

STARTING OVER | BOOK THREE

SAGE PARKER

THE
*Hampton
Beach,*
CAFÉ



The Hampton Beach Café

Starting Over Series



Book Three

SAGE PARKER



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Continue the Story!](#)

[More Books by Sage Parker](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE



With the last quarter piled neatly on top of its little stack, Frances gently closed the draw of the vintage cash register.

She knew it was a bit kitsch, but when Vincent had shown up with it under his arm after attending a flea market down the coast—and with a schoolboy grin on his face—she couldn't help but agree to its new home on the built-in wooden counter at Café Bruno.

The eponymous hound sat on a shelf overlooking the counter. She had wanted him next to the register but Lucinda—always thinking of the strangest and yet most useful things—had pointed out that it might not be a great idea to have him within grabbing distance of children's grabby hands.

Frances didn't like to think negatively—about kids in particular—but Bruno was a cherished childhood heirloom and was already vintage when she got him. She'd never forgive herself if the gorgeous thing survived forty-plus years until it met her!

Sighing as she heard the quarters tip over in the draw—it was a nightly game these days to try and stack the till float perfectly for the morning—Frances double-checked the locked front door and headed upstairs.

"So..." Lucinda said, stepping out of the bathroom they shared and making Frances jump, "...how'd we do today?"

"Don't walk around in the dark! I swear one of these days I'll flight or

fight you right down the stairs!" Frances scolded, pressing a hand to her chest.

"You're too anxious," Lucinda said. "You need to chill out more."

Glaring, Frances raised an accusing finger.

"The last time I listened to you about relaxing, we visited Hampton Beach for a relaxing weekend to forget my idiot ex-husband and I wound up sinking all my money into a passion project café."

Lucinda flicked the light on the hallway wall and pursed her lips into a judgmental pout.

"And I'd like to point out that you made that particular decision on your own," Lucinda said. "You gonna tell me how today was or are you anxiety hoarding?"

"I recognize that you may well not believe me, but I'm really not..." Frances said, "...we did alright. The influencer storm seems to have passed. They may have been pretty annoying to have in the café, but they did spend some money for their content—I'm glad they all knew better than to ask for discounts or free stuff. Oh, and you know that guy who called ahead to pre-order every single thing we have on the menu? He took it down the beach and ate it all in under forty minutes. He's posting it tomorrow as a food eating challenge—apparently, lots of his followers head to places after him and try to beat his time."

Lucinda stared at her. "That's disgusting...there were, like, ten slices of cake in that bag!"

"Yep! Well, five slices of cake plus four muffins, three paninis, a grilled cheese, a vegan breakfast burrito, and only two slices of the pie because Alex refused to cook four pies just for this guy's order. Plus, three milkshakes to go and two black coffees because he wanted to try both types

of beans we had."

Pressing the backs of her hands against her eyes, Lucinda groaned, "No...stop, I feel sick just thinking about it. That was enough food for five people! How many people can possibly be interested in watching that!?"

Laughing now, Frances headed down the hallway to check on the stock room with Lucinda at her heels.

"According to his press kit that he insisted on leaving with me, two point five million people care enough to press subscribe," she said.

Silence from Lucinda indicated to Frances that her friend was absolutely aghast at this number—it took a lot to make Lucinda speechless.

As she double-checked the food locker, pushed the bags of coffee beans back in line and counted how many packets of flour they had already used, she could hear the tiny spluttered noