, funnel cake, and hay combine to represent the very definition of fall.

Marley and I walk along the dirt fairway with no real destination. For now, I take in all the sights and sounds, the people around me lit by the glow of white strung lights above. It's so nice to experience an actual fall season that I just want to soak it all in.

I spoke to Brea this morning, filling her in on my first official date with Lane, leaving out the intimate details. Some things a girl has got to keep for herself. She teased me for "hooking up" with another guy named Lane, but I assured her this one is different. Brea told me about her latest ultrasound and how everything is right on track. I get an ache in my chest thinking about missing out on these big family moments, and how I won't be there for the birth of my nephew. She says she understands, but I think it hurts us both.

"I say we grab a warm apple cider and hit the Scrambler until we puke," Marley says, her eyes lingering on an attractive carnie shouting about his balls. To be fair, the game he's hosting is all about balls, but his intention is not missed.

"I'm not sure if that's how you define a good time, but I'm thinking no."

"Come on," she says, linking her arm through mine. "We've made our initial lap, now it's time to take action. I want a caramel apple and a corn dog. Could I *be* more American?" she asks with a giggle.

“I could go for something warm. I’ve never had cider before though. Is there hot chocolate?”

She stops in place, jerking me to a halt alongside her. “You do not come to a fall festival and not have cider. It’s like a rule or something. Just chalk it up to another new experience.”

I sigh and sweep my hair from my face. “Well, every other new experience you’ve talked me into has left me twisting my ankle, tied up naked in a dress, stuck in the grass like a lawn ornament, and being cut in half by a thong.”

“You forgot ‘getting it on with your neighbor on his vintage Harley.’ You’re welcome.”

“And how are you responsible for that?” I ask.

“Well, I did find you that house. And you may have never met him if you weren’t neighbors.” I shrug, giving her credit. “This will be another good experience, I promise,” she says, tugging on my elbow.

I surrender and follow her to the nearest cider stand where she orders two and asks if they’ve got anything to spike it with. The greasy man behind the plastic window gives her a wink and pours something from a flask he pulls from his pocket into one cup.

“None for me, thanks,” I insist. The man shrugs and hands over our drinks while Marley pays. I take a sip and hum as the warm golden liquid slides down my throat and settles in my empty stomach. “Mmm, that’s good.”

“I told you,” Marley sings.

Just as I turn to go, something bumps into my shin. I let out a little yelp and look down to find Chap wearing an argyle sweater and smiling up at me with his tongue hanging out. I search the fairway for his owner and see Lane walking toward us. He’s wearing a white knit sweater and dark jeans, looking like he just stepped out of a catalog. His smile warms me twice as much as the cider.

“Stella,” he says, leaning down to place a kiss on my cheek. “Marley,” he greets with a nod. “I was hoping you’d get a chance to check out our most anticipated event of the year.”

“Really?” Marley asks. “I thought it was the Lake Bash during the summer.”

Lane shrugs. “Well, I guess if you’re looking to get drunk and get laid.”

“Ding, ding, ding,” Marley shouts, raising her hand. I laugh at her enthusiasm.

“I’ve just had a taste of my first apple cider ever,” I admit.

Lane’s eyebrows raise and he grins. “Well? Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“And more.” Our eyes linger on each other, both unable to hide smiles that reminisce about our last evening spent together. “Things in this town have a way of surprising me.” Lane’s smile grows as Chap runs circles around all of us.

“Oh, Jesus. Would you two just shag and get it over with? This smoldering business has got me feeling randy and I’m not even involved!” Chap barks at a clown on stilts as we all laugh and try to sweep away the sexual tension. “Look, I’m not trying to make this a threesome, so I can do my own thing if—”

“No,” Lane and I say in unison.

“Just stay,” I tell her. “We can all hang out.”

“Okay,” she says, swallowing down most of her cider. “But things get any more tense between you two, I’m bailing.”

“Deal,” I say.

We head down the row of games, Lane insisting that he could win any of them easily, but they’re all just ripoffs. “The basketball rims are bent, but you can’t see it from here,” he says, pointing to one booth. “And half those bottles are glued down.” He points to another.

“Were you a carnie in your former life?” I ask, sipping my cider and walking between Lane and Marley. Chap sticks to the outside of our procession, stopping to sniff every pole or piece of dropped food.

“Nah. Just in high school. I got upset one day and ran away. Literally joined the circus,” he says with a shrug. I check his face for seriousness, but he gives nothing away. “Traveled with the show for a year before tucking tail and coming back home. I got to see most of the country, actually.”

“You’re full of shit,” Marley says.

I laugh. “Are you serious?”

He finally grins, his eyes sparking with amusement. “Totally serious. Hooked up with the Bearded Lady for a while, but was jealous of her facial hair since I hadn’t hit puberty yet.”

Marley falls out laughing while Lane bumps my shoulder with his. “Bearded Lady, huh?” I ask. “That’s stiff competition.”

“Yeah. I didn’t like her at first, but she grew on me.”

With that, we all burst into a fit of laughter. Chap barks just so he’s not left out. “You are crazy,” I say, grinning up at him.

“Crazy for you,” he whispers, planting a kiss on my lips this time.

“Ugh,” Marley groans. “You guys are giving me a toothache, you’re so sweet. Romance is not dead, my friends.”

“Speaking of cliches,” Lane says, sweeping his hand toward the ferris wheel. “Would you like to join me?” he asks.

I eye the ride and push down my small fear of heights. At least it’s not one of those old rusty things that look like a bench of death with a little bar to hold you in. This one has a round bucket with a door that closes and an umbrella shaped cover up top.

“Of course.” I swallow down the last of my cider and toss the cup into a nearby bin. “Marley, you coming?”

“No, love. I’ll stay down here and keep an eye on this guy,” she says, bending down to scratch Chap.

“Thanks,” Lane says before grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the short line.

While we wait for our turn to get loaded up, he does not let go of my hand. His palm engulfs my hand, the heat traveling up my arm and settling where I want him most. After a few minutes, we are loaded into a purple bucket. I slide in next to Lane and he throws his arm around the back of the seat and my shoulders.

I feel like a teenager again—butterflies in my stomach and the hottest guy claiming me as his own. Lane is quiet as we climb higher in the sky. When we reach the top, the ride stops to let more riders on. I look out across the town, seeing just the tiniest sliver of glow along the horizon. Orange and red-leafed trees litter my view and far off to my right, the lake reflects the last bit of light from the sky.

“It’s so beautiful here,” I say, leaning into Lane. When I turn to him, he is there waiting, his lips only inches from mine.

“It really is.”

A gust of cold air blows through and Lane slides his palm along my cheek, tilting my mouth to meet his. This kiss is slow and teasing. His warm hand slips down to my neck where his fingers comb through my hair and gently pull. I moan, the sound is only a vibration between the two of us. Lane’s lips and tongue move with mine and it is like they’ve never

belonged to anyone else. I am so lost in the moment, that the sound of applause barely registers. Lane's mouth pulls into a grin against mine before he tilts his head back and laughs.

It's only then that I look around and notice that we've made our way to the bottom and have an approving audience, including Marley and Chap. My face grows hot and I tuck it into Lane's neck to hide while people continue to clap and whistle.

"Oh my god," I groan, lifting my head to look Lane in the eyes.

"Hey, it's not so bad. This is a small town, we were bound to go public sooner or later." His hand squeezes my knee and moves up the thigh of my jeans.

"Still, I'm not into performance art," I say with a chuckle.

"That's a shame. I was planning on ravaging you in the hay maze."

"My ex-husband refused to show any signs of affection in public. I guess he kind of trained me to dislike it."

"Well, what has been trained can be untrained," he says, his fingers sliding to my inner thigh, his pinky so close to where I'm aching for him. "But I wouldn't do anything to make you uncomfortable."

I cross my legs, trapping his hand between my thighs and he raises an eyebrow in my direction. I shrug and ignore his silent question. I want his hand to stay there and this is my way of ensuring it does.

"I still can't believe your name is Lane. Of all the men in all the towns, I had to find another Lane."

"And you," he says. "Everytime I say your name, all I can think about is Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, shouting it up at that New Orleans balcony. That scene just stays with you. And it made your name famous."

"Can you believe no one has ever done that to me? I've been on plenty of balconies and there's been plenty of opportunity, but nada. I'm a little disappointed with every person I've ever known right now."

He grins. "Well, I've heard all the Lane jokes, so every person I've ever known has done their duty."

The sky is dark now, so when we arc over the top of the ride again, all I can see is a faint outline of the hills in the distance and dots of lights throughout town. The festival below is so loud and chaotic, but up here, there is a peaceful kind of stillness.



A rhythmic vibration echoes through our seat and Lane removes himself from me to pull his phone from his back pocket. He eyes the screen, takes a deep breath, and lets out a sigh.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

Lane silences the phone and tucks it back into his pocket. “Just work stuff. They hate when I ignore them.”

“When are you finally going to explain to me what you do for a living?” I lay my head on his shoulder and he pulls me into his side.

“When you have trouble sleeping and need to be bored to death.”

I laugh. “Come on, it can’t be that bad.”

“Not for someone like me, who’s passionate about it. But most people find it quite boring or confusing or mundane. Working with,” he pauses and I feel the muscles in his arm tense, then relax, “numbers—and other people’s money—can be tedious, stressful, and sometimes too much pressure. Everyone expects something from you and if you don’t deliver, then there’s hell to pay.”

I lift my head and turn to look at his handsome profile. Lane’s expression is serious and solemn. It’s the first time I’ve seen him this tense.

“Hey,” I say softly, reaching up and swiping my thumb across his frowning lips. “No more talk of work then. I’m sorry I pried.”

“No worries, babe. Sometimes it all just gets to me. It’s one of the reasons I run—stress relief.” Lane looks down and plants a soft peck on my lips just as the ride stops again.

“Haven’t you two given enough of a show tonight?” Marley calls out. “Encore! Encore! Encore!” she shouts.

The ride operator swings the door open and we scoot out just as the crowd joins her in chanting at us. I am mortified, but all I can do is laugh when Lane takes a bow. Everyone breaks into hoots and cheers.

“Come on, Chap. Let’s leave these two hams to their fans.” I scurry away as fast as my boots can carry me. With the sun completely gone, the temperature has dropped. Wrapping my scarf around my neck and buttoning up my jacket seems to keep me warm enough as I search for a place to escape. I tuck my hands into my pockets, put my head down and make a beeline for the apple cider cart.

Chap barks and takes off running. “Chap! Come back!” I shout. It’s then I see that he’s found a friend—Lane’s friend, actually—Joshua. “Oh, this can’t be good,” I mumble, but paste a smile on.

“Hi, Joshua.”

He stands up after greeting Chap and holds out a hand to shake. “Stella,” he says. “So good to see you again.” Though his words are kind, I feel the tenseness in his tone. His eyes scan our surroundings. “Are you here alone?”

“No, I—”

“Joshua!” Marley shouts. He and I groan in unison before sharing a knowing smile. Marley steps up beside me wearing a scheming grin and I want to tell Joshua to just run away, save himself. But I keep quiet. “Fancy running into you here, what with this place being so full of fun—and you being so not.”

Joshua presses his lips together just as Lane joins us. They greet each other in the standard hand shake, back slap man way before Lane notices that Marley’s already had a go at him.

“I’ve been known to have my share of fun,” Joshua says.

“Yes. I’m sure you’re a hit at the molds and spores medical convention, love.”

“I was just about to get some more cider. Anyone else want some?” I ask, trying to break the tension. The guys nod. I grab Marley by the hand. “Come help me carry.”

She tries to refuse me at first, but I eventually pull her away. “Why did you do that? You know that’s the first man who’s ever brought me pleasure that didn’t have anything to do with sex?”

“Yeah. It’s just a shame it has to be at his expense. Would it kill you to be nice?”

“Oh, go on. It’s just a bit of fun.” I order four ciders and shake my head when the man in the booth shows me his flask again. “Damn shame too. He’s so hot. Can you imagine? I bet he’s not even up for it. Would be like shagging a robot.”

“You are such a drama llama,” I say, paying the man and grabbing two of the drinks. “Get those two and come on.”

Marley takes the cups and follows, muttering the whole way. “Llama? Why a llama? Are they famously dramatic or is it only because they happen to rhyme with the word drama? I don’t get you sometimes.”

“Here you go, boys,” I say, handing one cider to Lane and the other to Joshua. I turn and take one off of Marley’s hands and we all sip in silence

for a minute. “We were just gonna take a look at the games, you guys want to join?”

“Sure,” Lane says immediately. After a few seconds, Joshua nods—whether it’s in agreement or defeat, I’m not sure.

The four of us wander down the fairway. Lane and I share looks as we place ourselves between Marley and Joshua.

“So, Josh. Give anymore thought to that whole flat Earth thing?” Marley asks, her lips pressed against the edge of her cup in a grin. “I swear, after Australia, you just fall off the edge. I’ve seen it.”

Joshua sighs and shakes his head. “I know you don’t believe the Earth is flat,” he says. “You just find my frustration entertaining.”

“Well, if you’d loosen up a bit I could show you other things that are equally entertaining.”

Joshua chokes on his cider, coughing and sputtering as Lane slaps him on the back.

“You okay?” Lane asks.

“I’m fine,” he says, shooting a glance Marley’s way that says there may be something more to this battle between them.

We pass the ring toss game, the darts, and the impossible task of landing a ping pong ball in a sea of tiny fish bowls. It’s then I see it, the mother of all prizes.

“It’s a giant corgi!” I squeal, running over and pointing to the stuffed animals hanging from the roof of the booth. “I need it.” I turn to the lady running the game. She’s covered in tattoos and has at least four piercings in her face. She is completely unimpressed with me and my enthusiasm. “How do I win *that*?”

“It’s a horse race. You’ve gotta shoot this here water pistol at the target. The more accurate you are, the faster your little horse will run toward the finish line. You’ve got to win three races in a row for the big prize. It’s two dollars per race for each player. And we don’t play until all my seats are filled.”

Chap lays at Lane’s feet and rests his head on the ground. “Look, Chap! It’s you.” He doesn’t move or acknowledge me at all. Marley, Lane, and Joshua all watch with amusement, but they don’t indulge me. “Come on, guys!”

Lane finally caves. “Okay,” he says. “If we all play, there’s only one more seat to fill. If we slack off, then she’s only got to beat the extra person.

I'll fund this little endeavor." He pulls a \$50 bill from his wallet and hands it over. "Marley, you're in charge of filling that seat."

I bounce on my toes and clap my hands. I know I'm 38 years old and it's just a stuffed animal, but the amount of joy I feel right now thinking about owning that giant corgi is immeasurable.

"Can't we just buy the dog?" Marley asks the girl behind the counter.

"Nope. Rules are the prizes have to be won," the girl deadpans. "Or I'd lose my job. Be out on the streets. Selling my body for money. Someone will have to call my mother and report Lindsey Durnin of Toronto missing. Do you really want that on your conscience?"

Marley chuckles and looks at the rest of us. "I like her." With that, she sets to chatting up every person that passes by. After a couple of failed attempts, Marley convinces a young girl to play. She pays her two dollars and everyone is ready to go.

I grab my pistol and aim it at the small red dot. A loud bell rings and water starts streaming out of our guns. I don't know what everyone else is doing because I'm concentrating so hard on my target. Lindsey's monotone voice carries over the microphone as she announces the race.

"And we're off," she says. "Horse One, Crazy for Corgi, takes an early lead, while Hot AF, Nerd Pants, and Sassy Brit stall out at the starting line. Horse Five, Unicorn Sprinkles, is coming up quick on Crazy nearly closing the gap. Meanwhile, the other three horses seem to have fallen asleep. Here comes Unicorn Sprinkles hot in the lane," she continues, her voice finally showing enthusiasm. "But it looks like Crazy for Corgi wins."

The bell sounds again and we all celebrate. The kid gets up from her seat and pulls the hood of her jacket over her head before stomping away.

"One down, two to go," I say to Lane. He gives me a grin, which I can't help but match. I win the next race too, when Marley convinces the pastor of a local church to join us. He nearly takes me at the end, but I hold out for the victory. My three friends aren't even pretending to play, they just sit and cheer me on like I'm competing for the Olympics or something.

While Marley works the crowd for our third round, Joshua is busy checking his phone. Lane turns toward me and scoots to the edge of his stool. He grabs my waist and twists, so that my knees are between his. His hands slowly slide down over my hips to my thighs and stop there.

"I love your hands on me," I admit.

“I love having my hands on you,” Lane answers. “I also love how excited you are about this game. You’re full of surprises, Stella. So much fun.”

“Well, my ex didn’t seem to think so. Of course, that’s because I never wanted to do what he wanted to do, like go hunting or watch NASCAR for hours on end.”

“What the hell does he know anyway?” Lane asks. His lips meet mine in the space between us and I want to devour him. But the memory of our cheering crowd earlier makes me keep it chaste.

“I’d say just about all he knows now is that crossing me will get you an empty bank account and a hidden dead fish in the backseat of your truck.”

Lane’s eyes go wide. “All that, huh?”

“That’s just the stuff I’ll admit to.”

Marley finally convinces a teenage boy to play. I can hear her obvious flirting from here as she coaxes him into the spot beside her. The boy hands over his two dollars and we are back in race mode. I grip the gun and point it at the target. The bell rings and my horse takes off.

“This is the big one, everybody, for all the glory,” Lindsey announces. “And it looks like Crazy for Corgi has some stiff,” she pauses to laugh at her own joke, “competition in Puberty Sucks.” I glance up to see our horses are neck and neck.

“Shit,” I groan, but return my focus to the target.

“Crazy pulls ahead, but then Puberty is coming up the rear.” At this point Lindsey and everyone else cracks up. I try to keep my focus. When she finally gets her breath back, Lindsey continues. “It’s neck and neck folks, going to be a close one.”

“Hey kid, want to see my tits?” Marley shouts.

“Puberty Sucks falls for a booby trap and Crazy for Corgi wins again!” Lindsey yells as the bell rings.

I exhale in relief and look over to find Marley with her shirt pulled up, facing the boy. He stares, unblinking, his water gun forgotten. A few other passerbys have stopped for the peep show as well, one woman covering her child’s eyes and dragging him away. I laugh when Marley lowers her shirt and our competitor snaps out of his trance.

Jumping from my chair, I do a little shimmy as Lindsey hands over the oversized plush dog. I can barely wrap my arms around it, but I refuse to let go.

The teenager stands and points. “You cheated.”

Marley leans in, a hand on his shoulder, and whispers, “But wasn’t it worth it, love?” A grin spreads across his face before he nods and turns to go. “Congrats, Stella. Don’t say I never did anything for you, mate. That was pure sacrifice.”

Joshua stands, his face still appearing shocked and somewhat appalled by Marley’s actions. Still, he congratulates me and pats my prize on the head.

Lane wraps his arms around me and the stuffed corgi, placing a kiss on my cheek. “Now that you’ve won the largest prize at the festival, what are you going to do?”

I smile up at him. “Go home, take a hot bubble bath, and curl up with my prize.”

He places a hand over his heart and makes a pained expression. “I’ve never wanted to be an inanimate object more than this very moment.”

“What are you talking about? I never said I’d be alone.”

"OH," BECCA SAYS, as I round the front counter and clock in. "I decided we needed a bit of a uniform."

Internally, I groan at the idea of a uniform. The first thing that comes to mind is polo shirts and khaki pants for some reason. Since I'm already not a passenger on the fashion train, I feel like this could condemn me for good.

"Ta daaaaaa!" she says, holding up a dark green apron with Grace Books embroidered on the front. It's got a tie for around the waist and two pockets in the front.

Relieved, I take it from her, tossing it over my head and tying it on. I move my nametag from my shirt to the apron and give Becca my best model pose.

"Well, how does it look?" I ask.

"I love it," she says, patting me on the shoulder. "And you can use the pockets to hold labels and pens, or condoms for the next time you and Lane devirginize my storage room."

I gasp in mock horror. "Jealousy is not a pretty color on you."

Becca laughs and pulls something from under the counter. "All that sass and I have a gift." She hands over a new Alaina Taylor novel, *The Gamble*, with a satisfied grin.

I squeal and snatch it out of her hands, pressing it to my chest in a book to person hug. "Oh my god. I can't believe it's here," I say. I scan the cover and take in the gorgeous man wearing an expensive, fitted suit and flashy cufflinks at the end of a craps table. He's all chiseled jaw and piercing eyes and I can't wait to dive in. Flipping through the first few pages, my breath catches in my throat when I spot my name scrawled at the top of the title page.

"Stella, always bet on love. Xoxo, Alaina Taylor." I read aloud.

I exhale in a kind of crazy sounding laugh and feel so overwhelmed. I close the book, check out the cover again, and flip back to my autographed page. “This is unreal. Can I take the day off to read?”

“Nope,” she says. My excitement wanes, but my smile is constant. “But I don’t mind if you sneak in a bit of reading *if* we’re slow.”

Flipping to the back of the book, I study Alaina’s photo and try to memorize her features. I wrack my brain to try and remember if I’ve seen her around town at all, but come up empty. “Thank you so much, Becca. This means the world to me. I’ll be the best employee you’ve ever had, I swear. I owe you big for this.”

“Nonsense,” she says, leaving the front counter and heading to her office. “You’re already the best employee I’ve ever had. That’s thanks enough.” She waves a hand in my direction, dismissing me and I know that our conversation is done.

I open the book, snap a photo of the title page and send it to Brea. She sends a text back with every emoji face that exists and a thumbs up. Even in tiny pictures, the girl texts just like she talks.

Forcing myself away from my new treasure, I get to work in the store. After a couple of hours of straightening shelves, dusting, and restocking, I am ready for a break. Besides, all I can think about is that book sitting behind the counter. It calls to me.

I poke my head into Becca’s office. “Hey, I’m going to take an early lunch, grab some food from the diner and sit somewhere quiet and read.”

She shakes her head, amused at my enthusiasm. “Go ahead, kid. Frankly, I’m surprised you held out this long.”

Speed walking through the store, I grab my wallet, new book, and hightail it across the street to the diner. I forget it’s Wednesday. The Reuben special. Of course, the one day I don’t want a distraction, the first thing I see is Lane Holder in a booth by himself. He spots me right away and gestures for me to join him. I look at the ordering station and back to his table. Lane’s eyes question me from across the room and I give in with a sigh.

I slide into the booth across from him, laying my book and wallet on the seat next to me. “Hi,” I say.

“Hey. Were you just thinking of blowing me off for a book?” he asks, one eyebrow arched higher over his thick-rimmed glasses.

“What?” I ask, my voice more falsetto than normal. “How did you know that?”



Lane laughs and throws one arm across the back of the bench seat. “I have a meeting with Becca today. She told me what she had for you.”

“Oh,” I say with an exaggerated exhale. “Well, I guess you know where my priorities lie then, right? Today it’s you, then books. Though tomorrow isn’t looking so good for you.”

He reaches across the table and takes my resting hand into his. “Stella, while I appreciate it, if you want to go read your book, I’m okay with that. I can handle lunch on my own. Besides, I’ll see you at the store after my meeting.”

“But can your ego survive a blow like that?” I tease.

Lane shrugs and releases my hand. “I’m not sure. Could be devastating. I may never recover. Just might run off and join the circus again.”

“Ha. Tell the Bearded Lady I said ‘Hi!’”

A waitress appears, pen and pad in hand. “What’ll you have, hon?” she asks.

I look around for a menu. “I’m sorry, I haven’t even...” Before I’m finished with my sentence, she’s gone. “Wow, everyone that works here is so cheerful. Between her and Frank, how do they keep business in this place?”

“Well, there’s not much competition, so I figure they don’t even bother.” Lane slides his menu over to me. I look it over for a minute while he sips his water. I can feel his gaze lingering on me, traveling over me like soft feathers across my skin. Finally, I glance up and catch him staring. He doesn’t apologize or look away.

“What?” I ask. “Is there something on my face?” I swipe at my mouth.

“No,” he answers, a crooked smirk in place displaying that dimple nearly hidden by a couple of days’ growth of facial hair. “You’re beautiful, you know that?”

I immediately drop my eyes to my lap and shake my head. My hands smooth down the green apron. “What? In this? Yes, I’m sure I’m particularly stunning in my Grace Books uniform apron and dirty hair ponytail.”

Lane leans forward now, halfway over the table. His presence in my space is intense and forces me to focus on nothing but him. “You are stunning in absolutely anything, Stella. It isn’t what you’re in that makes you beautiful, it’s who you are. Didn’t you learn that it’s rude to argue with compliments?”

Sighing, I lean against the back of the seat. “Actually, I did. Those manners are force fed to you starting at an early age. Elbows off the table, say ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘No, ma’am,’ always be punctual, bring a gift for the hostess, introduce yourself, hold doors open for the elderly. Some of those were good lessons, and to be truthful, I’m happy I grew up in the South. But there are other lessons, ingrained into women especially, that I’d rather forget.”

The waitress reappears and takes our order, dropping off a glass of water for me. Lane’s face is serious, he watches me, waiting for me to continue our previous discussion. But I’m not sure if I want to go there with him.

“What would you like to forget, Stella?” he finally asks.

I take a deep breath and blow my hair out of my face. “Things like ‘marry your high school sweetheart’, ‘wait on him hand and foot’, ‘abandon your own dreams for his’. It’s just the way it is down there. And I’m not saying it’s bad for everyone and that it doesn’t sometimes work out, but I’m saying for me, I thought there was no other option.”

Lane shakes his head. “Damn. That’s sad. I didn’t realize there were so many cultural expectations.”

“Hey,” I say, jabbing a finger across the table. “Don’t feel sorry for me. I chose that life and I lived it until I couldn’t anymore. But those were always my decisions, as misguided as they were.” I shrug and suck down half of my water. “It’s what happens when you think every guy is as good as your daddy.”

A pang of guilt shoots through my chest as I remember Lane doesn’t know his father. I want to take those words back and shove them into my mouth, swallowing them down. Luckily, the ringing of my phone interrupts us. I pull it from my pocket and see Brea’s face on the screen. She wants to video chat. I hit the green button to accept and greet her with a smile.

“Excuse me,” I tell Lane. He nods. “Hey, lil sister,” I say. “How’s it going?”

“We’re out of ice cream and I suddenly hate eggs,” she says, whining. Brea sticks her bottom lip out, making a pathetic face for the camera. I can see her curly brown hair pulled up into a messy knot on top of her head and dark circles under her eyes.

“Oh, the woes of pregnancy. You look tired,” I say. “But, this is not your first time through it, I’m sure you can manage a few months without scrambled eggs.”

“But I love them,” she says. “Or I used to. Ugh. Why do babies make you crazy and weird? And do you know I can smell the neighbor’s cooking from here? What kind of torture is that when I’m so tired that we’re eating sandwiches every night for dinner. Where are you anyway?”

“I’m on my lunch break. With Lane,” I admit that last part kind of wishing I hadn’t.

“Oh my god, he’s there?” she squeals. Her expression is beaming.

“Yes, Brea.”

“Hand the phone over. I want to meet him.”

I panic and look at Lane, but he looks as cool and calm as ever. “Umm, okay. Do you mind?”

He grins and shakes his head, taking the phone from me. “Hi,” he says.

“Holy mother fluffer,” she says, her loud voice echoing through the diner. I slap a hand over my face. “Does everyone look like you up there? Because count me in. You are country sausage hot.”

“Uh, thanks,” Lane says, grinning. “I’m assuming that’s a compliment.”

“It is,” she says. “And not just because I’m hungry and hormonal. Are you being nice to my sister?”

“I am being *very* nice to your sister,” Lane answers, giving her his charming grin.

“Oh Lord, I could just eat you up,” Brea says, covering her mouth to stifle a yawn. “If I had any energy, that is.”

“Momma, can I have a snack?” I hear my niece’s voice.

“Just grab a pack of goldfish from the pantry,” Brea calls out. “So, that was my daughter Scarlett. And this,” Lane turns the phone so we both see her swing the camera down to her baby bump, “is Ashley.”

“Are you a *Gone with the Wind* fan?” he asks.

“Yes!” Brea says. “Oh my god, hand me back to my sister, please. So nice meeting you, Lane.” Brea gives a visible shake of her shoulders. “Ugh. Going to have to get used to that name all over again.”

Lane hands the phone over and I see my own face reflected back in the tiny top window. “He’s hot *and* smart? Is he any good in bed?” she asks.

“I’m hanging up now,” I say.

“No! Stella! Give me something. Have you no pity for the pregos?”

Lane interjects, trying to change the subject and I am forever grateful. “Hey, Brea. Why don’t you come up for a visit sometime?” he asks, ducking his head across the table. I turn the phone so she can see him.

“A visit? Did you not see the large basketball attached to my abdomen? I mean, maybe one day. When it’s not cold. Is it ever *not* cold? And I mean, do you guys even have sweet tea up there? What about Waffle House? I need my hashbrowns scattered, smothered and covered every Sunday after church.”

“Scattered and what?” Lane asks, clueless about hashbrown consumption in the south.

I turn the phone back to my face and give her the same look I’ve been giving her since she was old enough to understand its meaning. “Bye, Brea.”

“So that’s a no on the Waffle House?” she says, as I hit the end call button.

Tucking the phone back into my pocket, I fold my hands together on top of the table. “So sorry about that. Manners say it’s rude to accept phone calls during a meal, but I miss her so much.”

Lane waves a hand at me and slides his lips sideways on his face. “No worries. I understand.” There’s a pause while our waitress silently delivers our food and leaves again. We look at each other over diner food. “So, you married your ex because it was expected of you?”

I pour the Italian dressing over my salad and stab at the lettuce. “Yes. I thought that he was it. Like I’d never find another decent man.” I take a bite and chew thoroughly before swallowing. Lane tosses a french fry into his mouth. “My world was so small then. Who knows what I could have done or been if I’d only known I had the option?”

“So, who are you outside of a reader and engine aficionado?”

His question hits me like a blow to the chest. My mind blanks and I shake my head. “Who I am beyond those two things is a mystery,” I say. “I was a wife. And that was all I was. Playing a perfect little part like a character in a book. I used reading to escape what I didn’t even realize I was trying to escape. I guess... I guess I don’t know who I am.”

He grins. “Well, your options are endless now, Stella. And it’s about time you found out.”

“You know,” I say, pointing my fork in his direction. “You’re right. I could learn to bake or garden, take up yoga classes or painting. I’m going to try a little bit of everything until I find what fits me, what makes me happy.”

“I only hope I make the cut.”

I take another bite and chew slowly, making him wait it out. “I’d say your odds are good to excellent.”

“I like those odds,” Lane says before taking a bite of his sandwich.

We finish our meals over other small talk and town gossip. When I ask for the check, Lane insists on paying.

“I can pay for my meal,” I say.

“I insist,” Lane replies.

“Well, what about my corgi prize? At least let me pay you back for that.”

“Not on your life,” he says. “That prize got me more time with you and a night of spooning in that comfortable bed of yours. I don’t know where you got your mattress, but I need one like that in my life.”

I grin. “I’ll tell you about it some time, but I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Of course,” Lane says, standing and offering his hand to help me out as I clutch my wallet and book in my other hand. As we exit the diner, Lane presses a sweet kiss onto my lips and pulls away before I’m ready to let him go. “Hey, I want to take the boat out this weekend. Are you up for it?”

“Won’t it be cold?” I ask.

He laughs. “I’ll bring a blanket and we’ll anchor in the sun. I promise you’ll have a good time.”

“Will you make snacks?” I ask. He nods. “Okay,” I say.

“Saturday,” Lane says.

“Saturday,” I repeat.

It’s not until I enter Grace Books that I even remember I have a book I want to read.

MY PHONE RINGS from my apron pocket downstairs. I finish pulling on my yoga pants and hurry down the steps, fully expecting to see Brea's face staring back at me. Instead, Marley's name is displayed.

"Hello, love," I say, trying to imitate her accent and doing an awful job at it. There's just silence for a few seconds. I check the screen to make sure we're still connected. It says we are. "Hello? Marley?"

"Stella," she breathes. Immediately, I can tell something is wrong. "Can I come over?"

A big red flag goes up. Marley never calls first to ask if she can come over. She always just shows up with wine or food or both and takes over my evenings. "Of course," I say. "What happened? Are you okay?"

I hear a snuffle and a feeling of dread takes over. "He called," is all she says.

"Who?"

"Him."

I wrack my brain and remember her mentioning the guy she followed here from England. "Crooked knob and bad credit?"

She gives a laugh, but it's humorless. "Yes. That's him."

"Okay, well. Get over here. Be careful and drive safe. Do you need me to come get you?" I ask.

"Already on the way."

With that, she disconnects the call. I stare at the blank screen of my phone for a few seconds before realizing what needs to be done. I dial Brea's number.

"Hey, girl," she answers in a whisper. "You caught me hiding in the pantry."

"What the hell are you hiding from?"

“My kid. I don’t want to share my gummy bears.”

“Okay,” I say. “Forget your gummy bears. I’ve got a Red Alert Hen Party on my hands. What do I do?”

“Oh, shortcake. Let me think.”

“You know we’re adults now and actually use curse words, right?”

“I have a five-year-old who thinks she can repeat anything I say. The other day she told me the goddamned postman left our package in the rain again.”

I chuckle, but get back on track. “Focus, Brea.”

“First, get out the booze—whatever she drinks.”

“I think this calls for red,” I say mostly to myself, digging through my wine rack and pulling out two bottles. I rethink my decision and grab another two.

“Make sure there are snacks, all the good stuff. And make sure there is variety—sweet, salty, hot, cold.”

I grab a few things from my cupboard as she talks and put them next to the wine on the counter. “I’ve only got chips, pretzels, Golden Oreos, and a pint of vanilla ice cream,” I tell her, looking through my freezer.

“Slim pickins,” Brea says with a click of her tongue. “It’ll have to do. Next, you need to contact support hens and make sure they’re in. They can bring more goodies. Give them specific assignments or they’ll fork it up.”

“Okay. I think I got it.”

“Good luck. And I expect you’ll call tomorrow and tell me all the dirty details because I’m living vicariously through you now. Practically a Yankee.”

“Bye, Brea.”

I end the call and immediately send out an S.O.S. text message to Kennedy and Reagan. I ask each of them to bring stuff from their stores and to get here as soon as possible. Both ladies confirm that they will be here shortly. I take a deep breath and blow it out.

There’s a knock at the door as soon as I have the first bottle of wine open. I swing the door open to find a still colorful, but sad Marley. Her shoulders are drooped, eyes rimmed in red. There is smeared mascara on her cheeks. Seeing her like this hurts like when you jam your toe into the coffee table leg. It’s painful and such a contrast to her usual demeanor.

“Come here,” I say, opening my arms. She falls into me and I wrap her up, squeezing tight. “Let’s get you inside.”

I take her bag from her shoulder and place it on my coat rack before guiding her to sit on my sofa. Marley kicks out of her glittered flats and curls up, wrapping her arms around a pillow.

“You want a drink?” I ask, running my hand over her pink hair. She just nods. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Pouring us each a glass of wine, I return to find Marley swiping at her eyes. I hand over her glass and grab a box of tissues from the bookshelf, placing them on the coffee table. By the time I turn to sit with her, Marley’s glass is empty. She still doesn’t say a word, just holds the empty glass out and looks at me with her bloodshot eyes.

I give her my glass and take the empty one. “I’m going to refill this, but let’s slow down, okay?” Marley nods. Once I’ve filled my glass, I join her on the sofa. “Are you ready to talk or do you want to finish that glass? I also have snacks, if you want to eat your feelings. And reinforcements are on the way.”

*Knock knock.*

We both look to the door. “It’s open,” I shout.

Kennedy and Reagan come barreling in carrying bags and boxes of goodies. They set everything down on the coffee table and look at Marley. The sisters wear matching expressions of concern.

Reagan gets on her knees so she can look Marley in the eyes. “What happened, Mar?”

“Desmond.”

That one word fills the room and seems to explain everything. While Reagan looks sympathetic, Kennedy appears to be fuming.

“That asshat,” she says. “Like how many times do I have to threaten his life before he leaves you alone for good?” Kennedy takes a seat on the coffee table facing Marley.

I hold up my wine glass. “You girls want?”

They both nod. “It’s going to be a long night,” they say in unison.

Once I make sure everyone has a drink and we’ve opened the cookies, we all just sit with her, waiting. Marley is such a free spirit, so full of life. Seeing her like this creates a deep, angry hole in my heart. When she spoke of Desmond before, it didn’t seem to be so serious. But this boy must have broken her. He must have destroyed the girl she was and created this new one. The pain is so obvious, my chest aches for her.



Suddenly, Marley sniffs, whips her head toward the three of us and gives an insincere smile. “Well,” she says, “that’s enough processing. You ladies want to get tanked or what?”

“Tell us what happened,” Reagan says, leaning forward in my grandmother’s rocking chair, resting her elbows on her knees.

“Yeah. That’s next on the list,” I say.

“Wait, what?” Kennedy says, as all eyes turn to me.

“Well, this is a Red Alert Hen Party. There are steps to follow, preparation, wrap up.”

“A red alert what?” Marley asks.

I let out a sigh and realize that I’m going to have to do some Southern-splaining to these ladies. Not that I mind sharing such things, it’s just that sometimes I forget how different our worlds are.

“A hen party is when a bunch of women get together for basically what y’all would call a ‘girls night in.’ A Red Alert Hen Party is when one of those women has been wronged or needs any kind of support. You prep,” I say, holding up my wine glass. “Then explain,” I gesture to Marley. “And then everyone determines if we need to go out and slash some tires or if we’re going to stay in and celebrate ourselves.”

“Slash tires?” Reagan asks.

Marley grins, a genuine smile that catches me off guard. “Stella Locke, you are a sweet, southern enigma and I love you for it.”

“Slash tires?” Reagan repeats softly.

I laugh and shrug. “Sometimes a girl has got to take action when her tribe has been wronged. The key is not getting caught.” Sipping my wine, I hold it in the air as a salute. “And I’ve *never* been caught.”

The other three ladies raise their glasses before swallowing down more wine.

“I think I love you,” Kennedy says.

“Get in line,” Marley answers. “Behind me and Lane. In that order.”

“We are not here to talk about me,” I say. I point at Marley. “Spill it.” She sighs and I can almost see her retreating back inside herself. “We’re your friends. We’re here for you. And we don’t judge.”

Marley finishes her wine and sets the empty glass down on the coffee table. “I was in the middle of my afternoon meditation when my phone rang,” Marley starts. “I tried to ignore it, but it just kept ringing and ringing. So I fetch it from my purse and see that it’s a number I don’t know. I answer

and the first thing I hear is Desmond's voice saying my name." She takes a deep breath and blows her hot pink bangs from her eyes. "It guts me," Marley admits. "But I put on a brave face and ask what he wants."

"Fuck face," Kennedy mutters. Reagan shoots her a look to quiet her.

"Anyway, Mr. Fuck Face just called to tell me that he was engaged to this nice American girl with a wealthy, old East Coast money family. They were going to have a spring wedding." Marley rolls her eyes and rests her chin in her hand. "Apparently, Miss Old Money smartened up and left him yesterday. So he calls to tell me what a mistake it was leaving me. That I'm the girl for him. That he still fucking loves me—he's always loved me."

"No he didn't," I say, not even realizing the words have left my lips until they're gone.

"Yes he did," Marley answers. "My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to explode." Her hands flail around now as her voice gets more frantic. "I've never felt so many emotions at one time. Hurt, sadness, blinding rage." She abruptly pops up and we all jolt back like bowling pins knocked over. Marley paces behind the sofa. "How does he still do that to me, you know? Like, after all this time, how does he still have this effect on me? I'm over him. Aren't I?"

"Absolutely," Reagan says. "He's history, Marley."

"Yeah," Kennedy says. "You are totally over him. You do not deserve that toxic bastard in your life. Oh, man. I gotta say I feel like slashin' some tires all of a sudden."

We all chuckle and Marley takes her seat again. "He ruined me, you know? I gave him my heart and he wasted it." She blows out a slow breath. "And I became a wasted girl."

"You are not a wasted girl!" I say. "You are kind, and fun, and a fierce friend. You made me feel welcome in this new place, introduced me to these amazing women, and never made me feel like a social charity case."

"Yes!" Kennedy shouts. "And you are a badass! You give zero fucks about social norms, you rock mixed patterns and you are your own boss. We all want to be more like you. And you don't need Fuck Face. You don't want Fuck Face. You are so far above Fuck Face that he's not even in your universe."

Marley grabs a handful of potato chips and shoves them in her mouth. "I know," she says, her cheeks stuffed with food. "I know," she repeats. "I'm so angry that he can still do this to me."

“I know, babe,” Reagan says. We all sit silently for a while, listening to the sound of Marley crunching.

“So,” Kennedy says. “Do you want to go out and get back at him or do you want to stay in and celebrate how amazing you are?”

Marley raises her head and looks at each of us. Her mouth lifts into a tiny smile and I can see the light returning to her. “How amazing we *all* are,” she corrects. “Let’s celebrate!”

“Group hug,” Reagan says, standing. We all meet in front of the sofa and wrap our arms around Marley. “We love you Mar.”

“And I love you guys back,” she says. “But you’re squeezing so hard I can’t breathe and my left tit is pinched.” Everyone laughs and releases her.

I open another bottle of wine and refill everyone’s glasses. “Now, does this town have delivery or take out food? I’m starved,” I say.

“That’s a big no,” Kennedy says.

All four of us are digging through my pantry, trying to come up with a meal when there’s a knock at the door. “I’ll get it,” Marley sings, running over and whipping the door open. “Well, hello there Mr. Neighbor.”

I join her at the door to find Lane standing on my porch, holding a casserole dish covered in foil. And three beautiful flowers in the other hand.

“Hey,” he says. “I brought this lasagna over thinking we could share it, but it looks like you have company.”

“We’ll take it,” Marley says excitedly, grabbing the dish from his hands and disappearing inside. “We’ve got food,” she calls out. Lane chuckles.

“Thanks for dinner,” I say with a grin.

“And these are for you, directly from Granny’s greenhouse.”

“Peonies,” I say, bringing the white flower with magenta tips to my nose and inhaling. “My favorite.”

“Noted,” Lane says.

“We’re kind of having a girls night in.”

“I see that.” His eyes move behind me. I turn to find all three women standing in the doorway, watching us.

“I’d invite you in, but it’s kind of a hostile environment right now. I fear you’d just be the victim of some serious verbal man bashing.”

“Is everything okay?” he asks, genuine concern paints his face.

“It will be,” I answer with a nod. “Though I don’t need an audience,” I say louder, turning to face the onlookers. They scatter and close the door, leaving Lane and I on the porch alone.

“Sorry, we stole your dinner.” I take a step toward him, needing to be nearer.

He runs a hand through his hair. “It’s fine. I’m glad I could help.” He moves closer now. The setting sun is almost gone, but the sky is rose-colored fading into purple. Such a beautiful backdrop for such a beautiful man. “Though, I have to admit I’m disappointed I won’t be spending time with you.”

I grin and drop my eyes to the wooden planks of my front porch. A few dried leaves have gathered in the corners as if fall has purposely decorated the space. “We have tomorrow, on your boat.”

Lane’s fingers nudge my chin up as he drops his lips to meet mine. That spark that ignites every time he touches me comes alive. As his tongue moves across mine and his hands slide into my hair, I am lost. The whole world falls away and I want to live in this moment forever.

The sound of giggling breaks us apart, both of us looking over to find Kennedy, Marley, and Reagan peeking through my curtains. Lane rests his forehead against mine as we catch our breaths.

“I’ll never get enough of you, Stella.”

His words fill me with an emotion I can’t pin down. All I know is that it gives me wings and makes me feel brand new.

“I should go,” I say, motioning to the house. “I’ve got guests.”

He nods and releases me. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Come over around noon.”

“Okay.”

Lane plants one more kiss on my lips before making his way down the steps onto the sidewalk. I watch him walk to his house, appreciating the wide curve of his shoulders and the way his body moves with easy confidence. Once he disappears, I get back inside my own house. There I find a waiting audience just staring at me expectantly.

“Girl,” Kennedy says. “If that is any indication of how he’ll be in bed, what the hell are you waiting for?”

“This!” Marley says, pointing at Kennedy. “I’ve *been* asking her this.”

I shrug and drop my flowers into a vase and fill it with water before taking a seat on the sofa. “I don’t know. Sex is a big step, and he makes me feel so many things—so many intense things. I’m scared it might just be a rebound or the newness factor. And I want it to be real.”

“That looked real to me,” Reagan says.

“Anyway, who’s up for some lasagna?” I say, changing the subject.

We all gather in my kitchen, eating and drinking around my table. The conversation is light. There is a lot of laughing and storytelling, and it makes me miss my sister and a few old friends back home. But it also makes me so happy to have found these ladies. They’ve welcomed me into their hive and I know that they’d slash tires for me if I needed that.

“Those flowers are gorgeous,” Reagan says, her fingertips delicately lifting the petals to her nose.

“They look just like the ones my neighbor grows,” Marley says.

“Lane said they were from his Granny’s greenhouse.”

Her wrist goes limp, her fork clattering against her empty plate. “Do you think Lane’s granny is my neighbor?” We all look at each other and shrug. “If so, I feel bad calling her a witch now.”

“Did I tell you guys that my damn car broke down right outside of town the other day?” Reagan asks, as we’re rinsing off our dishes and refilling our wine.

“No,” Kennedy says. “How long were you stranded? Why didn’t you call me?”

“Chance stopped to help,” she says nonchalantly. “Had his guy tow my car to the garage and fixed it up in under an hour. Didn’t charge me a thing.”

Marley and Kennedy freeze, their faces displaying matching grins. “Oh, he wants you so bad,” Kennedy says.

“Yep,” Marley says. “Not going to give him a second chance?”

“No,” she says slowly. “But did you guys know he runs a free bike program down at the community center in Hamilton Bay?” Reagan asks. “He gets people to donate used bikes, teaches the kids how to fix them up, repair them, and then the kids get to keep the bike.”

“What?” I say, my pulse spiking.

“Yeah, it’s surprisingly decent, right?” Reagan smiles.

I abandon the dishes and speed-walk to my bookcase in the main room. My fingers run along the spines of my Alaina Taylor novels until I get to the Rock City Mechanics series. I pull out book two and flip through it.

“What are you doing?” Kennedy asks.

“This book is about a mechanic named Chance in a fictitious town called Rock City. I know there’s a part where he runs a program for kids to earn free bikes!”

“No way,” Kennedy says.

“Yes way.” I continue flipping through the book and finally find what I’m looking for. The girls pass the book around, reading exactly what Reagan described.

“So, she *is* using local people,” Marley says. “This Alaina Taylor is making the folks of Grace famous and they don’t even know it.”

“This is crazy,” Reagan says. “Can I borrow this?” she asks as she waves the book at me.

“Sure. So, none of you read Alaina Taylor books?” I ask.

They all shake their heads. “Well, feel free to check out any from my library. But return them or I’ll cut you.”

Reagan laughs, but it dies in her throat when she sees my serious expression.

“I wonder if any of them are about Lane,” Marley says. “Hot tattooed guy into finance with a cute dog. Ring any bells?”

I shake my head. “No, but there is a series that revolves around a diner. Wait!” I shout, slapping my hand to my forehead. “The Big Business series has a lead named Kane who is an accountant and lives on a lake.”

“That could totally be Lane,” Marley says.

“This is so trippy,” Kennedy whispers, her eyes scanning my shelves. “I wonder if we’re in any of them.”

“Could be. Though I don’t recall any of your names being used,” I point out. “Wow. So, Alaina Taylor doesn’t do appearances, supposedly never leaves the house, but she knows just enough about the men of Grace to use them in her books? Do any of you recognize her picture on the back?” All three women take a look and shake their heads.

“Maybe she’s got a spy or personal assistant who does all the research,” Kennedy says, tapping her finger on her chin. “Maybe she’s got a good friend on the outside, feeding her town gossip. Who’s been around awhile and knows everyone’s business?”

“You’ve literally just described everyone over the age of 40 in and around this town,” Reagan points out.

“All this thinking is making my brain hurt,” Kennedy groans.

“More drinks?” I ask.

“Yes!” they answer in unison.

I open the fourth bottle of wine as we abandon book talk and the sisters tell stories about growing up in Grace. They seem to have had a perfectly

normal childhood, filled with small town charm and typical teenage rebellion. A few years ago, their parents sold their house here in Grace and bought an RV to travel the country. They always make sure to come home for all the major holidays and pressure the girls for grandkids.

“When I turned 18, I shagged a member of the royal guard,” Marley says.

“You did?” I ask.

“Yep,” she answers with a sly grin. “Even convinced him to keep the hat on. It was epic—the story, not the shagging unfortunately.”

We all laugh and I’m glad that she’s feeling better. Marley is just one of those sunshine people. As crude or outlandish as she may be, she’s got a great heart that brings joy to everyone—everyone except poor Joshua.

When the fourth bottle of wine is gone, we’re all feeling happy and loose. We get loud and giggly, our words slurring a bit. I crank up some music as we dance in the living room and eat the delicious cupcakes Kennedy brought.

“These cupcakes are better than sex,” I shout over the music while shaking my ass.

“They’re good,” Kennedy shouts back. “But we’ll see if you are still saying that after you get Lane in bed.”

I laugh, suddenly thrilled at the idea of sex with him. I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol or atmosphere, but all my worries are gone and all I can think about is him being inside me and the way he looks at me when he’s turned on. I’m shocked out of those thoughts as Kennedy presses her back to my front and we continue to dance together.

“Is this a legit sleepover or what?” Marley asks, squeezing in behind me now. “Let’s play truth or dare.”

I stop dancing and turn to face her. “We’re not teenagers. Are you going to put my underwear in the freezer if I fall asleep first?”

Her face scrunches up in confusion. She turns the music down and everyone takes a seat, fanning themselves and trying to catch their breath. “Truth or dare, Stella?”

The wine makes my head light and airy, but even in this state of bliss I know not to chance a dare from Marley. “Truth.”

“What was married life like?”

I groan. “I guess it wasn’t so bad at first. It was years until I realized I had just settled for the first boy who came along. And a few years after that, I finally knew I wasn’t happy. But I stayed. Because that was what was

expected of me. I stayed because I wanted kids—a family—and I didn't want to start over. Twenty years later, all that unhappiness was for nothing."

"Well, that was depressing," Kennedy says.

"I think married life is going to be awesome," Reagan says. "After I get my business expansion off the ground, I can't wait to share my life with a partner. And I want kids too. Lots of them."

"Do you still want kids?" Kennedy asks me. I nod. "Well, it's not too late. Hell, celebrities are having babies in their forties. If they can do it, we can do it."

"Except they've got the money to hire nannies and chefs and chauffeurs," Marley points out.

"Reagan, truth or dare?" I ask.

She smiles. "Uh, truth?"

"Bunch of prudes," Marley mutters.

"How do you really feel about Chance?" I ask.

She lets out a startled kind of laugh as her shoulders rise up to meet her ears. Reagan shakes her head as if not knowing the answer. "Good thing I'm drunk, otherwise I would never say this out loud. I think he's insanely hot, but I also kind of want to kick his balls up his ass, pull them out his throat and hang them from his ears. Is that weird?"

We all howl with laughter. Kennedy falls out of her chair and swipes tears from her eyes. "I cannot believe you just said that," she tells Reagan. "I need to get you drunk more often."

"Truth or dare, Marley?" Reagan asks.

"Dare, of course."

"Of course," we all repeat.

"I dare you to streak naked around the cul de sac."

"Oh my god," I say, giggling. "My neighbors!"

Marley stands and pulls her shirt over her head. "Oh, you. You're just worried about one particular neighbor getting an eyeful of my goodies. Blimey, I'm going to freeze." She shimmies out of her leggings. "All the way?" she asks Reagan.

"All the way," Reagan answers.

Marley purses her lips and tilts her head. "Good thing I just did my lady-scaping." She unhooks her bra and swings it around a few times before letting it fly across the room and land on my banister. Next she hooks her thumbs in her tiny panties and slides them down her legs.



“Jesus, you are smokin’ hot under all those crazy clothes,” Kennedy says. Marley grins. “Sex does a body good, love. Now, here I go.”

We all follow her to the front door, where she throws it open, slowly walks down the porch steps and gets to the sidewalk. Once there, she takes off in a sprint around the cul de sac, waving at each house as if people are there cheering her on. By the time she makes it back to my place we are all dying with laughter.

“Fuck, it’s brass monkeys out!” she says, running past us and into the house. She shimmies back into her clothes as we all file inside. “Enjoy the show, ladies?”

“That was insane,” Kennedy says.

“Don’t get too impressed, love. It’s your turn. Truth or dare?” Marley asks, pulling a quilt from the back of my sofa and throwing it over herself.

“Dare,” Kennedy says without even thinking about it.

“Go jump in the lake.”

“What?” I screech, realizing that even my screeching is a bit slurred.

“Fine,” Kennedy says. Alarm bells go off in my head. This is a bad idea. She’ll freeze or drown or something worse.

Regardless of my worries, within minutes we’re all outside, wrapped in blankets at the end of my dock. It’s pretty dark, so all we can see is my backyard and a few feet out into the lake.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say.

“Yeah, Kennedy. It’s too cold,” Reagan chimes in.

“I’m not doing it,” Kennedy says. “We’re doing it. If I go in, we all go in. Deal?”

“You want me to get in that freezing water after running about the neighborhood stark naked?” Marley asks, her hands on her hips. She shrugs. “Okay.”

“Stella? Reagan?” Kennedy asks, throwing off her blanket and toeing off her shoes. Marley does the same.

I think about all the risks and what the old Stella would do. I decide I don’t care. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” Reagan says. “I thought you were my one voice of reason here.”

“Fuck reason,” I say. “Let’s have some fun!”

Reagan and I drop our blankets and kick off our shoes. The four of us stand at the end of the dock holding hands staring off into the darkness. We’re laughing so hard, no one can focus.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Reagan asks.

“On three,” Kennedy says.

“One, two,” I count.

“Three!” we all shout and dive off the dock into the icy water.

The temperature shocks me sober and I regret this decision immediately. We all come up screaming and yelling and cursing—but still laughing. We take turns climbing the ladder out of the lake and when we’re all soaked and frozen standing on my dock, a blinding light comes on next door.

Lane is standing at the end of his dock, Chap at his feet, applauding. Reagan squeals. I grab our blankets while Kennedy gets the shoes before we all take off running for my house. Marley flips Lane off and then blows him a kiss.

That night, still drunk and high on woman power and the tightest of friendships, we all snuggle up in my king size bed and fall asleep with smiles on our faces.

AFTER EVERYONE WOKE up and dragged themselves home, I jumped in the shower hoping it would bring me back to life. While last night was necessary and so much fun, I'm regretting the amount of wine I consumed. I stand in the hot shower letting the steam rehydrate my body while thinking about our girls night. I grin to myself, so lucky to have found a new tribe so far away from home.

Just as I finish blow drying my hair, Brea calls. I answer, pressing the button for speaker and lay my phone on the bathroom countertop.

"Hello, dear," I groan.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"I'm hungover." I apply my tinted moisturizer and a little mascara to help me appear less like a zombie.

"Ha! No way. Stella Elizabeth Locke is hungover? I wish I was there to see it. And make you miserable." I can just picture her face while saying this. I bet it's the same look she used to get as kids when I had my friends over and she wanted to hang out with us.

"Thanks," I say, picking up the phone and carrying it to my closet while I flip through my clothes.

"What are you up to today?" she asks. I hear her smacking her lips.

"Are you always eating?"

"These days, yes. It's like I can't get full. Between mom grocery shopping for me and bringing home healthy snacks and Heath giving me the eye everytime I shove a brownie in my mouth, I'm dying from shame. But does that stop me? Heck no."

I chuckle. "I'm going out on Lane's boat with him today. Should be fun. I just have no idea what to wear and I'm worried about getting sick with this hangover."

“Ohhhh. Mr. Hotpants has a boat? Of course he has a boat,” she says. “Just take some ibuprofen and chug a Gatorade. You’ll be fine. I know recovery time at your age has got to be slow.”

“Kiss my ass, Brea.”

“Remember that time I actually did?”

“Hanging up now.”

“Byeeeeee,” she says, giggling.

I toss the phone onto my bed and take a closer look at my wardrobe choices. Between a few visits to Hamilton Bay and Marley’s help with online shopping, I’ve got some cute pieces. I choose a maroon knit maxi dress with an ombre fade into burnt orange and a creme cardigan. Ballet flats finish the look. I feel comfortable but confident as I check my reflection in the mirror.

After pulling my hair back into a cute braid, I slip into my shoes, place my phone in my pocket and walk next door. As soon as Lane’s door opens, Chap runs out to greet me. I bend down and give him some belly scratches after he rolls onto his back. When I look up at Lane, he’s grinning at me. The sight of his handsome face still sends me reeling.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he says, kissing my lips. I raise my sunglasses to the top of my head and grab onto his shoulders, deepening the innocent kiss. When I’m satisfied with his taste on my tongue, I end the impromptu makeout session with a quick peck on the lips. “Well, damn. That’s a greeting I can get behind.”

I laugh and follow him inside with Chap trailing behind. “Sorry if I’m a little sluggish today. I may have had a tad too much wine last night.”

Lane spins to face me in his kitchen. “Really now? I wouldn’t have guessed with the way you all just jumped in a freezing cold lake last night.”

I run my hands over the cool granite countertops and lean on my elbows. “Ha, ha. Not the best decision ever made. It took us forever to warm up. But you only live once, right?”

“So true,” Lane agrees, picking up a canvas bag and throwing on a jacket. “You ready?”

I nod and follow him out the back door, down to his dock. Chap’s excitement is contagious as we approach Lane’s boat. I smile as he helps me on board, hands over the bag and then tosses Chap in. Lane unties the boat and climbs on, taking a seat behind the wheel. I take a seat in the plush

chair next to him as he starts the engine. Chap barks and runs around in circles, before climbing up to the bow of the boat.

We take off, slowly at first and then Lane gives me a wink as he pushes the throttle forward, giving us some speed. The cold air pushes against me and I can feel my skin becoming chilled in the shade of the overhead canopy. I stand and move to the front of the boat, next to Chap, so that I can get some sun.

It's not long before we slow down and come to a stop, Lane dropping anchor. Chap moves to the back of the boat onto a small doggie bed just for him. He curls up in the sun and closes his eyes. Lane turns on some music and pulls a cooler from the canvas bag, handing over a cold bottle of water.

"You'll probably need this," he says. "But I have wine if you just want to dive back in."

I laugh. "Water is fine." He takes a seat next to me and as the boat gently rocks in the lake water, I feel myself getting sleepy.

"Are you going to fall asleep on me?" he asks. "I bet you're exhausted."

I cover a yawn and lean into his side. "I'm okay."

"Why don't you lay down?" he says. "You and Chap can nap while I answer some emails."

"Noooo," I say. "I'm okay. I'm good. I want to see your face and have the words with you."

He laughs. "The words? What words should we have?"

I lift one shoulder, but it's lazy. "The good, sexy vocabulary words."

Lane leans closer, his lips at my ear. "Ubiquitous. Cacophony. Perfunctory. Dichotomy."

I hum in approval and grin. "Now the words where you tell me your deepest, darkest secret."

"You must think I'm much more interesting than I actually am," Lane says, leaning back against the seat. "I have no secrets." He's silent for a few seconds. "Though my therapist says I may have issues with male role models and fear of abandonment. But I figure those are pretty obvious."

I nod. "I still can't imagine doing that. I mean, I've always wanted kids, so I can't imagine putting a man before my own flesh and blood." I sit up taller and cover a yawn. "I'm sorry. You probably don't need to hear that. I don't know your mom, but I kind of hate her."

Lane shrugs, but I see sadness pull down over his face. "I kind of hate her too." He shakes his head and swallows down his water. "But you know

what? I wouldn't have had the life I have if she would have stayed. And I had a good life, Stella. My granny? Well, she's the very definition of love. I might have been abandoned, but I never felt that way."

"That's good," I say, cupping his jaw. "This Granny? Her, I like. I'm glad she gave you what you needed. What an amazing lady."

"You have no idea," he answers as I cover another yawn.

"Here," he says, scooping me up and laying me across one of the bench seats in the shade. He pulls a blanket from one of the boat's compartments and lays it over me. Lane slides in next to me and lays my head on his lap. "Comfy?" he asks.

"Mmmm," is all I can muster. I try to fight to stay awake, but with Lane raking his fingers over the skin of my shoulders and the gentle rocking of the boat, I soon fall asleep.

A moaning sound wakes me up. It comes again and I realize it is my own raspy voice. As consciousness takes hold bit by bit, I realize that I am alone on the bench, but that something feels very, very good. I tip my head up to find Lane kneeling on the floor of the boat, his head between my legs. He has my dress pushed up to my thighs while he places warm, wet kisses on the inside of my knees working his way up.

"Good afternoon, sleepy head," he says, pressing more kisses to my inner thighs. "I just couldn't let you sleep anymore. Your little whimpers were driving me wild. Did you have a good dream?"

I shake my head even though he's not looking. "I don't remember." Unconsciously, I spread my legs further apart. When he finally reaches my panties, I am a mess. All that teasing has me so worked up I want to scream or explode or everything at once. His teeth scrape over my flesh and I gasp, my fingers clawing at the bench.

Lane's fingers wrap around the thin material of my panties and he starts to edge them down ever so slowly—too slowly. "Is this okay?" he asks, his words represented as hot breath against my pussy.

"Yes," I breathe out. "This is very okay."

He removes my panties and without any warning, his hot mouth attaches to my body. I suck in a breath, my back bowing off of the bench below, as his tongue slides along my slit. This sensation is euphoric and brand new. My ex had always complained about oral sex unless it was happening to him, so eventually I stopped asking. But this is something bigger and better than I've ever experienced, and completely off the pleasure charts.

Lane presses his tongue against my clit, holding it there until my entire body relaxes. Just when he's lulled me into this state, he flicks his tongue back and forth while his lips form a suction. The sensation is overwhelming. I buck my hips to get closer, to pull away. My head swims and I am floating as he works me over. My breaths come faster now as he expertly laps at me. Lane throws one arm over my stomach to hold my writhing body in place while his other moves between my legs, pushing two fingers inside my wetness.

"Fuck," I hiss, as he fills me so sweetly and continues ravishing me with his talented mouth. "Lane. I'm going to cum. Oh god." I squeeze my eyes shut as the swirling sensation centers around where we're connected and pulses out so that I feel it reach my fingertips and my toes. "Yes!" I scream, when the orgasm takes over. I move against him, riding his face and he doesn't let up for a second. Every muscle in my body pulls tight as I finally still against him.

I open my eyes while white spots dance in my vision. Slapping a hand to my chest, I try to catch my breath. Turning my head, I find Chap sitting up in his bed watching us and it makes me chuckle. Lane is still between my thighs, placing soft kisses against my pussy, slowly licking my wet flesh. A gust of wind blows through and it feels like ice against my heated, wet skin. I slide my hand into his hair and tug, needing to see him, to be closer.

Lane comes to me without hesitation. His body covers mine and when he kisses me, I taste myself on his lips and tongue. I've never tasted myself and I can say, that mixed with Lane, is a consuming aphrodisiac that kick-starts my libido all over again.

"I could do that all day," he says, kissing down my neck and whispering into my ear. "You taste like sweet Georgia honeysuckle and sex." It's then I register another sound. It's an approaching boat engine. I snap up to a sitting position, practically throwing Lane onto the floor. He laughs before taking a seat next to me and throwing an arm around my shoulder while I pull my dress down and cover us with the blanket.

The boat slows down and comes to a stop, it's wake rocking us. Chap trots to the end of his bench and hangs his head over the side to investigate.

"Lane," a middle-aged man with jet black hair says. He's got aviator sunglasses on and a large fishing hat. "I thought that was your boat. Didn't see anyone aboard," he shouts. "Thought it may have slipped loose from your dock again."

Lane waves back. “Nope. We’re here. Though it is a bit slippery,” he says with his charming smile while my clit still pulses from our previous activities. My hand slides under the blanket to his lap and I run my fingers down the length of his hardness. I feel his body tense and he lets out a little grunt.

The man laughs, having no idea what is funny. “Who’s your friend?” he asks.

“This is Stella,” Lane says. “My new neighbor. I was just showing her around a bit.”

“I’m afraid you caught us *eating*,” I say with a wave. “It’s such a nice *spread*.”

Lane almost chokes, but manages to stifle his laugh. “So good, I’m thinking about seconds,” Lane adds.

The man just stares at us, his expression blank. “Uh, well, don’t go overboard. Don’t want to have to run extra miles tonight, eh?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” I say grinning and patting his stomach. “He can just eat and eat and eat and not gain a pound. It’s such a gift.”

When the silence stretches too long, Lane clears his throat. “Well, good to see you, Rich.”

“You too,” he says.

“Tell Cherie I said hello.”

“Will do.” Rich revs the engine and speeds away while we rock back and forth on the waves.

“Well, I’m glad he didn’t *come* sooner,” I say, still sublimely happy and a little dazed. “Who was that?”

“Richard Lang. He lives just outside town, runs the little pharmacy on Sixth Street.” I trace the outline of his cock with my fingertips. “You’re going to kill me,” he says. “I swear I almost shot my load when you reached under the blanket.”

He throws the blanket off and pins me down again. “You’re a sweet southern lady, but deep down inside I know there’s a dirty girl just wanting to play.”

“Not that deep down,” I say, wrapping my hands around his biceps. He stares into my eyes and I am transfixed. “Are you going to let me reciprocate this time?” I ask, batting my eyes. My stomach growls so loudly, we both look down.



“Uh, I think we better get some food in you first,” he says, sitting up and grabbing the bag.

My lips form a pout and I groan. “Fine.”

Lane hands over a turkey sandwich, which somehow is the best turkey sandwich I’ve ever had. This man can even impress with cold-cuts and bread. I finish down my water and he hands me a new one.

“Better stay hydrated,” he says with a wink. I roll my eyes, but laugh.

“Hydrated? I’m still loopy after that orgasm. That was the best wake up call I’ve ever had.” He chuckles and takes a bite of his sandwich. I watch him chew, loving the movement of that strong jaw and the tendons in his neck. Realizing it’s weird to watch someone eat, I shove another bite in my mouth. My body is so relaxed, I find it hard to stay upright. I laugh and shake my head.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

I contemplate keeping it to myself, but Lane has a tendency to see through me anyway. I might as well be upfront. “Well, I’ve never had an orgasm from *that* before.”

His eyes go wide and his mouth freezes mid-chew. “Really?”

“To be fair, my ex hadn’t gone down on me in at least ten years. But when he did, I guarantee it was nothing like that.”

“What was it like?”

I look out over the lake and try to remember, but it’s just a faint memory of complaining and never hitting the right spot. “Like trying to kill a spider in a bathtub—just crazy jabbing and all over the place.”

Lane laughs, covering his mouth so food doesn’t fall out. “Wow,” he says after swallowing. “Maybe I’m only good because you don’t have anything decent to compare it to.”

I shake my head. “No way,” I say, my hands resting in my lap holding my sandwich. “What you did? How you made me feel? That was all very... educated.” Lane grins so wide, it splits his face in half. Pride beams from him as he straightens his shoulders and puffs out his chest. “You’ve definitely got skills.” I leave off the part where his skill level has me a bit concerned about my own when it comes time to give as good as I got.

“So, what’s your favorite thing about living here so far?” Lane asks before taking another bite.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “It’s all just so completely different than home. I love everything. The scenery, the people, the absolute

grandeur of this place. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed and lonely and I think, 'What have I done?' and then someone in this town does something incredibly sweet and thoughtful and I know that I made the right decision."

"So you're happy here?" he asks.

"I am."

"Especially with your orally skilled neighbor?" he asks, one eyebrow raised higher than the other.

I grin. "Yes, oh humble one, especially with that. Though I'll warn you now, my mother mentioned coming for a visit. And I don't think you're ready for that."

"Well, maybe we can do a prep course or something," he says, chuckling. "Though I've never had a problem with mothers, for the record."

"Oh, I'm sure you just charm the hell out of them, don't you?"

We finish our lunch and I end up giving Chap the last of my sandwich. Lane points out all the noteworthy spots around the lake, saying we can tour the shore when it's warmer. "Hamilton Bay is across that way, but you can't see it from here," he says. "What are you up to tomorrow?"

"Oh! I'm heading over to Kennedy's bakery. She's going to give me a lesson in baking."

"That'll be fun," Lane says.

"Maybe I'll bring you whatever I make." I rethink that offer. "If it's good. If not, then I'll just bring you something Kennedy made and tell you I made it."

"Well, you've blown your cover now."

"Nope," I say. "I'll never tell."

"I think I could coax it out of you," he says, reaching over and tugging on my loose braid.

"I'm not sure I like your cocky attitude, sir."

"It's not cocky," Lane says, moving closer. "It's confident."

And just with a tilt of his head and the low baritone of his voice, he has me feeling sex-crazed all over again. This feeling is so foreign, but energizing. I never want to let it go. But I force myself to push that down, because I want whatever this whirlwind that surrounds us to be more than just sex. I want to hold onto him. I want to know his dreams, his goals, and how he takes his coffee. I want to know every dip and curve of muscle and tan skin on his body. I want to know the dirty thoughts he has when he

thinks of me and the what's in his head when he masturbates. For now, I keep it PG.

"How did you end up with Chap?" I ask.

Lane looks to his dog, who is fast asleep in the sunshine again, and back to me. "Believe it or not, he's a rescue. I know people pay big money for this breed, but apparently someone abandoned him and two other dogs in a vacant house. Chap was skin and bones when he was found, but the vet nursed him back to health. I happened to go in the day he was put up for availability and it was love at first sight."

I smile at the way he talks about his dog. I've always said you can judge people by observing how they treat waiters and dogs. Just by the smile on his face and the fond look he gives Chap, I can tell that he's a good guy.

"What's *your* favorite thing about living here?" I ask him this time.

Lane stares up into the blue sky dotted with fat white clouds and closes his eyes. "This, right here. This peace and silence. The sunny days and the cold, wintery ones too. The leaves in the fall and the mountain roads when the snow thaws in spring. The feeling of this small town life, like everyone is family."

I exhale, not realizing I'd been holding my breath while he spoke. "Wow. You make it sound so amazing."

He turns his head toward me now. "It is amazing. You'll see. And I can't wait to be the one to show it to you."

“NOW THAT YOU have your ball of dough, we need to roll it out,” Kennedy says, handing me a large wooden rolling pin. “Watch how I do it.” I see her sprinkle a little flour over her dough, place her rolling pin on top and work it back and forth, smoothing it into a flat, almost uniform circle. “It doesn’t have to be perfect, but you want the same thickness throughout, or else it will bake unevenly.”

I pinch some flour between my fingertips and toss it onto my ball of dough. It looks like a pile of snow. “Maybe a little too much?” I ask. She nods, but motions for me to continue. I try to rock my rolling pin back and forth to smooth the dough, but it seems tough. This should have been the first red flag.

Standing on my tiptoes for more leverage, I use all my strength to press down and push forward. The pin slips over the dough and rolls all the way to the back wall, taking me with it. I hear Kennedy laugh. When I stand up, I am coated in flour and there is a distinct impression of my boobs in the dough.

“Well, that’s interesting,” I say. “They look much bigger in dough. Maybe I should just bake it like that and give it to Lane.” I mime presenting it to him. “Here. Eat my boobs.” We both crack up while I dust the flour off my face and chest.

“Let me help,” Kennedy says. She stands behind me and places her hands over mine on each side of the rolling pin. “Now keep the pressure nice and even,” she says. We roll it back and forth a few times together until I get the hang of it. “There, you’re getting it.” She steps away and watches me work.

“I thought we were about to have a ‘Ghost’ pottery moment.”

“A what?” she asks.

I stop rolling and look at her. “The movie ‘Ghost’? Patrick Swayze, Demi Moore. She’s making pottery. He sits behind her and turns it into this big sexy thing? Is anything registering here?”

Kennedy shakes her head. “Sorry. Never saw that one.”

“And here I thought you were trying to seduce me,” I say with a grin.

“Stella, if I were trying to seduce you, you’d know it.” She gives me a wink and starts cleaning up around us.

After we get the pies in the oven, we turn and assess the damage. Every surface of Kennedy’s kitchen is covered in flour. I dust my hands off over her sink before wiping them on my apron.

“I think I have flour up my nose,” I say, sniffing.

Kennedy laughs. “Stella, I’m not even sure how you managed to get it everywhere.” I wipe down the counters while she sweeps the floors. “But hey, we got them in the oven. Now it’s just a wait and see.”

“I told you I’m no good at this,” I say, washing my hands and drying them on the seat of my jeans.

“Well, that’s why you’re here, right? Did you enjoy the process?”

I lean against the counter and cross my arms while she leans on her broom. “I like hanging out with you,” I say with a smile. “But still, all the measuring and having to get things just right, it’s really not me.”

“Then what is you?”

I shake my head and slide my lips sideways on my face. “I’m not sure yet. That’s what I’m trying to find out. That’s weird, right? To be 38 years old and unsure of who you are?”

Kennedy sets her broom aside and approaches me. “I think everyone has their own unique journey for a reason. This is yours. It sucks that it left you unhappy and hurt and wondering about your identity, but how amazing that you get a second shot at it, right?”

Her positive attitude sparks a bit of hope in me. I can see that I should appreciate the lessons learned in my former life, because they taught me something. And they led me here.

“Let’s get some coffee,” she says. “I’m so tired.” When we’re each seated at a table in the front of the bakery, our hands wrapped around warm mugs, Kennedy asks the question she’s been dying to. “So how are things with Lane?”

I can’t help the grin that comes over me. The idea that his name alone can create so much joy gives me hope and worries me at the same time.

“Things are good. Great, actually,” I answer.

“So, why the worry line?” Kennedy says, pressing her thumb between my eyebrows. I relax my face.

“Because I *am* worried. I worry that this is some sort of infatuation, because I’ve never felt anything like this before. It’s like a rollercoaster of thrills and fears all rolled up into one *almost* relationship. I worry that it’s purely physical attraction bringing us together. And while I’m flattered that someone like him would want someone like me, I don’t know if my heart knows the difference. I worry that if I open up to him, that things could go very wrong. I worry that I might be the biggest scaredy cat in the whole world and that will lead to missing out on someone like Lane Holder.”

Kennedy reaches across the table and takes my hand in hers. She gives me a sympathetic smile like she’s been in my shoes before. But that’s just who she is. “You’re justified in your worries. But I can tell you that Lane is worth it. We all grew up together, I am a year older than him. He’s always been the same guy he is now—kind, generous, smart, dangerously good looking. You don’t have to worry about him being genuine. If he says that he wants more, believe him.”

I nod and look out the window at the sunny street littered with red and orange leaves. “I know I’m in my head too much about this. Marley says I live in my romance novels, waiting for that perfect guy. And maybe that’s true, because I’ve already had the villain.” I look at Kennedy now as she sips her coffee. “So what do you do when you actually find the hero?”

“You hold onto him and throw yourself in. Nothing amazing ever happened to people who were too scared to take the chance. And you’re a dope lady. You deserve this.”

“I’m dope?” I ask with a chuckle. She nods. I sit up taller and sip my coffee, letting it warm me from the inside. “That’s right. I’m dope as fuck. Let’s just hope my pie is too.”

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AS SOON AS I get home, I send Lane a text asking if he wants some pie. He responds saying he’ll be over in a few minutes. I check myself in the mirror, dusting the last of the flour from my cheek and adjust my messy bun. I consider changing into something else, but his knock echoes through the house before I can get upstairs.

“Well, that was fast,” I say, swinging the door open and waving him in.

“I mean, you said pie. Soooo...” Lane plants a kiss on my lips and moves past me, Chap right on his heels.

I bend over and scratch between his ears. “Hey, buddy.”

“Uh, Stella,” Lane says from behind me. “Anything you want to tell me about your baking session with Kennedy today? Things get a little frisky?”

I stand and turn. “What?” Why?”

“You’ve got white handprints on your ass. It’s like a HOLD HERE sign.”

I laugh. “That’s just me trying to clean up. I made the biggest mess. Guess my hands weren’t clean when I dried them on my jeans.”

He steps closer now and wraps his arms around me, placing a hand on each ass cheek and lifting me up. My legs squeeze around his waist as Lane pins me to the door. I wait for the kiss to come, the one that makes my toes curl. But instead, he lowers his mouth to where my neck meets my shoulder. I can feel his hot breath fanning across my skin.

“Mmm,” he growls. “You smell like cinnamon and apples.” Lane’s lips press against my neck.

“So, you’re saying you want my pie?” I ask with a grin.

He chuckles and places another quick peck on my lips. “I’ve had your pie. I love your pie. And I’ll always want that pie.”

Even with the joke between us, the look in his eyes sets my body on fire. “How about the one made of apples first?” I ask, dropping my legs and sliding down his body. When my feet hit the floor, I head to the kitchen with both Lane and Chap following.

Cutting us each a slice, I serve them on these colorful-patterned plates that I’ve been dying to use. Lane pulls the milk from the fridge and pours us each a glass. We meet at the table. I watch him closely as he digs right in, moaning as he chews the dessert.

“This is so good,” he says. I smile and take a bite myself. “Please tell me this is the one you made and you can recreate it every week.” Lane scoops another bite into his mouth.

“Sorry,” I say with a shrug. “Baking is not in the cards for me. This is Kennedy’s. Apparently I mixed up the canister of salt and the canister of sugar. My pie tasted like a saltlick.” Lane frowns, but keeps eating. “So, we’ll be purchasing our baked goods. Sorry, babe.”

The nickname slips from my lips so naturally that at first I don’t even notice. It’s not until I see Lane grinning that I realize what I’ve done.

“Is that weird?” I ask. “Is it too early for nicknames? I mean, I’m not sure what we are to each other, if we’re anything. And I don’t want to push you when I don’t even know what I want. And I still pinch myself every day knowing that you want to be with me.” I slap a hand over my mouth to stop the rambling. “What the fudge is wrong with me?”

While I’m trying to keep the atmosphere light after my word vomit, Lane’s expression is completely serious. His gaze pins me in place and I can’t read him well enough to know if he’s angry or turned on.

“Babe,” he says. “We are definitely something. If you don’t want to define it, that’s fine with me. But for the record, you’re mine and I’m yours. Clear and fudging simple.” His lips twitch, but remain a solid straight line. “I don’t know why you don’t see yourself how I see you, but there is no need for pinching.”

“But I—” Lane holds up a hand to stop me.

“I swear if you say one more self deprecating thing, I’m going to put you over my knee.” I raise an eyebrow in challenge. “Get upstairs.” I sit staring, the sexual energy and tension booming between us. “Now,” Lane demands.

I let out a little squeak and abandon my pie at lightspeed. Lane chases me up the stairs and into my bedroom. He wraps his arms around me from behind and moves me to stand in front of my full length mirror. One hand lifts and holds my chin gently, turning my face toward my reflection.

“Keep your eyes there,” he says. I follow his instruction without question. My eyes scan the way he wraps around me and how his hands move over my body. “I’m thinking your ex-husband trained you to feel a certain way about yourself and I’m here to undo that.”

I look at the ground, a bit ashamed by his words, because nothing has felt truer and it makes me weak and angry. “You’re right,” I say, my voice just a whisper between us.

“Eyes up, Stella.” My gaze snaps back to the mirror. “The woman you see is not only beautiful on the outside, but on the inside too. She’s smart and funny. She’s a great friend. She’s creative and kind. She’s stronger and braver than she gives herself credit for.” His hand slides beneath my shirt and skims across my stomach. “This woman is so sexy, it’s effortless. Her smile lights up the room. Her laugh can make me forget my name.” His fingers dip into the waistband of my jeans and trace along the edge.

“Lane.”



He releases me and walks to the mirror, turning it to face my bed. Then, he grabs my hand and pulls me over to the edge of my mattress, making me face the mirror again. With no words spoken between us, he pulls my shirt over my head and tosses it aside. Next, he unbuttons and slides my jeans down. I kick out of them and watch the way he looks at me. It's like a hunter on the prowl, his focus so zeroed in that there is nothing else in existence.

Lane's hands move to unclasp my bra and I let it fall away. When he drags my panties down, he places a heated kiss just below my navel. Goosebumps spread across my skin like a wildfire. I am now completely naked and having to keep myself from raising my hands to cover my body. Lane moves behind me again and sits on my bed. He pulls me back with him so that I'm seated between his legs.

"Look at yourself, Stella. Look with new eyes, with mine. See the woman that exists, not the one you've buried beneath self doubt. She is stunning."

He watches me as I scan my own reflection. I still see a stomach that isn't as flat as I'd like it to be and thighs that are full, but I also see the curve of my hips leading up to a narrow waist. I see breasts that still look young and perky. I see my smooth skin, the line of my neck, and the way toned calves lead down to my ankles.

"Now touch yourself," he says.

Now I see my own terrified expression reflected back at me. "What?"

Lane takes hold of my right hand and slides it up my stomach, cupping my breast. I suck in a breath and release it as his fingers move over my nipple. He guides my hand down to between my legs, gently prying my knees apart. "Touch yourself for me, Stella. I already know how sexy you are. I want you to know it too."

"I've never," I start.

"Shhh," he says. "It's okay. It's just us." My entire body blushes as I slide my middle finger down my slit, coating it in my juices. I move to my clit and as soon as I press against it, my body sags against Lane's. "That's it," he says, a low growl in his tone.

I lay my head back against his shoulder and whimper as I move my finger faster. Little, breathy whimpers escape my mouth and I try to close my eyes, but Lane nudges me.

"Watch, Stella. See how fucking beautiful you are."

I force my eyes open and focus on my reflection. My hips rock in time against my fingers as Lane sits and watches me with such intensity, I feel like I could fly.

“What are you thinking about, Stella?” he says against the shell of my ear.

“You,” I breathe. “Only you.”

My pace increases and with his eyes on me, I know I’m close. “Look at the way you move, baby. Look at your body and your curves and the sweet pout your lips make when you’re close.”

“Oh, god!” I scream as my orgasm rips through me and I can’t help but squeeze my eyes shut as my body convulses. I slump against Lane, my chest heaving from the intense experience. He grins and places a kiss against my neck, before pulling my fingers to his mouth and sucking them clean.

When I am coherent again and have the ability for speech, Lane wraps his arms around my naked body. I feel the warmth of his against mine and the scratch of his jeans against my thighs.

“Now, do you see what I see? Do you see how amazing and absolutely stunning you are?”

I scan my reflection and in this euphoric state, I don’t feel one bit of shame or embarrassment. I feel empowered, sexy, and beautiful. Lane’s face clearly displays pride mixed with lust. “I see,” I say, turning to kiss his lips. “I finally see.”

“Good,” Lane answers, his tongue sliding over his bottom lip. “Now can I have my pie?”

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FOR THE NEXT few weeks, Lane is tied up in a big project with work. He seems a bit stressed and busy, but he makes time for me. Some nights I’ll cook dinner and lure him over for an hour or two. While our time together is always fantastic, I can tell he’s distracted. We talk about our families, tell stories from our pasts. There’s laughter and some disheartening memories too. But no matter what, I always feel happy when Lane’s around. This man brings out the best in me. He fills me with light and hope, and somehow makes me feel at home.

“This is delicious. I’ve never had chicken and dumplings before,” Lane says through chewing.

I grin. “I’m glad you like it, but drop the g. It’s dumplins where I come from.”

“Dumplins.” He says slowly. “All your veneration for exorbitant vocabulary, but drop the g, huh?” His lopsided grin appears as he looks over his glasses at me.

“Drop the g,” I insist.

“Well, I don’t care what you call it. It’s fantastic. The ultimate comfort food. You’ve got to show me how to make it.” He spoons another bite into his mouth.

“All I *can* say is it starts with a stick of butter. It’s my grandmother’s recipe. I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Lane drops his spoon and grabs his chest. “Not if the *dumplings* kill me first!”

“Ha. Ha.”

He finishes his meal quickly while I’m only halfway through mine. Lane wipes his mouth on a napkin, and swallows down the last of his water. “Can I help you clean up?” he asks, placing his dishes in the sink.

I look down at my bowl and back to him. “I’m still eating.”

“Oh,” he says, running both hands through his hair. The muscles of his arms flex as he locks his hands behind his neck and blows out a breath. “Right. I’m sorry. I’ve just got so much to do and a major conference call to prep for tomorrow.”

I stand and move toward him, pressing up on my tiptoes to place a kiss on his lips. At first he barely responds. I can feel the tension in the way he moves. But within seconds that tension slips away and he is completely invested in me.

“Or you could stay,” I say, kissing along his jawline. “I could help you relax.” The words are practically a purr in his ear. When Lane doesn’t respond, I pull away and grab his favorite beer from the fridge. Snapping the cap off I toss it in the recycle bin and hand the bottle to him with instructions. “Take this and have a seat on the sofa. I’ll get the dishes and be right in.”

He gives me a strange look, but nods and heads into the other room with his drink. I load the dishwasher as fast as possible, the whole time getting

more and more nervous about what I'm about to do. Sure I've given blowjobs before, but not to this man, not to Lane Holder.

I feel a bit guilty that we haven't had sex yet. I'm sure he's not used to waiting this long. But something in me just isn't ready. I know it's completely my deal and he's been incredibly patient, never pushing. But I want to make him happy. I want to bring him all the pleasure that he brings me. I want to do this right.

Drying my hands on the kitchen towel, I stand up tall and summon as much confidence as possible. "Just go in there, drop to your knees, and do it. You'll be fine. Even a bad blowjob is still a blowjob. Right?" Taking a deep breath, I exhale and exit the kitchen, turning the light off.

"I hope you're ready for—" I stop when I round the sofa and Lane is fast asleep with his arm propped on the side table, full beer still in his hand. His head is rested on a pillow, his glasses askew.

I take the beer from his hand and put it back in the fridge. Then I grab my current read and curl up next to Lane, laying my head in his lap. He doesn't stir at all. Chap is in his usual place, curled up on the ottoman. I decide to let them sleep for an hour since I know Lane needs to get back to work.

I'm dressed in rags, my bare feet covered in dirt. Looking up, I realize I'm surrounded by an angry mob. They shout "Witch! Witch!" as I'm shoved from behind. My eyes dart from face to face, trying to find a friend in the crowd, but they are all hostile. Stumbling to the center of the crowd, I find a wooden contraption with huge screws and a metal crank.

"Stop!" I scream. "I'm not a witch! They're just scented candles from Amazon."

The crowd roars as I am forced to my knees, my head shoved into the wooden mechanism. A thick plank presses against the back of my head and another against the front. There is a hole where my face sticks through.

Panic surges in me as I realize this is a killing device, something medieval. "Please," I beg, but no one hears my cries. A man dressed in black, wearing a cape over his face cranks the lever once. The boards tighten against my skull. The crowd continues their chant as the man turns the crank again. The pain in the back of my head is blinding and I know that I've got to escape or I'll die. The man in black reaches for the lever again and I raise my arms, throwing my fists behind me as hard as I can.

"Owww," Lane howls, jolting me awake from my dream and back into reality. I sit up and spin to face him as he presses both hands over his

crotch. “Oh my god! What did I do?”

Chap is off the ottoman, checking on his owner. “You punched me in the dick,” Lane grunts out, his face red, every muscle in his body pulled tight in agony.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, placing a hand over his.

“Don’t touch it!”

I yank my hand away and sit back on my knees. Watching this man writhe in pain is terrible. Knowing that I’m responsible for it is excruciating. It is a few minutes before Lane can relax again. He rights his glasses and looks over at me and I sit watching, waiting.

“So, I fall asleep and you get even by punching me in the most sacred of areas?”

“Sacred?” I ask, my brain caught off guard by the terminology. “I mean, it’s not like you’re the Dali Lama. While yours is... special, I’m sure his area is actually sacred.”

Lane gives me an exhausted look and drops his head back against the pillow. “Still doesn’t explain why you’re trying to damage my future children.”

I crawl into his lap now, straddling his body. “Is this okay?” I ask. He nods and rests his hands on my waist. “I’m sorry. I fell asleep and was having the weirdest dream. I was just fighting back.”

He shakes his head and gives me a half smile. “With those fists of fury, I’m sure you won.”

I shrug. “I don’t know, your screaming woke me up.” I rest my hands on his hard chest and place a kiss on his lips. “I’m so sorry I went all Chuck Norris on your manhood.”

Lane chuckles now. “It’s okay. I think I’ll live.” He covers a yawn and looks around the room. “What time is it?”

I slide my phone from my back pocket and check the screen. “Just after 10.”

“I have to go.”

I poke my bottom lip out and give him sad eyes. Lane leans forward, capturing my lip between his teeth before running his tongue across it. I open up for him and soon we are making out like two teenagers in the back of Daddy’s car. With no warning, Lane pins me down on the sofa, hovering over me. His lips are pink from our kisses.

“You are very good at distraction, Stella Locke. But I have to go.” One hand sweeps the hair from my face and he places the softest kiss on my lips.

Lane hops up and holds out a hand. I take it and he pulls me from the sofa and into his arms. Being wrapped up against him is one of my favorite things of all time. I want to build a fort with a wine rack, snacks, and stacks of books to just live here.

“Come on, Chap,” Lane says, giving me one final squeeze before letting go. “I doubt I’ll see you tomorrow. But I promise to make it up to you.”

And then he is gone from my home. The soft click of the door closing behind him echoes through the room and I want him back so bad it overwhelms me. Lane Holder has certainly got a hold on me.

IT'S A LONG work week, helping Becca do inventory every day. By Thursday I've counted so many books I'm starting to resent them. I've got paper cuts on my hands and sticky notes on every shelf in the storage room. I'm only halfway done. I've hung out with Marley a few times since the hen party. I'm not sure if she's still processing or if we need to intervene, but I've decided to give her a little more time. I check on her every day and usually get a rundown of meetings and appointments while she avoids anything personal. She still sounds like her usual, energetic self—just a tad off from the Marley I know.

Sighing, I take a seat on a stack of boxes and check my vibrating phone. It's a text from Lane. We've both been so busy with work, we haven't seen each other since Sunday.

Hey, BABE. I'm heading downtown for lunch. Want to meet at the Farmer's Market on sixth?

Yes. Get me out of this cave of books! Damn. Never thought I'd say that.

See you in a few.

I drop my phone back into my apron pocket and mark the shelf where I stopped counting with a bright pink sticky note. Ducking my head into Becca's office, I tell her I'm stepping out for lunch. She barely looks up from her paperwork to wave me off. Grabbing my jacket and wallet from behind the front counter, I push through the front door and onto the sidewalk.

The air is so crisp I take a deep breath, filling my lungs and blowing it out like a drag from the most satisfying cigarette. A light breeze whips around me taking dried leaves across the street to settle on the diner's welcome mat. I shove my hands in my pockets and turn toward Sixth Street.

“Oh, shookyooky!” I shout, pressing a hand over my racing heart. Lane laughs. It’s a whole-hearted kind of laugh that shows off his dimple and sends my pulse flying for a completely different reason.

“Shookyooky?” he asks, wrapping me in his arms and placing a kiss on my forehead. “That’s a new one.”

“And there’s plenty more where that came from,” I promise. “There’s fork-face, ham sammich, and my personal favorite, mother plucking fiddle fart.”

He laughs again, grabs my hand and pulls me down the sidewalk. “Come on, you foul-mouthed heathen. I’m going to buy you lunch.”

“How is it that we live next door to each other and I haven’t seen this face in three days?” I ask, coming to a stop and pulling him down for a kiss.

“I don’t know,” Lane answers. “We’re both busy with work, I guess. Chap misses you.”

“I miss that little furball too,” I say, moving along the sidewalk again. “I can come over tonight. Oh, wait! No I can’t. Tonight is my yoga class with Reagan.”

Lane grins. “Yoga? This sounds promising.”

“Well, it’s another new experience. I have a whole list of things I want to try.”

“Do tell,” he says.

“There’s an impressive lineup of classes offered at the Community Center in Hamilton Bay. I intend to try them all. Pottery. Painting. Even a writing class. Can you imagine? I mean, I love to read, but I don’t even know if I’d be a good writer. Lord knows I have plenty of stories to tell.”

“What would you want to write? Romance novels like the ones you read?” Lane asks, swinging our hands between us.

“I don’t think so. That seems like a big task for someone just starting out.”

“You never know until you try. It could come naturally to you.”

I shrug. “There’s also knitting and Salsa dancing. You want to partner?”

Lane makes a face. “I’d be willing to try anything once,” he says. “Besides, the thought of you partnered up with some hot Latin guy gives me anxiety.” He hits me with the lopsided grin and I laugh.

“Aww, would you be jealous of me gyrating on another man?”

“You save all your gyrating for me.”



“The last one is gardening, but I can’t do that until spring. I’d love to grow my own vegetables and herbs in the backyard. Living next door to my own personal chef could have it’s advantages.”

“I live to serve,” Lane says, pausing to bow.

When we turn the corner onto Sixth, I see the temporary farmer’s market set up in the street. There are at least ten booths selling fruits and vegetables, plants, and even some homemade goat cheese. I sample a few items before Lane leads me to a food truck parked at the end of the block.

“Is this where we’re lunching?” I ask.

“Best tacos in a hundred mile radius,” he says. “And their roasted tomatillo salsa is so good. It’s like the perfect balance of sweet and tang. Tastes like beach tacos in Mexico.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“Hmm,” Lane says, bending down to kiss my lips before dragging them to my ear. “I’ll have to take you one day. I’d love to see you in a skimpy little bikini on the sand.”

I blush as he straightens up and drops the sexy purr from his voice. “What do you want to eat?”

“Oh, just about anything. Order me whatever you’re having.”

I snag us a picnic table in the sun while Lane orders our food. While I wait, I ponder all these talks of future plans and how Lane just assumes that we’ll be together. While my heart wants to jump into this relationship with everything, my head warns me to be cautious—guard myself.

Service is speedy and Lane joins me just minutes after ordering. “Carnitas tacos with tomatillo salsa and fresh cotija cheese. Simple, but delicious,” he says while placing the food down in front of me. He holds up a red squeeze bottle. “Hot sauce?” he asks.

“Always,” I answer, sliding my tacos toward him. He hits me with a little and I wave for him to continue. Lane puts a bit more and I motion again. Finally, I’m satisfied with my hot sauce and dive right in. “Oh my god, this is ‘slap ya mamma’ good,” I say with a moan.

“Slap your mamma?” he asks.

“Yeah. Or as my dad would say, ‘Don’t get none on your forehead, because your tongue will beat your brain to death.’”

Lane laughs and shakes his head. “Well, I guess that’s a compliment. But trust me, I’ll never lead you wrong, babe.” I grin at the adopted nickname and take another bite. The meat is savory, the tomatillo adds some great

flavor and the hot sauce tingles on my tongue. “Though that much hot sauce would melt my face off.”

“Yes, well you Yankees aren’t known for your strong stomachs. Are you?” I tease.

Lane grins and covers his mouth as he chews. “Shots fired, Stella Locke.”

I point a finger gun at him. “Locked and loaded, sir. I do have to admit, I don’t think I’m prepared for the winters here. You’ll find me frozen to death, hovered over the radiator, a book in one hand, a bottle of wine in the other.”

He swallows his food and wipes at his mouth with a paper napkin. “A, I’d never let that happen. B, winters up here are pretty intense, but you’ve got me to help you through. And C, Marley and the girls can help with wardrobe essentials. The key is preparation. If you want, I can check out your pipes this weekend.”

I grin. “So you want to check out my pipes, huh?”

“They don’t call me ‘The Plumber’ for nothing.” There’s a beat of silence and we both crack up. “Damn. Why am I so bad at that?” Lane asks.

“Well, it’s only fair. You can’t be....” I wave a hand over him, “all that and the master of puns too. The universe just balanced you out.”

“So I’m *all that*, huh?”

I smile at him and shake my head, refusing to answer.

“Saturday is supposed to be an unusually warm day. I’m thinking of taking the bike out. You want to come?”

I stop mid-chew and stare at him. “Do I want to ride on the back of your completely restored 1955 Harley Davidson Panhead? Absofuckinlutely.”

We make plans to spend the day together Saturday and I’m giddy to think about holding onto Lane on the back of that bike. When I finish my second taco, I swallow down half of my water and close my eyes, pointing my face up at the sun. It’s so nice here. The sun is not a harsh thing that feels suffocating, it’s the perfect balance to the chilled air.

“What are you thinking about?” Lane asks.

I open my eyes and drop them to his face. Such a handsome face. It is a face that I wouldn’t mind looking at for the rest of my life. “Us,” I admit. “I’m thinking about us and how we talk about things in the future like there’s some kind of guarantee that we’ll be together. I mean, we haven’t even had sex yet. What if I’m terrible and you change your mind?”

Lane's neutral expression morphs into something more serious, contemplative. He reaches across the table and takes both of my hands. "Stella, there are no guarantees in life. I can't guarantee you anything except my intentions. And those are to be with you." I open my mouth, but don't know what to say. Lane continues. "I want to cook for you. I want to fall asleep with you and wake up with you. I want to introduce you to my Granny and let you teach me how to work on my bike's engine. I want to pour you wine and listen to you talk about your books. But mostly? I want you to want those things too."

My pulse races with his declaration. There's a desperate longing to believe him and suddenly, the gate around my heart breaks down. It crumbles to pieces and is swept away by the complete honesty of this man and his old soul. Sometimes things aren't too good to be true. Sometimes they are just too good.

"I do want those things," I say. Lane gives me a perfect smile, his blue eyes like crystals in the sunlight. I want to climb over this table, crawl into his lap and make sure he knows that I feel the same way.

"Good," he says, standing and tossing our trash into a nearby garbage can. Lane walks over and grabs my hand, kissing my knuckles. "Glad we're on the same page." He leans down now and presses his lips to mine. What starts off as a modest kiss morphs into something deeper, hungrier. Before I know it, we are full on making out in the middle of the street. And I. Don't. Care.

"Get a room," someone shouts from down the block. We break away wearing matching smiles.

"Is this really happening?" I ask.

"It is," Lane answers.

I want to spin in circles until I'm dizzy. I want to shout and scream and laugh until I can't breathe. I want to shake my ass and fist pump like there's no tomorrow. Because my life, at this moment, is unrecognizable and amazing. I have released my fears and embraced what's right in front of me. Lane Holder, the gorgeous man of my dreams wants me. He wants to listen when I talk. He wants to be a part of my future. He wants to ravage me and show me his world. He wants to introduce me to his only family. And I want to let him.

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I ROLL MY new yoga mat out next to a young girl on the front row. The room is a large space with a wall of mirrors and a wall of windows. About twenty other women and two men file in and start stretching while I search out Reagan. I find her talking to a group near the door.

“Hi,” I say, inserting myself.

“Hey,” Reagan says, giving me a hug. “Everyone, this is Stella.” They all give a wave and friendly greetings. “You guys ready to get started?”

I follow her back to the front of the room. “Don’t worry about keeping up,” she says. “This is an intermediate class, so you may not be able to fully extend into every position. The key is to do what you can and mind your breathing.”

I nod and take a seat on my mat, mimicking everyone else’s starting pose. Reagan presses a remote and soft, soothing music pumps through the speakers. She sits facing the class and closes her eyes.

“Be mindful,” she says.

“Be mindful,” the class repeats, startling me.

“Seek peace,” Reagan says. This time I’m ready and respond with the class.

“Seek peace.”

“Okay. Clear your mind,” Reagan says. “Let’s begin in Lotus position. Breathe in.” She pauses. “Exhale.”

I follow her directions, feeling my body begin to relax. Though clearing my mind is much harder. Just then, the door bursts open and slams against the cinderblock wall. Marley comes tumbling through the door, pulling a shirt over her sports bra as she walks. The whole class watches as she makes her way across the room and sets up next to me.

“Sorry,” she mock whispers. Marley faces Reagan. “I’m here. I made it. Let’s roll.” I laugh as she sits on her mat and gives me a wink.

“Let’s refocus,” Reagan says calmly. “And one more deep breath before we transition to Thunderbolt.” Everyone moves to sit on their knees with hands resting in their laps. “Straighten your spine and stay as tall as possible.” I look around and realize I’m the only one slouching. Lifting my head, I square my shoulders and elongate my spine.

“Good,” Reagan says, and I know she’s talking directly to me. “Exhale and move into Child Pose.”

I watch Marley lean forward, resting her chest and head on the ground and extending her arms out. I do it too, our faces toward each other.

“This isn’t so bad,” I say.

“This is just the warm up, love.” Marley grins and I feel dread sink into the pit of my stomach for what’s to come.

“Exhale. Now push up into Downward Dog.” Following Reagan’s example, I push up with my arms and straighten my legs, my body creating an upside down V. I can feel the pull in my calf muscles and eventually my arms begin to shake. “Remember to breathe,” Reagan reminds us.

As dumb as I would have thought that reminder was, I’m happy for it now. I hadn’t even realized I was holding my breath. I exhale in one big gush and inhale slowly, silently begging her with my mind to change positions.

“Sink down into Upward Dog. Inhale.” I drop my belly and legs to the ground, keeping my upper body rigid and tilting my head back to look at the ceiling. “Exhale and back to Downward Dog.”

I groan and hear Marley chuckle. A few minutes feel like an hour in this class. I glance around the room and find no clock, knowing its absence is purposeful. Six more moves and every muscle in my body has been pulled, stretched, bent, and exhausted. Surprisingly, I actually work up a sweat.

When I think I can’t take much more, Marley whispers that we’re almost done. I breathe out a sigh of relief just as Reagan walks by to check our form. “Nice breath control, Stella,” she says. I hold in a laugh.

“We’re going to end on a big stretch,” Reagan says from the back of the room. “Move into Wide-Legged Forward Bend.”

Marley spreads her feet wide apart, laces her fingers together behind her back and bends forward, almost touching her head to the ground. Moving my feet apart, I get into pose and exhale. The back of my thighs, knees, and calves burn from the stretch and I know I’ll be sore tomorrow. But I like it. I love how loose and relaxed I feel while knowing I’m still getting a workout.

Just as I’m pushing my head down farther to get a bigger stretch a loud fart rips from Marley. While she keeps her composure, I completely lose it. I’m laughing so hard, I can’t breathe. My chest aches and I collapse on the floor. My face burns as I try to suck in a breath, but I can’t stop laughing.

Marley turns to me with a straight face. “Had egg salad for lunch, did you?”

I immediately gasp, finally sucking in the air I need, when I realize she’s pinning it on me. Looking around, I realize I’m the only one who looks

guilty. Curled into a ball on the floor laughing uncontrollably while everyone else holds their pose. Reagan grins as she walks to the front of the room.

“Up into mountain pose. Give me two three-part breaths and we’re done.”

I scramble to my feet and stand tall with my arms raised high over my head. I take deep breaths while giving Marley the stink eye in the mirror. She just smiles and sticks out her tongue.

“Good job, everyone,” Reagan says. “See you next week.”

I drop my arms and turn to Marley as people start to file out of the room. “Oh my god, you bitch!” I give her a light punch on the shoulder. “Everyone thought I did that!”

She breaks into hysterics now, followed by Reagan. “You should have seen your face,” Marley says through her laughter.

“I can’t ever come back to this class,” I say, swatting her again. “And I really liked it, you ass.”

“Ouch, you blimey tart. Stop being so violent,” Marley says, rubbing her shoulder, but still smiling.

“It’s fine,” Reagan says, stepping between us. She looks at me with her signature sympathetic gaze. “It happens more than you’d think.”

“Yeah,” Marley says, rolling up her mat. “Stop being so uptight. You get relaxed enough and pulled in the right direction, it’ll happen to you too.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” I groan, covering my face.

“No worries,” Marley says. “At the next class, I bet you’ll have plenty of space around you, because no one will want to get close to that trump gun.”

I roll my eyes and shove my mat into my bag. “Trump? Is that what you Brits call a fart?” I ask.

The three of us head outside onto the sidewalk. “Of course. Same thing,” Marley says. “It can also be used as a verb. As in, ‘I trumped in yoga class and blamed it on my mate.’”

THE NEXT DAY I moan and groan through inventory. Every bit of movement hurts. There are aches where I didn't know I had muscles. While it's painful, I still enjoy taking control of my body and pushing myself.

At lunch, Becca slips me two pills and tells me they're muscle relaxers. "Take them tonight before bed, because you won't be able to sleep."

"Thanks?" I say, dropping the pills into my apron pocket.

That night, after an hour of uncomfortable tossing and turning, I take the pills. They relax me so well, I'm asleep in minutes and don't wake up until my alarm the next morning.

When Saturday arrives, it's warm enough to have coffee on my back porch. I smile into my cup as I think about hopping on that Harley with Lane. By 11 o'clock, I'm dressed and ready, knocking on his door.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says, stepping aside to let me in. I greet Chap with a belly rub and turn to face Lane. "Nice boots." I do a little spin, showing off my new jeans and vintage Doc Martin boots. "That jacket won't do, though."

"What's wrong with my jacket?" I ask, looking down at the old, beat up leather.

Lane opens a closet door in his foyer and pulls out a woman's black leather motorcycle jacket. "I got you a little something," he says, removing my old jacket and sliding this one on.

It's a beautiful piece with a relaxed snap collar and asymmetrical zipper up the front. There's quilted stitching on the shoulders and it fits like a dream. The smell of new leather wraps around me right before Lane does.

"Thank you. It's beautiful," I say. He releases me and grabs his own jacket from the closet.

“And safer, too. It’s got shoulder, elbow, and back armor built in. Gloves are in the pockets.”

I lift up on my toes and kiss him. “You’ve thought of everything. Can we go now?”

“So eager, babe. What if I wanted to have some ‘pie’ first?”

“Nope. No time. Let’s ride.”

Lane chuckles and leads us out into the garage. “Have you ridden before?”

“Nope.”

“So, make sure you hold on to me at all times, even when we stop. Keep your feet on the pegs so you don’t get burned on the exhaust system. On turns, stay neutral and look over my inside shoulder. It is important to not shift your weight suddenly in the corner. If you need me to stop or there’s a problem, three taps on my shoulder. Got it?”

“Got it.”

He hits a button on the wall and the garage door opens, flooding the space with light. I grab both helmets, handing his over and strapping mine on. Lane climbs onto the bike and nods for me to hop on. I step on the peg, grab his hand and swing my leg over the bike. When I’m pulled in tight behind him with my arms around his waist, he starts her up.

A loud rumble fills the space and echoes out into the neighborhood. The vibration is strong at first, but then settles down into a purr. Lane revs the engine a few times to prime her, pops the kickstand up and we are off.

I hold in a squeal as we make our first turn out of town and hit some country roads. Blurs of red and orange leaves, and even a few evergreens blur by as I take in the view. The wind cuts through my jeans, chilling the skin of my legs, but my upper body and feet are nice and warm. The feel of the sun, the bike, and the speed combine to reinforce every adrenaline-filled imagining of this. He guns the motor and we take off. With my arms wrapped around Lane I feel like we’re flying above the world instead of coasting through it.

Eventually, we slow to a crawl at a stop sign and Lane turns left onto a road that rises steep through the trees. Here, the sun is barely visible with the huge branches acting as a canopy above the narrow, winding road. He navigates through this beautiful tunnel of autumn much more slowly, taking each turn with care. I wonder if he does this only because I’m with him.



After a while, the trees open up and we are headed downhill. The sun is warm on my shoulders and from this vantage point, I can see for miles around us. It's absolutely beautiful and I immediately think of bringing Brea and her family up here. I know she would appreciate the beauty of this place.

Another 30 minutes of riding and we pull into a place called Schrute Farms. When we come to a couple of farm houses, Lane pulls over and parks the bike. He motions for me to hop off first, so I do. He swings his leg over and sits sideways on the bike while I remove my helmet. Lane takes his helmet off and runs his hands through his hair, returning it to its usual disarray.

"How'd you like your first ride?" he asks.

"Like it? I loved it! It was amazing." I throw my arms around his neck and squeeze tight before placing a kiss on his cheek. "What is this place?"

Lane stands and unzips his jacket. "Well, it's usually an apple orchard. But it's late in the season and all the picking has been done. They have a nice little restaurant too." He leans down, his lips hovering near my ear. "They even have pie."

I laugh as he pulls me up the steps and into the building. The decor is very farmhouse chic and the room is filled with small wooden tables and chairs. There's a chalkboard menu over the counter and an old cash register sits at the end.

We order our food and have a seat near the front window. The land rolls into a valley, where I can see rows and rows of apple trees.

"Next year, we can come up here and pick some apples," Lane says.

I smile. "Yes. For Kennedy to bake into pies."

He grins. "Or maybe you could try again. One failure doesn't make you a failure."

His words hit me on so many levels, it's like they smooth over the last jagged edges of my heart. "So I'm learning," I reply.

"You look so sexy in that jacket," he says, leaning forward. "And my favorite part? You look like you know it."

His words make me blush. I shrug one shoulder, but meet his gaze across the table. All his compliments flood my head and the way he looks at me gives me confidence. "I do know it."

"Good."

After the roar of the bike and whistle of the wind, we are content to sit in silence and wait on our meal. Lunch is a delicious chicken pot pie for me and corned beef hash for him. Each are served in miniature cast iron skillets on small wooden planks.

We both dig in, only stopping here and there for casual conversation. When we're finished with our meal, I tip the waitress since Lane wouldn't let me pay, and we head outside.

"There's a short walking trail," he says. "Are you interested before we hit the road again?"

"Sure."

Our hike only takes about fifteen minutes, but is just the kind of quiet moment we need to recharge. We spot birds and squirrels and the biggest spider web I've ever seen. It's late afternoon now and I know Lane wants to get us home before night comes.

Soon, we're back on the bike and heading toward Grace. The ride back is just as nice and I enjoy the serenity of not being in control of anything for a while. Just as we make our stop and turn onto the road back to town, the engine sputters and dies. We roll to a stop and Lane tries to start it back up, but nothing happens.

We both climb off the bike and remove our helmets. "Shit," he says. "I'm sorry. Let me call roadside assistance so we're not stuck out here." He removes his phone from a zippered pocket, but I hold up a finger to stop him.

"Can I take a look at it first?" I ask. His eyebrows shoot up and he slowly slips his phone back into its pocket.

"Be my guest. It sounded like we ran out of fuel, but I gassed up yesterday."

I nod, unzip my jacket and shrug out of it, laying it over the bike. I knock on both tanks to verify they have fuel and they do. Leaning down and placing my ear next to the tank. When I unscrew the cap on the left tank I hear a sucking noise when air rushes in.

"Your cap vent is clogged," I say, holding up the cap and line. "Be just a second." I pull the line and try to blow through it, but nothing budes. "Maybe you have stronger lungs than me, being a runner and all," I tell Lane. I hand him the line and show him how to hold it. "Now blow into it as hard as you can."

He follows my directions and after a few seconds, debris flies out of the end of the tube. Lane smiles in victory and blows into it a few more times, clearing more gunk.

“How’s that?” he asks, handing it back.

“That’ll be perfect for now. I can clean it out better or replace it once we get back.” I replace the cap on the gas tank. “May take a couple of tries, but she’ll start.”

Lane stalks toward me and I squeal as he grabs me by the ass and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he spins us around. “I have never been so turned on in my life,” he growls. Lane’s lips crash against mine. He is tongue and teeth and desperate, greedy hands pulling me against his body. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Really? Because my ex wouldn’t let me do anything with the cars. Said that was a man’s job.”

“Well, I’m not emasculated by your fucking talent. I love it. And no talk of your ex when I just want to take you into the woods and fuck you senseless.” He rests his forehead against mine. “But you’re too good for that and I want to take my time.”

I kiss him this time. It’s with the same desperate longing I’ve always had when he’s touching me, saying all the right words. “God, I want you,” I say between panting breaths after I slide his bottom lip from between my teeth.

“Yeah?” he asks, eyes shining in the afternoon sun. I nod, my smile telling him everything he needs to know. He sets me back down on my feet. “We’re 10 minutes from town. I’ll get us there in five.”

I laugh as I pull my jacket back on and mount the bike behind him. She kicks to life on the third try and we are off, speeding down the highway toward what I know will be an unforgettable night.

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THE BIKE IS barely parked with the garage door closing behind us before we’re off the bike and onto each other. Lane pulls the zipper down on his own jacket and shrugs out of it as he kisses me senseless. I do the same with my own jacket. We are desperate moans and roaming hands as we stumble inside. Once the door closes behind us, Lane presses me against the wall. His arms cage around me protecting my head as we bounce from wall to wall, his mouth never leaving mine.

At the bottom of the stairs, he pulls my shirt over my head and drops it at our feet. My nervous hands pull at the hem of his shirt and when I can't seem to get it, he reaches behind his head and pulls it off. God, I am speechless and weak as I take in all the muscle and colorful ink. I think about tasting every inch of that skin, running my hands over every dip and curve of muscle, tracing the lines of his tattoos with my tongue.

"You keep looking at me like that and I'm going to take you right here," he says, slamming his hand against the wall next to my shoulder.

I unhook my bra and grin at him. "You've got to catch me first," I say, flinging my bra over my shoulder as I take off up the stairs.

His heavy footsteps are close behind me. Those arms I love wrap me up just as I hit the top step. Lane's large palms cover each breast as he spins us and pulls me back against his body. Grinding my ass against his crotch I hear him groan. His hands slide down and unbutton my jeans before he slides his fingers inside. Lane's lips place sucking kisses along my shoulder and neck, up to my ear.

"You see that last door on the right?" he asks, his voice raspy and low. I nod. "Get in there. Now."

I take off down the hall and duck into the room, stopping short when I see an entire wall of windows facing the lake. The sun is setting, painting the sky and water with gold and pink hues. The entire room glows. I see Lane enter the room in the reflection of the window.

"It's beautiful," I say, mesmerized by the picture perfect view.

He walks around me, facing me now, and runs his fingers along my hairline, brushing my hair behind my shoulder. "You are always beautiful," he says. "But in this light, you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

It's in this moment that our frantic desperation for each other turns into a slow-burning need to take things slow. Lane sits me down on the bed and unlaces my boots, pulling them off and setting them aside. His hands move over my legs before hooking onto the waist of my jeans. He grabs my panties too and slides everything off at once. There's a quick flash of panic, of wanting to cover myself, but it disappears when I look into his eyes.

The way Lane is looking at me is clear and undeniable. I memorize the sunset colors over his skin and how it casts soft shadows across the room. I watch the rise and fall of his chest and soon my own breathing matches his. We are motionless and silent, appreciating each other in every way.

When I can't resist anymore, my hands reach for him. They quickly unfasten his jeans as he kicks out of his boots. Lane pushes at his jeans, dropping them and his black boxer briefs in one motion. His large, hard cock springs free and I lick my lips at the sight. To know that I am responsible for that makes me smile. This gorgeous man wants me and I will never deny him again. He is perfection and I don't want to spend another minute of my sheltered life not touching him.

Lane climbs over me on the bed, his lips finding mine again. Our kisses are slow and intentional. His lips and hands move over my body until I am a writhing mess of want and desire. When his lips press below my navel, I know where he's headed. My body shakes with anticipation.

He slides off the end of the bed, landing on his knees on the floor. Lane grabs my ankles and pulls me toward him, my ass hanging off of the bed. He places my legs on his shoulders and moves in. Flattening his tongue, he licks the length of my center and I let out a little yelp when he slides over my clit. I can feel his mouth grin against my flesh.

Without warning, Lane's tongue flicks out again. My thighs twitch uncontrollably as he continues playing with me. My hands fist the soft sheets beneath me as I try to move against his face. He moans when I buck my hips and that is when all his teasing restraint is destroyed. His hands grab onto my hips as his lips and tongue work me over. My body is his, completely. It comes alive at his touch, every nerve channeling the raw energy between us. A swirling kind of tingling sensation starts in my fingers and toes, pulling into my center where Lane's mouth is connected to me. It builds and builds until I feel dizzy. An orgasm rips through me, causing my entire body to convulse and tremble, but he doesn't let up.

Finally, I beg him to stop. "Please," I whimper. "Please. I can't take anymore."

Lane kisses his way up my body before swiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. "Is it terrible that I love when you plead with me? That I love watching you hold on until you can't take another minute and then pushing you past that point?"

My pulse finally starts to slow as I place my hand on his jaw. "Nothing about *that* is terrible." He smiles and kisses me, again letting me taste myself on his lips. My hand moves to his cock and I stroke the smooth, warm skin a few times. Lane closes his eyes and sucks in a breath.

"Fuck," he whispers. "I can't wait to be inside you, Stella."

I scoot to the middle of his giant bed and get up on my knees while he crawls toward me. “How do you want me, babe?” I ask, my own hands sliding over my body. I can see the fire in his eyes, the predatory gaze levels me.

Lane practically tackles me, and we fall back together. His mouth is on mine again as I spread my legs and welcome him in. His cock slides between my wet thighs before he grabs it and teases my clit a few times.

“Are you ready?” he asks. I bite my lip and nod, knowing that I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life.

He moves his lips down to my nipple, licking and sucking before using his teeth. I moan so loudly I’m almost embarrassed. But the press of his hardness against my opening makes that feeling evaporate. Lane switches to my other breast while slowly pushing himself inside me. I gasp at the stretch of my body around him.

“Oh my god,” I breathe out. “Oh my god,” again when he keeps going, pushing until our bodies are pressed together.

Lane rests on his elbows hovering above me. He sweeps hair out of my face and traces the curve of my jaw. “Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I’m so good,” I say. One corner of his mouth lifts. “It’s been so long. And I’ve never...” I can’t find the words. “So, so good.”

He pulls almost all the way out and pushes back in again. We both exhale stuttering breaths. “Do you need me to be gentle?” Lane says against the shell of my ear.

“No,” I answer immediately. “I want all of you.”

“Then you might want to hold on,” he growls. My hands grab onto his shoulders as he places one soft kiss on my cheek before pulling out and pushing back in again. My nails dig into his skin as he increases his pace. Every time our bodies slam together, a tiny whimper escapes my lips. At first I am conscious of it, but after a few more pumps I have lost the ability to censor myself.

Soon I am full on moaning and calling his name. This only encourages Lane and his pace quickens even more. He pushes up to his knees while continuing to drive into me again and again. His eyes rake over my skin as he grabs both breasts and pinches my nipples between his thumb and forefinger. I cry out, loving the feel of Lane inside me and the bit of biting pain from his teasing.

His hands slide down my body and grab hold of my waist. The muscles of his arms bend and flex as he pulls me onto his cock at a pace so fast I can't keep up. I am putty in his hands as he commands my body and my universe. I love watching the way he moves. This man is passionate and somehow graceful as he fills me so completely. His face is beautiful. There's a line between his lowered eyebrows, a pout on his lips as he concentrates on watching his cock slide in and out of me. I squeeze my inner muscles to tighten around him and his movements freeze.

"Fuck," he grunts out. "Stella," he moans. One hand releases my waist and his fingers find their way to my center. Lane pushes into me at a relentless pace, finding his rhythm again as his thumb presses against my clit. "I'm close, baby. Are you?" he says.

My eyes roll back and I am breathless as an orgasm washes over me. Every muscle pulls tight and I scream his name as he pushes in a few more times before finding his own release. Lane hums in satisfaction as he falls over me, our sweat-slicked skin sliding against each other. He holds himself up on his forearms to keep his weight off of me. But I reach around his back and pull him down, wanting to feel every damn inch of this beautiful man.

Lane rolls us over, pulling me on top of him, as his chest pushes against mine with labored breaths. I place a kiss on his neck, then his jaw, and finally his lips. I want to bathe him in kisses to thank him for another new experience. I want to worship him for showing me just how amazing sex can be, for awakening a part of myself that I never knew existed.

I sit up with Lane still inside me, sticky and wet where we are joined and not even caring. "That was," I pause and search my head for a word accurate enough to express how I'm feeling, but I come up with nothing. His eyebrows raise in question when I don't say anything.

"Amazing? Incredible? Stupendous? Phenomenal? Heavenly? Magnificent? Mind blowing?" he asks.

"All of the above."

Lane grins and pulls me down to him. The light in the room has faded away and we are cloaked in shadows. He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. *I love you*, I say in my head. But I don't dare say them out loud. *I love you*.

Lane wakes me two more times in the night. The first time is fast and frenzied. He pulls me to my knees and takes me from behind while reaching around to finger my clit and make sure I come first. The second time I wake

curled on my side facing the window. The sun is coming up over the hills, the slightest hint of orange fading up from the horizon. Lane presses his body in behind mine, his cock already hard against my back. One hand glides over my hip and between my legs while the other slides under my head and laces our fingers together. He teases me until I am a mess, slick and ready for him. Pushing inside me slowly, we rock our bodies together at a torturous pace. I come from his fingers and again from the position before he pulls me tight against his chest and whispers my name as he orgasms. I want to tell him that I've never done that before, that he's given me so much in just one night. But exhaustion takes over and I am asleep again within seconds.

I wake to the smell of Lane's soap or shampoo. It wafts in from the adjoining bathroom. Pulling myself from the bed, I hope to find him in the shower, but the bathroom is empty. The air is still warm and humid, so I know he was here not long ago.

Before searching him out, I treat myself to a shower in his fancy bathroom. I let the steam and hot water wash away all evidence of our night together, but nothing can erase the memory of it. I have never felt so wanted, so desired, so ultimately satisfied in my life. A grin takes over my face when I feel the soreness in my thighs and between them, knowing that feeling will stay with me for a couple of days.

After towel-drying my hair, I grab one of Lane's t-shirts and throw it on over my naked body. I hear Chap bark and suddenly smell bacon. Staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I see a new woman. I see someone who has been brought back to life, who gambled on a second chance life and won the fucking lottery. I see someone I am finally proud to be.

When I step into the hall, I hear Chap bark again and realize it's coming from upstairs somewhere. I go from room to room, opening and closing doors as I search for him. I find two nicely decorated guest rooms, though one holds a treadmill and a few free weights besides the bed and nightstand. The bathroom brings back memories of the Halloween party and our first kiss. I can't keep the smile off my face as I close the door. Finally, I move across the hall and try the door that was locked during the party. The knob turns freely and I push the door open.

What I expect to find in Lane's office are books on accounting, filing cabinets and a few charts. What I *do* find sends my heart into my throat and makes my head spin.



CHAP RUNS PAST me, escaping from the room. There's an entire wall of windows like Lane's bedroom and I figure the entire back of the second floor must be glass. I squint against the rising sunlight and try to focus on one thing, but it's useless. My feet mindlessly carry me to the middle of the room. I don't register the movement until I step onto a soft rug that gives way beneath my bare feet. My eyes frantically skip from one shelf to the next, each holding many copies of Alaina Taylor novels. There are posters framed of each cover on the walls, along with awards and a giant #1 NYT Bestselling Author decal pinned to a corkboard. My mind works to piece together what I'm seeing, but I just can't.

A huge dry erase board with tons of sticky notes fills an entire wall. My gaze skims the handwritten notes, catching words like Las Vegas, green eyes, develop backstory. My fingers skim the notes in wonder. I round the desk and press a key on the desktop computer. It whirs to life and I see a document open, titled *Las Vegas 3 (working title)*.

"What?" I say, my voice strained from the tightness in my throat. My vision blurs as my watery eyes stare at the screen. I blink those tears away and they escape, carving silvery paths down my cheeks.

"Shit," I hear from the doorway.

My head snaps up to find Lane standing there, Chap at his feet, holding a tray with breakfast and a white flower in a vase. For some reason, I focus on that flower—the tiny ivory petals curling out from the center. I can't make myself meet Lane's gaze.

"What is this?" I ask, pressing my trembling hands into my ribs as I cross my arms.

"I can explain," Lane says. His words feel like the biggest betrayal, a knife in my back severing my spine and bringing me to my knees. There is

no rug here, so the hardwood floors send a shooting pain throughout my legs. It is nothing compared to the pain in my chest. “I was going to tell you.”

Folding my hands together, I place them over my heart hoping to stop the ache. “Are you Alaina Taylor?” I ask.

Lane sets the tray on the floor just inside the door and makes his way to me. He drops to his knees and reaches for me, but I sit back onto my heels out of his reach. “No. Answer my question.”

He rests his hands on his lap and blows out a long, slow breath. “Yes.”

That one word—three little letters—guts me. More tears fall as I try to latch on to a single emotion. It’s impossible with the chaos in my head. “How? I mean, the photo. I don’t understand.”

“It’s a retouched photo of Granny when she was younger. The name is hers too, but no one knows it, because it’s her maiden name.”

Suddenly, like a rubber band snapping against my skin, I find the emotion I’ve been searching for. Anger. Blinding rage and betrayal consume me and my vision blurs again. Stumbling to my feet, I back away from him and press myself to the glass window.

“You’re a liar,” I say from between clenched teeth. “Every time you said you worked in finance, every time you complained of working overseas, every damn thing was a lie.” Both hands fly to my still wet hair, gripping tight and pulling at the roots. “Oh god. Becca knows,” I said, finally meeting his gaze. Lane nods. A sob escapes my lips and I hate the sound of it in this empty room.

Lane gets to his feet and approaches me, his palms up like he’s approaching a wild animal. “Stella, please.” He’s begging, but I don’t know what for. I was betrayed and afraid once before and apparently did not learn my lesson.

“Please what?” I say through tears. “Believe you? Trust you?” I push past him, making my way out of the office and back to his bedroom. In a panic, I search the floor for my jeans.

“Stella,” he says from behind me.

“Just stop!” I yell. I scoot the jeans up my legs and pull my house key from my pocket. “I don’t want to hear anything else from you. Everything you said,” I gush, stopping to catch my breath and push down the blinding pain in my chest. “*Everything* was a lie.” The agony rises in my throat and tries to choke me.

I make my way past him into the hall and start for the stairs. He calls my name, but I ignore his pleading voice. Chap runs to me when I hit the bottom floor and that pulls even more tears from me. Swinging open Lane's front door, I throw myself onto the porch and cover my face with my hands. *Don't break down here, Stella. Keep it together for another 50 feet.*

"I love you."

I spin to face him standing in the doorway in some flannel pajama pants and no shirt. His strong arms are raised as his hands grip the doorframe. His muscles flex and strain as he holds himself there. My eyes are fire as I level him with a glare. Those words in this moment are what feels like the last blow in a fight I've painfully lost.

Turning away from him and his pleading eyes, I run to my house and throw myself inside. With the door closed behind me, I slide down to the floor and fall apart like the fool that I am.

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A POUNDING SOUND vibrates through my temple. I blink my eyes open and see the dust on my hardwood floors. I feel glued to the spot, unable and unwilling to move. The pounding starts again, but this time it's accompanied by Marley's voice.

"Stella!" she shouts through the door. "Open up, love," she says more gently. "We're here."

It takes every bit of energy I can muster to push myself from the floor and scoot over to the door. I twist the deadbolt open and lean against the wall. "It's open," I say, though it's not loud enough for them to hear.

The door swings open, bright daylight spills into the space and I squeeze my eyes shut. I pull up my knees and rest my forehead on them, a sufficient hiding space.

I hear my three friends come in. They move around me silently, their footsteps echoing on the floor. Still I hide. The door shuts and I finally look up. Marley, Kennedy, and Reagan all sit on my living room furniture, staring at me. They wait patiently for me to make the first move. Only, I can't. I am a frozen mess of hurt and embarrassment.

I meet each of their eyes, seeing nothing but sympathy and understanding there. "How did you know?" I ask, my raspy voice barely a sound in the open room.

“Lane,” Marley says. The name jabs at me. Another wound in my already wrecked body. “He called me and told me everything. Asked me to come check on you.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from crying again.

“That means Red Alert Hen Party 2.0,” says Kennedy.

“I don’t want a Hen Party. I don’t want to drink or eat my feelings. I just want you guys to tell me everything will be okay and I will not die from heartbreak.”

“You won’t die from heartbreak,” Marley says. She leaves her spot and sits on the floor facing me. “I’ve been there, love. I know it hurts. It’s okay to embrace that hurt.”

I raise my head and look at her pretty face—her sad, beautiful face. “How does this hurt more than when my husband of 20 years betrayed me? How? When I found my ex in bed with my friend my immediate reaction was anger. But right now, all I feel is pain.”

“You opened yourself up to him and he let you down,” Reagan says. “That’s going to hurt no matter what.”

“I still can’t believe he writes romance novels,” Kennedy says. Marley and Reagan shoot her a look, but I wave it off.

“While that is fucking crazy,” I say, “that is the least of my worries right now. I haven’t begun to process that information yet.”

“This is honestly the craziest real life shit I’ve ever heard of,” Marley says. She takes both of my hands in hers and squeezes them. “But we’re here. If you want to scream and shout, if you want to cry, if you want to break things, we’re here.”

“Let’s slash some fucking tires,” Reagan says. We all turn to her, eyes wide in surprise, before breaking into laughter.

When that dies down, the hurt and pain seep in again and I want to disappear. “This is unreal,” I say. “It’s like my brain can’t process the lies, on top of lies, on top of lies. I am such an idiot. I should have seen it. I should have known.”

Kennedy jumps from her chair. “You are not an idiot. With him force feeding you lies and being so charming, you couldn’t have known. Hell, we’ve lived here our whole lives and had no idea. He fooled everyone.”

There’s a complete minute of silence between us while I tamp down the tightness in my chest and learn to breathe through the pain. “He told me he

loves me,” I say. “A last minute declaration to try and keep me from running and telling his secret, I guess.”

“No way,” Marley says, releasing my hands, and pushing her pink bangs to the side. “That man has been in love with you since the first flash of your headlights. Of course, the daft prat waits until the wrong moment to say it out loud.”

“Of course,” Kennedy agrees.

I shake my head. “How can I believe anything he’s ever said?”

Reagan approaches now and sits with Marley and me on the floor. “I can’t vouch for him, Stella. I can’t tell you that everything he ever said was true. But I can tell you that I saw the way he looked at you and I would give anything for someone to look at me that way.”

“Chance does look at you that way,” Marley says, rolling her eyes. “You two are another ridiculous case, but we’re here for Stella today.”

“I just want to go to bed and wake up tomorrow and go to work. Rinse and repeat,” I say. “No neighbors. No cute dogs. No feelings at all.”

“Do you want us to leave?” Marley asks. I nod. “Is that what you really want?”

I think about being surrounded by my friends and having to talk about my feelings and what happened and I die a little more inside. “It is. Just let me be,” I plead. “I swear I’m okay. I’ll text you all tomorrow to prove it. I don’t need a Red Alert Hen Party. I need a day to myself.”

Marley grabs my face and forces me to meet her gaze. “I am trusting you to tell me what you need right now, love. If you change your mind, we are all a few minutes away. Will you truly be okay?” she asks.

I think about her question and know I can’t answer that honestly. I don’t know if I’ll be okay. I don’t know if I’ll ever recover from a betrayal like this—the second one in my lifetime. But I nod convincingly and they all gather their things.

The girls leave me with loads of wine and cupcakes and absolute silence. I don’t leave my place next to the door until I have to use the bathroom. It’s then that I drag myself up the stairs and into my bedroom to face my big bed and giant stuffed corgi. I peek through my curtains facing Lane’s house to find no movement from his home.

I close my eyes and wish for this to all be a nightmare that I can’t wake from, a plot twist in one of his novels. I wish for all this pain to go away. I

wish I never met him. But I'm a fool full of wishes. So, after using the bathroom, I fall into bed and wish for the world to disappear.

AFTER A WEEK of mourning, of avoiding my friends and calls from my family, I decide that life must go on. The pain still sits heavy in my gut and the betrayal still eats away at my insides like a festering disease that means to kill me, but I push that down and call my sister.

"It's about darn time," she says. "I was about to send out a search party for you. Why are you stressing me out? I'm pregnant. I do not deserve this." When I open my mouth to tell her what's happened, a sob escapes. "Oh, shit. What happened? It was the pretty boy, wasn't it?"

I get my crying under control and snuffle. "Yes."

"I'm so sorry, Stella." She sighs. "Want me to come up there and cut him? I've got a raging case of heartburn that is making me violent."

I shake my head, knowing she can't see it. "No. I'm just trying to stay above water, you know? I feel like I'm drowning."

"Ahh," Brea says. "You're still in the sad phase. Haven't reached the mad phase."

"I guess." There's a long silence between us. It doesn't feel awkward. I know she's thinking, processing. We've been through this before.

"Well, what happened?" she finally asks.

I lie down on my bed and curl onto my side with the phone. I tell Brea everything. Reliving the good times we had forces tears from my eyes. Remembering how happy I was in those moments makes my ignorance to the truth hurt that much worse. I tell her about our night together and what I found in the morning. I even tell her how every day, Lane comes here and pounds on my door, begging me to talk to him while I hide upstairs. Then I sit and wait for her words of support and encouragement, because I'm greedy for them.

"I cannot believe he's the author you love so much," Brea says. "What are the farfignewton chances?"

"One in a million zillion," I answer, while tracing the pattern on my duvet with my index finger.

"Wow. And all that lying about what he does for a living? He must be a fantastic actor. Bless his heart," she says.

"Bless his heart, Brea? He broke mine and that's all you've got to say?"

"Stella," Brea says, switching to her 'let's keep it real' voice. "I know what he did is awful. Keeping the truth from you and making you believe all the lies is terrible. But it's not like he was lying only to you."

I sit up, my head spinning. "What?"

"This was his secret from the world, Stella. What would you expect him to do? Confess to a new neighbor or a woman he's just started dating? No. He would have to wait until he trusted you, until you were both invested in that relationship."

"He's a liar, Brea. It's that simple."

"I don't think it's simple at all."

More tears fall down my face. "Stop being rational. It's pissing me off."

"Good," she says. "Get angry. Get so mad you want to strangle him. And when that passes? Talk to him."

"I can't believe this. I call you for support and all I get is..."

"Reason."

"Bye, Brea," I say, holding my phone out and staring at her smiling photo on the screen. "I'll talk to you later." Ending the call, I toss my phone on the bed and run my hands through my hair. I think about her words and as another wave of hurt washes over me, I decide I'm not ready to be rational yet.

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EACH DAY, I paste on a smile, go to work and ignore Becca's sympathetic looks. And each night I listen to Lane come by and knock. When that doesn't work, he calls. And when I don't answer, he sends me a text message. It's the same one every time. *Please talk to me, Stella.* I can't talk to him yet, because I can't shake free of the pain he's caused and the anger of now comparing him to my scumbag ex-husband. I try to believe that he is a better man than that, but my heart doesn't know the difference.



The days pass in a blur as I paste on the “I’m okay” face and keep pushing through life.

I stay inside for Halloween, holed up with my good chocolate and eat myself into a sugar high and crash. I can hear the kids moving through the neighborhood, but I don’t feel like facing anyone.

The girls come up with a plan to keep me busy until I’m ready to deal with Lane. The days grow colder each week and I stay occupied with work, baking with Kennedy, yoga with Reagan, and salsa lessons with Marley. I’ve even started a free video course to learn Spanish, though I’m terrible at it. My baking is improving and my last pie would have been edible if I wouldn’t have burned the bottom crust.

I’ve come to adore yoga. After making Marley promise no more shenanigans in class, I returned and embraced the practice. Reagan has really worked with me on my breathing techniques and meditation. I love how it makes me feel strong and in control—for one hour at a time, twice a week.

The salsa class has been a lesson in being hyper-aware of my body, my posture. Every motion is intentional and balanced by my partner’s reaction. Since we were the only two single ladies in the class, I was paired up with the instructor, Paulo. And Marley is with his assistant, Tom. “Of course you end up with the exotic, handsome fellow named Paulo while I’m stuck with Tom,” she complained after our first class. But Tom turned out to be a great partner. Dancing is such an amazing distraction that I don’t even mind when Paulo uses me as an example to teach the class something new. My chest pulls tight at the realization that that has everything to do with Lane and how he guided me to find confidence again.

The one thing I haven’t done since the fallout is pick up a book. I pass by my shelves and stare at them, like these pages of *his* bound words are somehow offensive and responsible. I’ve lost all desire to pick one up. Not only did my neighbor steal my heart, he also stole my joy. Coming to that realization is when I transition from sad to mad, just like Brea said.

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MY MOM DECIDES to not visit for Thanksgiving since Brea is due soon. I’m a little relieved. While I know she’d deliver the comfort I’m looking for, I’d also have to hear hours of advice filled with so many southern

colloquialisms we'd need a translator for anyone listening in. So the girls and I plan a Friendsgiving feast. I volunteer my house, because it's the only one big enough to host everyone and get all the cooking done.

I make my delicious turkey, stuffing, and carrot souffle. Marley brings salad, because she insists that's the extent of her kitchen skills. Reagan supplies all the veggies and Kennedy is in charge of dessert. Being in the kitchen all day, my eyes constantly drift out the window to Lane's house. I haven't seen any movement and I pretend not to care.

When the table is all set and the wine has been poured, the four of us sit down around my table. Marley shoves a piece of turkey in her mouth right before Reagan reaches over and slaps her hand.

"I think we should all say something we're thankful for this year," she says, giving Marley a dirty look.

"Fine," says Marley. "I'm thankful for the grapes that sacrificed themselves to make this wine and I'm grateful that you Americans are so obsessed with casseroles. Because that shit is goooooood."

"I'll go next," Kennedy says. "I'm thankful for another successful year for my bakery, for you girls, and for my Patagonia Micro Puff Hoodie, because you all *know* how I feel about the cold."

I smile over the rim of my glass as I take a sip of wine. I don't remember the last time I smiled.

"Okay," Reagan says. She grins and folds her hands together in her lap and bows her head as if in prayer. "I'm thankful for all of the plants and herbs that grow so freely and include the natural ingredients to help keep us healthy." Marley and Kennedy share a look. "I'm thankful for Godiva dark chocolate truffles, and for having such good friends who won't judge me for eating all this food today."

Marley throws another piece of turkey in her mouth. "Totally judging," she says to Reagan with a wink. Reagan rolls her eyes as Marley turns to me. "It's your turn, love."

I take a deep breath and blow it out toward the ceiling. "I'm so thankful for the three most fierce and loyal friends a girl could have." They all smile. "And I'm thankful for you guys too."

"Heeeey!" Kennedy says as the three of them laugh.

"I'm thankful for a job I love and for the freedom to explore who I am and who I want to be." Another deep breath as Lane enters my mind. This

time tears don't come and anger is absent. "And I'm thankful for a man who taught me to love me again."

"Even if he is a total tosser," Marley adds.

"The biggest tosser," I repeat, trying to mimic her accent.

"To us," Reagan says, raising her glass. We all clink them together over the table and start in on dinner.

After we stuff ourselves, the four of us lounge around in my living room, sipping wine and sharing our favorite songs with each other. I introduce the girls to some older stuff and they introduce me to dubstep, which was a big dub-nope for me.

"I ran into Joshua at the market in Hamilton yesterday," Marley says.

I swing my feet from over the side of the sofa to the floor, sitting up now. "And?" I ask.

"He was alone, if that's what you're wondering," she continues. I shake my head. "Anyway, after I insulted his sweater vest, he asked about you."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that I wasn't a daft cow willing to spill secrets about her friend to the enemy. He got all offended that I called him the enemy and that little vein on his forehead started throbbing." She grins widely, like she secretly likes the way that little vein behaves just for her. "Anyway, he confessed that Lane is a mess without you."

"Good," Kennedy says. I nod, but don't know how I feel about that.

"If he's such a mess, why has he given up on you? He stopped coming by, right?" Reagan asks. I nod again. "Where's the grand gesture? Where is the effort? Where is the persistence of a man who says he's in love?"

We all stare at Reagan and her newfound passion. "What the hell was that?" Kennedy asks.

Reagan looks at her feet, her hands fidgeting in her lap. "I, uh, I might have started reading Alaina Taylor novels," she spits out so fast it takes us a few seconds to catch up.

"You what?" we all screech in unison.

She looks at me. "I'm sorry. After I borrowed that one book from you, I was hooked." She motions to my shelf. "I did return it, by the way. But you always said how good they were and how the men were so dreamy and romantic. After finding out that Lane wrote them, curiosity got the best of me. I'm so, so sorry, Stella. Do you hate me?"

A tiny smile pulls up the corner of my mouth. “I don’t hate you,” I say, slumping back against the sofa. “They really are great books.”

I glance to my built-in shelves and the rows of books lining the wall. Thinking about my favorite ones and how many amazing stories Lane has written at such a young age makes me proud. But Reagan is right, I do long for the grand gesture—something one of his characters would do. I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive him, but I long for this man to beg for absolution and make me believe that he needs it. I want to know that he shares in this hurt, and that he can’t possibly live in a world without me.

Out of nowhere, we hear tires screeching and someone yelling. We look to each other and scramble for the front door. I slip into my boots and run out onto the front porch to see Lane on his knees in the street. Chap lays motionless between him and a delivery van.

"NO!" I SHOUT, taking off for the street. Tears already fill my eyes as I drop to my knees next to Lane. "Is he...?"

"He's still breathing," he says, devastation already evident on his face.

"Then, let's get him to the vet." Lane doesn't move, his body frozen, his eyes glossed over.

I place my hand on his arm. It jolts him out of shock and into action. "Let me get my keys," he says. Lane jumps up and takes off toward his house.

The van driver stands over us. "I'm so sorry," he says. "I tried to stop in time."

I ignore him and scoot closer to Chap's head. Leaning down, I gently place a hand on his head and talk to him. "It's going to be okay, Chap. We're here. You're going to be okay, boy." Even as I say the words, tears fall from my eyes and land on his tan fur.

Lane's garage door slides open and he backs his truck out into the street. He hops out with a blanket and wraps it around Chap, lifting him and putting him in the truck. Without thinking, I hop in too.

"I've already called Dr. Kent to meet us there," he says. I nod and keep my hand on Chap, continuing to talk to him in a calm voice. Lane races through the streets of the neighborhood and we make it to the vet's office just as Dr. Kent does.

"Get him inside," Dr. Kent calls over his shoulder as he unlocks the building and flips on the lights.

Chap whimpers as Lane scoops him up and carries him inside. I grab the keys from his truck and follow them in. We're led into a cold, sterile room and Dr. Kent motions to a metal table. Lane gently lays Chap on the table. He bends down and presses his forehead to Chap and talks to him.

"Hang in there, buddy," he says. "You'll be okay."

I cross my arms over my chest to keep from falling apart and tuck myself into the corner of the room. I feel out of place here. I shouldn't have come.

Dr. Kent examines Chap, running his hands along his body. Chap blinks at me from across the room. When Dr. Kent moves to his leg, Chap lets out a cry. I'm at Lane's side in a second, trying to be supportive the only way I know how.

"Looks like a broken leg and a minor laceration on his rump. I'll need to do an x-ray to check for internal damage, but the fact that he's still lucid is a good sign. You guys can stay here while I take him."

Dr. Kent rolls the metal table away as Lane and I watch Chap disappear. Lane drops into a chair, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hand.

"Fuck," he whispers. "Fuck."

I take a seat next to him, feeling unsure about what my role here is. I place a hand on his back and rub small circles there. I feel Lane's body sag under my touch and know that he needs me here and I made the right decision. He exhales a long breath, wipes at his eyes and lifts his face to meet mine.

"He's going to be okay," I say.

Lane shakes his head. "You don't know that."

I look down at my lap. He's right. I don't know anything. "Let's just keep a positive attitude until we know otherwise, right?"

He nods. I return my hand to my lap and we sit in silence for a few minutes. My knees bounce up and down as time seems to drag by slower than normal.

"Thank you for coming," Lane says, sitting back in his chair and resting his head on the cinderblock wall behind us.

"Of course."

Lane rolls his head towards me, but I stare straight ahead. I tell myself to keep it together, be strong for Chap. I know that one look at Lane will destroy any strength I currently possess.

"Stella," he says, but stops when Dr. Kent pushes through the door with Chap.

"Good news," the doctor says. "No internal bleeding. Just the cut and broken leg." We both sigh in relief, as I pat Lane's knee. "I'll have to sedate him a bit to set the break and stitch up the cut. I'd like to keep him here overnight to watch him, but he should be able to go home tomorrow."

“He’ll be here alone?” I ask, scooting to the edge of my chair.

“No,” Dr. Kent says, pausing. “I’m sorry. I don’t know your name.”

“I’m Stella.”

“No, Stella. I’ll have one of my techs come in for a night shift. And I’ll be back in the morning. Lane, I’ll keep you updated.”

Lane stands and I follow him to the table. He scratches between Chap’s ears and rests his hand on the table. Chap nudges Lane’s fingers before licking them. I smile.

“Same old dog, always looking for attention,” I say.

“I’m going to leave you here tonight,” Lane says, looking Chap in the eyes. “But I’ll be back for you tomorrow. And we’ll have a long talk about the fucking heart attack you gave me.”

I chuckle. And run my hand over Chap’s head a few times. “You’ll be back on your lil stumps in no time.”

“Thank you, Dr. Kent,” Lane says, holding out a hand for the veterinarian to shake. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. He’s in good hands,” Dr. Kent replies as we head for the door.

We walk through the quiet building and Lane pushes out the front door, holding it open for me. It’s not until now that I realize I don’t have a coat and it’s freezing. I wrap my arms around myself, rubbing to generate some heat. We climb into the truck and Lane puts the heater on full blast.

“Sorry, it’ll take a few minutes to warm up.” He twists in his seat and looks in the back. “I think I have a jacket in here.” Lane pulls a tan jacket from behind me and hands it over. I pull it on without hesitation. Humming at the bit of warmth it provides. Zipping it up, I duck my nose inside to warm my face and get hit with the scent of Lane Holder. That familiar ache returns as I realize how much I miss him.

Lane backs out of the driveway and hits the road back toward our neighborhood. We are only a couple of minutes into the drive when he slams on the brakes and pulls to the side of the road. Gravel crunches under the tires as we come to a stop.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my face still buried in his jacket.

He doesn’t look at me, just stares out the front windshield at the empty road in front of us. “You haven’t spoken to me in weeks,” he says with a sigh. “If this is the only way, so be it. Stella, I miss you.”

Just as he turns to look at me, I turn to look out the window. I blink away tears, because he doesn't get to see me cry. When I remain quiet, he goes on.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner about the books. But it's a big secret to tell and it's not just my secret, you know? Besides my agent and publisher, four other people know and that's it."

I inhale slowly and try to clear my head. "I understand," I say, finally turning to meet his eyes. "It's just, I've never felt so betrayed, so blind-sided. And I'm the woman who found her husband of twenty years in bed with her skank best friend!"

"I understand," he says, repeating my words.

"You knew what I'd just been through. You knew how leery I was of trusting anyone and you convinced me to take a chance on you. I did and look where it got me." I drop my eyes to my lap and hold my hands in front of the vents to warm them.

"Stella," he says. When I don't look up. "Stella," he repeats. "We were happy, right?"

I lean my head against the cool glass, pressing my flushed cheek to the window. "All relationships are happy at first."

"We were not *all* relationships," he says. "We were special. We still are. Just give me a second chance and I'll prove it. I'll tell you anything you want to know—answer all your questions."

My mind spins with questions and possibilities and I just can't force anything to stick. "I don't know, Lane. How could I ever trust you again?" I throw my hands up before tucking them into the pockets of his jacket.

"I don't have any other secrets, Stella. Besides this one little thing, you know me."

My head whips toward him now. "One little thing? I'd say this is a big thing, Lane. You let me go on and on, gushing about my love for Alaina's... your novels. I feel like a fool. It's a feeling I'm too familiar with to let go of. Please just take me home."

"Babe," he pleads.

"Please," I whisper, turning to the window again. That nickname cuts through me. Lane puts the truck in drive and pulls back onto the road. Once he is parked in his garage, I start to remove his jacket.

"Keep it," he says. "You can return it later."



I shake my head, shrug out of the jacket and leave it in his truck, along with my dried up tears and doubtful heart.

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DECEMBER FIRST, BREa gives birth to Ashley. He's a perfectly healthy baby with a round face and an obnoxious amount of black hair on his head. I relish every photo she sends and even get to see him when we video chat. Brea looks exhausted, but sublimely happy—even with my mother staying with them. I'm sad to miss such a big event and twice I almost buy airline tickets back home before stopping myself. As much as I'd love to see them, the chance of running into my ex and his dick bait in my emotional state scares me to death.

By the middle of December, the cold has really kicked in and we've gotten our first snow. I'm out in the front yard with Marley, spinning in circles until I'm so dizzy I have to lean against my car. We make snowballs and throw them at each other and a tiny little snowman. Just as I am wrapping my scarf around Sir Chilly Balls—named by Marley—I hear the telltale sound of Lane's front door opening and shutting.

My head snaps up as I slowly stand and face him. Somehow, in this tiny town and living 50 feet away, it's the first time I've seen him since returning from the vet. Marley stays silent as we stand in our driveways, just staring across the yard. Just the sight of him stirs a dormant ache in my chest, a tightening in my gut. His eyes are pleading. For what? I don't know. Forgiveness? A conversation? Nothing I am prepared to give. Finally, he gives me a tiny grin and a wave before tucking in his earbuds and taking off in the opposite direction.

"Well, that wasn't awkward," Marley says. We head inside and warm up with some hot chocolate.

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"EXHALE," REAGAN says to the class. "Aaaand we're done. See you next week."

Everyone packs up and heads for the door while Marley, Kennedy, and I sit on our mats near the front mirrors. Reagan tells the last person goodbye and joins us on the floor.

“I cannot believe I let you guys talk me into this,” Kennedy says. “I cannot sit still or quiet for this long. Yoga is not my jam.”

Marley lays back on her mat, and rolls over to lay on her stomach. “Well, I love it. It makes me more flexible, which is super helpful when you’re trying to nail every position in the Kama Sutra.”

“Overshare,” Reagan says, smacking Marley on the ass.

“What? I have a checklist. And don’t get cheeky just because you’re not getting laid,” Marley says. She looks at all three of us. “Oh my god. I’m the only one currently getting shagged. This is a Hallmark movie moment,” she says, miming wiping away a tear.

“Oh, please,” Reagan says. “You’re way too dirty for Hallmark. You’re an HBO special if I ever saw one.”

“God, I miss sex,” I say, not even realizing it was out loud. All eyes turn to me. “What? It only happened once, but it was good. Very fucking good. Like erect a golden statue of Lane and worship it good. Just reminded me of what I’ve been missing.”

“You said erect,” Marley points out.

Kennedy nudges my shoulder. “Don’t worry. He didn’t ruin sex. He ruined your trust in him. There’s a difference.”

“I know,” I say, waving a hand in her direction. “And I miss him so much. That man gave me more in a couple of months than my ex gave me in twenty years. He helped me rediscover my confidence and sexuality. Of course I’m indebted to him for that.” I tighten my ponytail and brush my bangs from my eyes. “Chap is recovering well, so cute in his cone of shame. I just want to snuggle that dog and his owner and forget what happened.”

“Then do it,” Marley says with a groan. “Stop being such a drama llama.”

I chuckle. “Stop stealing my shit,” I say. She smiles. “I don’t know. I’m waiting for the grand gesture. I need to know that he was serious when he said he loved me. That it wasn’t a desperate plea to make me stay. That I’m not a passing phase and he’s not my rebound guy. That’s reasonable, right?”

Marley sits up now and takes both of my hands in hers. “You will never be certain of any of those things until you give him a chance.”

“Stella,” Reagan says, “this man wants to love you so much. We can all see it so plainly. You just have to let him. You’ve been ignoring him for weeks now. I know you want him too. What’s stopping you?”

I rest my chin on my pulled up knees and shrug. “You guys want to see pictures of my baby nephew?” I ask.

They all squeal and smile over photos of Ashley and I’ve done my job at distracting them from making me face reality. I’m getting good at distraction. Too good.

ALL IT TAKES to decide to return home for Christmas is my niece asking. She shows me a sleeping Ashley and turns the screen back toward her face.

“Auntie Stella, are you coming home for Christmas? I really miss you so much and I need to show you all my new tiaras.”

I smile as she twirls with the phone. “Sure, sweetie. I’ll come home. Tell your mommy I’ll call her tomorrow.”

“Yaaaay!” she shouts. “Bye! I love you!”

“Love you too, Scarlett.”

My next call is to Becca, asking if she’d be okay with me taking some time off. She says since her daughter is in for the month, it’s not a problem. She even offers to pick up my mail while I’m gone. I thank her and hop online to book my ticket. I’ll fly out two days before Christmas and return a week later. The girls have all decided to gather at my place for New Year’s Eve since Hamilton Bay does an enormous fireworks display out on the lake.

Excited about a trip back home—and especially warmer temperatures—I pack my suitcase that night. I take my time, making sure I’ve thought of everything. By the time I’m finished, I’ve got my suitcase by the door with my carry on bag, which is stuffed with snacks, my printed out itinerary, my e-reader, passport, and phone charger. Just two more days of work and I’ll be back in the South where, even with the humidity, I’ll be able to breathe a little easier.

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THE MORNING OF my flight is a complete disaster. First, I sleep through my alarm and wake up in a panic. I’ve got no time for a shower, so I spray

enough dry shampoo in my hair that the cloud chokes me. Throwing a few last minute toiletries into my bag, I zip it up and drag it down the stairs with my carry on over my shoulder. The weight and momentum of the suitcase makes me lose my balance and I fall down the last three steps.

“Ow,” I groan, getting to my feet and rubbing my surely bruised ass. I shoot a death glare at the suitcase and yank it back up to standing on its wheels.

I drag everything onto the front porch only to find that it snowed last night. While I’m lucky that the plow has already been by, I am not lucky that it somehow pushed a huge pile of snow into my driveway, blocking my car.

“What the Christmas crackers is this?” I say, throwing up my hands in surrender. I’ll never make it to the airport in time. I look over to see that Lane’s driveway is pretty clear and with his truck he could make it out of here no problem. So, I suck up my pride and march across the white covered yard to knock on his door.

I hear Chap bark inside and by the time my third knock pounds on the door, it swings open. Lane is standing there, all sleepy-eyed and tousled hair. He’s got flannel pajama pants on and no shirt. Chap runs out to greet me.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s early, but I’ve got to get to the airport and I’m afraid my Subaru cannot climb that mountain of snow at the end of my driveway. Is there any way you can drive me to Syracuse?” He rubs at his eyes and runs a hand across his bare stomach. “Like now? I’m already running late and I really don’t want to miss this flight. It’s the holidays. There probably aren’t any other flights. I’d be put on standby and spend hours, possibly days sitting in the terminal. I’d probably run out of snacks after like an hour since I eat when I’m nervous.”

Lane chuckles and holds out a hand to stop me. “Okay, okay,” he says. “Let me put a shirt on. Come in.”

Chap and I follow him inside. I give my buddy a few belly rubs and watch as Lane takes the stairs two at time. Opening the door to the garage, I drag my suitcase and bag in there and wait for Lane. He’s only a few seconds behind me, still in pajama pants. He’s added a thermal shirt, his glasses, a coat, and boots.

He unlocks the truck and hits the button to open the garage doors. I climb into the passenger seat while he loads my stuff in the back. Lane starts the

truck and turns the heater on as I buckle up.

“It’s usually only 30 minutes, but the snow could slow us down,” he says backing out of the driveway, slushing through the snow. “I’ll get you there as fast as I can.”

“Thank you,” I say, rubbing my gloved hands together for warmth. “I really appreciate it. Here I am being a damsel in distress again.”

“If it makes you feel better, pretend we’re just friendly neighbors helping each other out.”

I sink into my seat and blow out a breath. “After what you made me feel...” I stop and look down at my fidgeting hands. “I don’t think I’d be good at pretending anything.”

With the rush and the frantic blundering earlier, I didn’t have time to feel anything. But now, trapped in this truck with him for the next half hour, my stomach twists in knots. I practice my breathing techniques to calm my pulse and stare out of my window.

A strange sensation, like a slight tingle, starts in my thighs and travels up, settling in my ass. It’s mild at first, but with each second it grows more and more intense. I squirm a bit, trying to get some relief, but it’s still there. Starting to panic, I use my hands to push up and try to get my butt off the seat, but the seatbelt keeps me in place. It really feels intense now and I think I may be having an allergic reaction or something.

“Are you okay?” Lane asks, glancing over and then back to the road.

“My ass!” I shout. “My ass is burning!” Lane bursts out laughing and presses a button on his dashboard. “I have some kind of flesh eating disease and you’re laughing?”

“It’s just the seat warmers. I turned it down,” he says through more laughter.

I sink back into the seat and realize that it is just warmth radiating up through the leather seat bottom. I exhale and cover my face with both hands.

“Oh my god, I am such an idiot,” I say while still hiding.

“You’re not an idiot. What would a woman from Georgia know about seat warmers?” he asks.

I drop my hands to my lap and grin. “Can we just pretend this never happened?” I beg.

Lane shrugs. “I’ll think about it.” His eyes slide to me for a moment. “God, I miss that smile of yours.”

Those words make my smile disappear, but I want to tell him I miss him too. Instead I lean against the glass and watch the miles fly by. The rest of the drive is silent until we get to the airport. I point out which airline I'm flying out of and Lane pulls to a stop outside the doors. I grab my carry on bag and wait on the curb, checking my phone for the time. A few people stand outside smoking, but it's too cold for anything else.

I spin to face the truck to see what's taking Lane so long and find him waiting there with my suitcase. He rolls it over to me. Our hands connect on the handle and this simple touch brings back every touch.

"I gotta go," I say, motioning to the building. He nods and I turn toward the doors.

"You're coming back, right?" he asks.

I stop and turn to look at him over my shoulder. "Yes. *This* is my home now."

Lane grins and I head inside, making my flight with only a few minutes to spare.

RETURNING TO SAVANNAH for the holiday is just what I need to recharge emotionally. Luckily, I had already done all my shopping and had mailed everyone's gifts ahead of time. So, there was no last minute shopping or any of that stress. I just spend time with my family, meet my new nephew and enjoy the warmer temperatures.

Because my mother is staying with Brea to help take care of the baby, I decide to stay at Mom's. I didn't want to crowd them anymore than they already are. While my days are kept busy with visits and spoiling my niece and nephew, my nights are lonely. Being alone in this old house just reminds me of how much I miss my dad. When it gets to be too much, I climb behind the wheel of his vintage Chevy and just sit in the garage. I can almost hear his voice asking me for the socket wrench or teaching me how to listen to the timing belt.

My last day in town, everyone comes to my Mom's house for a change. Brea cooks her famous gumbo while I entertain the kids. Mom constantly asks how life up north is and Brea—being the amazing sister that she is—constantly redirects the conversation.

That afternoon, Mom, Brea, and I are gathered around the dining room table drinking coffee. Heath, Brea's husband, has put Ashley down for a nap and Scarlett is currently painting his toenails a bright pink color. He's a good man and a great father. Just seeing how much Scarlett loves him makes me ache for a family of my own. I sigh and sip my coffee.

"I have something I want to give you girls," Mom says, setting her mug down and digging through her oversized purse. She pulls out two blue velvet boxes. She slides the larger one to me and the small one to my sister.

Brea opens hers first and finds a set of diamond earrings. I lift the lid on my box to find a delicate necklace with a crescent moon charm. I remember



seeing my mom wear this when I was a kid. I always loved it.

“Mom, why are you giving us these?” I ask.

“They were gifts from your father,” she says. “Of course you girls will get everything when I’m gone, but I don’t like the idea of these things just sitting around until then. I want you to have them now.”

We’re all teary eyed when Scarlett comes in with Heath to show off his pink toes. “Everything alright?” Heath asks.

Brea nods and stands from the table. “I’m going to start packing up the kids’ stuff so we can head home soon,” she says. She grabs both of our boxes. “I’ll put this in your suitcase since I’m getting Ashley up from his nap in your room.”

Half an hour later, the kids are loaded up and we’ve said our goodbyes. Mom, Heath and the kids wait in the car while Brea lingers.

She wraps me in our fourth hug and squeezes. “I’m going to miss you, but I understand why you had to go.” She swipes under her eyes. “Ugh. Don’t mind me. I’m still a hormonal mess.”

“I’ll miss you too, but we’ll talk soon,” I say, tugging on her ponytail.

“Keep me updated on that whole pretty boy neighbor situation.” I nod. “Especially after you read what I found in your suitcase.”

My eyes go wide. “What?” I ask, my head whipping back to the house and then to her face.

“Well, I figured the necklace would be safest in that zippered compartment in your suitcase, but there was something already in there. From Lane.” My mind races as my heart thunders against my chest. Brea practically squeals. “Go,” she says, giving me a wave.

I sprint back into the house and throw the door closed. On top of my suitcase, I find a black notebook sitting wrapped in red ribbon. There is a small white card tucked beneath the ribbon and I recognize Lane’s handwriting immediately. I run my hand over the smooth matte cover and slide the card out.

“Merry Christmas, Stella,” I read aloud. “Lane.”

Sliding the ribbon off, I fall into the armchair near the window and open the notebook. The first page is short and sweet.

*Stella,*

*I am a writer. And that is the only side of me that you don’t know. I’ve written to you every day since we’ve been apart. Some pages are simply filled with words that make me think of you. Others are stories that I wanted*

*to share, or thoughts on where I went wrong. Please know that this is me. All of me.*

*With love, Lane.*

I spend hours reading through the entire notebook. My heart breaks when he talks about how he started writing stories when he was just eight years old about men who were better than every man who'd ever been with his mom. His granny recognized his talent very early on and encouraged him to embrace writing.

Lane talks about his struggle with keeping this secret from people that he cares about and how his publisher pressured him into releasing his debut title under a pen name as a woman. After that book took off, he felt stuck in that role and just kept going along with it.

One of my favorite entries is the day he saw Marley and me playing in the snow. I read it three times, a wide grin on my face at the magic of his words.

*I didn't know you were outside. So, to step out into our first snow and see you so utterly happy made my heart break a little. You looked carefree and beautiful with wisps of hair spilling out of your knit cap framing cheeks reddened from the cold. I wanted to take a photo of your smile and bright eyes with the soft flakes falling around you—like the most picturesque scene in a shaken snow globe. You looked ethereal and I wanted to be the one sharing that moment with you. When our eyes connected, that all vanished. To know that I was responsible for stealing your joy made me feel unworthy of a woman like you.*

The last entry is an entire page of long, SAT-worthy words.

*acrimony, infinitesimal, idiosyncratic, perfunctory, equivocate, sycophant, cacophony, Machiavellian, ubiquitous, fastidious, dichotomy...*

I read through every word, picturing his smug face and his deep voice whispering them against my ear. At the bottom of the page, the list stops. There is a final entry scribbled in a handwriting that seems more hurried, more desperate than those before it.

*Stella, before I met you I thought I had everything I needed. And now that you're gone, I realize that wasn't true. I want to give you the world. Please say you'll be a part of mine again. I am lost without you. P.S. Chap misses your belly rubs and the scraps of food you used to sneak him that you thought I didn't know about.*

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MY ENTIRE FLIGHT home, all I can think about are all the pages of that notebook. Marley picks me up from the airport and I know I'll face the inquisition on the drive back to Grace. I try to distract her with stories from my trip, but she's not having it.

"Yes, yes. Your family is the bees' knees," she says. "Tell me about the notebook."

I exhale a laugh. "I'm not sure what else there is to tell. Lane wrote me a letter every day that we were apart. They are very personal and I'm not going to share every detail with you."

She shakes her head and grins. "That man is so special. I mean, who writes letters anymore? The most I get is a note scribbled on a restaurant receipt saying, 'Call me' with a number. What are you going to do?" she asks.

"I don't know. There's a million things in his pro column and just one in the con column. The answer seems clear, right?"

"Right."

"But it's not," I say. "Because that one thing was a BIG one thing."

Marley keeps her eyes on the road. "Stella, I know that you can learn to trust him again. But all of these other things? The way he makes you feel about yourself? The way he adores you? The way he makes you come so hard your toes curl? Well, you can't find all those things. At least, not in the same man."

"I know."

"I mean, I'd have to piece together 8 or 9 men to build one mega man to get everything you have waiting on you back home."

"I know."

"And the shaggin' is good, so let go of all these feelings of betrayal and let the man redeem himself."

I look out the window and sigh. She's right. I know she's right. I want to be with him and he wants to be with me. The only thing holding us back is my guarded heart and stubborn head.

"I'm going to do it," I say, when we're a few minutes outside of town. "He's the hero of my story, Marley."

"That's my girl," she says, fist pumping.

THE FOUR OF us are sitting on my upstairs balcony facing the lake. There is wine and champagne pouring freely while we nibble on sweets from Kennedy's bakery. We're bundled up and trying to stay warm until the fireworks start in about an hour.

I tell Kennedy and Reagan all about Lane and his letters. Afterwards, they look at me with big doe eyes and declare that if I don't want him, they do. While I doubt they are serious, this stirs a latent kind of jealousy in me. In the quiet of the night, that spirals into seeing him with other women around town. The mental image alone steals my breath and I know I've got to talk to him soon.

"So, you haven't seen him since you've been home?" Reagan asks.

I shake my head. "No. I don't know if he's still busy with work or if he's avoiding me, but there's been no signs of life next door—not even Chap."

"Wow," Kennedy says. "He drops a bomb like that in your lap and then disappears. Men. Pssh. Who needs them?" Marley, Reagan and I raise our hands. We all look around and burst into laughter. "Touché," says Kennedy. "But that's why I like to keep my options open."

I sit up taller now, feeling the wine make my head a bit light. "Are you a lesbian?" I ask.

"Would it matter to you?" she asks, leveling me with a gaze.

"Not at all. You're hot. If I was interested in playing for that team, I'd do you."

"Hey!" Marley shouts as if she's offended.

"Your cougar tendencies are strong," Kennedy replies. "I like it."

"I'm still mad that I haven't seen Sandra and Dee," Marley pipes in, finishing her glass of wine.

“And you’ll have to stay mad,” I say. “With all the layers of clothing I have on right now, I couldn’t get to my tits with a shovel and guided directions from GPS.”

We all laugh and fall quiet, looking out over the dark lake to the twinkling lights of Hamilton Bay. “I’m so glad I moved here,” I say. “And met you ladies.”

“We are too,” Reagan says, reaching over and squeezing my hand.

“A few minutes before midnight,” Kennedy says. “We need some more bubbly.” She stands and heads downstairs to restock us before the new year.

I think about the upcoming year and all the possibilities. But the fact is, everything is uncertain until I talk to Lane.

“Stellaaaaa!” I hear a shout from my yard. We all stand and look down to find Lane and Chap standing in the grass. “Stellllaaaaaa!” he shouts again.

“Oh my god,” Marley says. “Is he drunk?”

The motion sensitive light on my back porch kicks on, illuminating the two. Lane is in a white t-shirt and jeans. He must be freezing. His blue eyes shine in the light as he places one fist over his heart and holds the other hand out toward me.

“Stellllllaaaaaaaaa!” he shouts, his voice laced with desperation. It doesn’t feel like acting. His expression, the way his hand clutches at the white t-shirt over his chest, all point to a man in real pain.

“No,” Reagan says. “He’s reenacting *A Streetcar Named Desire*.”

A smile takes over my face and I can’t help but laugh. “You’re going to freeze!” I shout down to him.

Lane shoves his hands into his jeans pockets and looks up at me through those thick black lashes. “Worth it,” he shouts back. “Did you get my gift?”

I nod and blink my watery eyes. “I did.”

“And?” he asks.

I look at Marley and Reagan, they give me a nod. “Get your ass up here!” I shout. “You too, shortstack!” I say to Chap.

Kennedy walks onto the balcony with two bottles of champagne. “What did I miss?” We all just laugh.

A few moments later, Lane and Chap appear in my bedroom. His hair is wild like he’s been running his hands through it. The beautiful tattoo sleeve is visible with him in short sleeves and I crave to follow those lines back to where they converge over his heart.

“Hi,” he says, his chest rising and falling quickly.

“Hi,” I answer.

“You want to make this full circle and flash me your boobs again?” he asks.

“Shut up and kiss me,” I say. Three giant steps and I am in his arms again. Lane’s chilled skin wraps around me and I have never wanted to be anywhere more than I want to be here. “Where is your damn coat?”

“There are no coats in balcony scenes set in New Orleans.”

The first blast sounds through the air and the sky lights up red behind us. “Well, grab that blanket and come see.” The fireworks display is amazing.

“Happy New Year!” Marley shouts, popping a bottle of champagne open and topping us all off while we watch the fireworks.

We all clink our glasses together and turn back toward the lake. But not Lane. He holds me from behind, nuzzling his face in the crook of my neck.

“I’ve missed you,” he says.

I turn to face him now as the sky turns from blue to a sparkling white. The booming sounds rattle the windows. “I missed you too.”

“Do you forgive me?” I bite my lip and nod. Lane looks down at me, his gaze so intense I feel my pulse quicken. There in front of my friends and the most brilliant start to a new year ever, Lane kisses me until my knees grow weak and he’s holding me up against the balcony rail.

When the sky is dark and quiet again, I don’t even realize that the girls have left us alone until I look around. “Those are good friends you have,” he says.

“Well, I doubt they’ll want to witness all the naughty things I’m about to do to you.”

“I really think you underestimate them,” I point out.

I pull Lane inside and fall onto my bed with him where he kisses me as he peels the layers of clothing from my body. When I feel like I’ll burst from his teasing hands and lips, he stops and holds his body over mine. Lane’s eyes pin me in place.

“Will you let me be a part of your happily ever after?” My grin is all the answer he needs.

IT'S THE MIDDLE of the afternoon. Bright light pours in through the wall of glass in Lane's bedroom, painting us in light and shadows. He lays beside me trying to catch his breath after our third round of sex today.

Once all of the drama and secrets were out of the way, our relationship was able to bloom and grow into something completely satisfying and all encompassing. Lane is voracious when it comes to our sex life and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up. But I surprised myself, because my need for him is bigger than life and that includes everything physical too.

"Can I just say that your ex is a fucking moron?" he asks.

I laugh. "I mean, you can say it, but I'd rather not talk about my ex while naked and in bed with you."

He holds up both hands. "Of course," Lane says. "Please forgive me."

"You are forgiven. This time. But make sure it doesn't happen again or there will be hell to pay."

"Hmm. I look forward to it, mistress."

"Oh, mistress? I could get used to that." I rest my hand on his neck, my thumb skimming the line of his jaw. "Is that something you'd like to explore?"

Lane stares up at the ceiling. "I don't know. I think I'd do just about anything to make you happy, but I'd much rather have you tied up and at my mercy."

An immediate surge pulses through my body before centering on my gut. "That sounds amazing," I say.

"Noted," he answers. "You never cease to surprise me, Stella Locke."

"Good. It keeps things interesting. And I've got one more surprise for you at dinner."

He chuckles. “You still think you can out-gift me? No way your Valentine’s Day gift is better than mine.”

“We’ll see,” I tease in a singsong tone.

We lay in silence for a few minutes, basking in the glow of everything that we are together. *And phenominal sex. Did I mention phenominal sex?*

“So when Nelson left the rest of the gang behind, he was really doing it to save them?” I ask, running my hand over Lane’s bare chest.

He chuckles. “Yes.” Lane rolls onto his side and props up on one elbow. “You’ve been asking me questions about my novels for over a month now. Don’t you know everything you need to know?”

“Nope. I don’t know anything about the next book in the For Love or Money Series.”

He grins down at me, his fingers trailing up my forearm. “That’s because that book doesn’t come out until next month and you don’t get any special privileges just because you’re sleeping with the author.”

“So unfair. I mean, why can’t I just read it?” I whine.

“You’ll have to wait like everyone else,” he says, tapping me on the nose and rolling out of bed. I watch his naked ass move across the room and grin. *All mine.* “I’m jumping in the shower. You coming?”

I hop out after him. “Hopefully at least one more time.”

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WE’RE SEATED AT a private table in the fanciest restaurant in Hamilton Bay. Which, by location alone, is not that fancy—but it’s perfect for us. The lights are low and there are two candles in the center of the table as we are treated to a chef’s menu tasting by Lane’s friend who owns the place.

“Do you know everyone in a 50 mile radius?” I ask, taking a bite of my bacon-wrapped scallops.

“Writing material,” he says, sipping his drink. I nod, knowing what he means. People are his biggest inspirations. Everyone he meets could earn the opportunity to exist in print. It may be in an exaggerated form or something close to who they are, but the option is always there.

When dessert arrives, my eyes devour the plate before my mouth can. “That is a serious dessert,” I say.

“I think it’s meant for sharing.”



“The hell it is,” I say, pulling the plate closer to my side of the table with a devious grin.

“That’s cold, babe. Especially since I got you such an amazing present.”

I clap my hands together and bounce in my seat. “Is it present time yet?”

“Sure,” he says, pulling an envelope from his suit jacket pocket.

“That’s it? That’s the present that’s so epic?”

“Big things come in small packages,” he says.

“Gimme!”

I rip the envelope open to find a cream colored piece of paper, one edge jagged as if it’s been ripped from a book. I open it and read the print centered in the middle of the page.

“Dedicated to Stella. She is my muse, my life, my love.” Tears fill my eyes and fall over my cheeks before I can stop them. “So, I don’t get a sneak peek, but I get the whole book?”

Lane nods and takes my hand in his. “I know our journey has been fast and wild, but that doesn’t change one bit of how I feel about you. With you picking this town, moving in next door, and completely owning me— from the first flash to this moment—it seems like destiny doesn’t it? You are my future, Stella.”

I laugh and wipe my face dry. Lane sits back smugly, thinking he has won the battle of the gifts. “Well,” I say, pulling a long slender box from my purse and placing it on the table between us. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

He picks up the box and shakes it, a soft rattling sound comes from inside. He pulls on the ribbon, untying the bow and letting it fall away. “The look on your face says that you think you’ve won,” he says. I give nothing away, keeping my eyes on that box. Every muscle in my body pulls rigid in anticipation. I hold my breath.

When Lane lifts the lid, his eyes scan the contents and nothing happens. My stomach twists and my pulse spikes as panic rises. His face is expressionless. He doesn’t move. After a minute, which feels like two lifetimes in the scheme of things, I can’t take it anymore.

“Lane?” I say softly.

Finally, his eyes meet mine and a smile as bright as the Georgia summer sun splits his face. He holds up the white plastic stick and waves it at me. “You’re pregnant?”

“I am.”

“Holy shit!” he almost yells. Lane jumps from his chair and moves around the table, kneeling next to me. He places his large, warm hand over my belly. “There’s a baby in there?” he asks.

I nod. “A little lower, but yes.”

Lane sits back on his heels and blows out a breath. “I’m going to be a dad,” he says, his eyes glazing over, his words wavering in disbelief.

“If you want to,” I say.

He whips his face back toward me, serious eyes pinning me in place. “If I want to? Of course I want to.”

Lane leans forward now, kissing me slowly at first. Soft lips against mine, worshipping, reverent. When I hum against his mouth, he deepens the kiss. We devour each other, the passion and joy growing until I feel dizzy.

I pull away, placing a hand on my chest as it heaves to take in air. Sitting back in my chair, I stare at the gorgeous face before me. The sweet man who celebrates who I am and is my biggest cheerleader at every turn. The man who will be my child’s father. The man who showed me what love is supposed to feel like, for others and for myself.

## About the Author

SEASON VINING grew up in southern Louisiana where food, culture, and family mean everything. She has lived in Houston, San Diego, and NYC—all of them providing colorful experiences and tons of writing material. Her obsessions include live music, tattooed bad boys, vintage cars, and people who know the difference between their, there, and they're. To learn more, visit her online at [www.seasonvining.com](http://www.seasonvining.com).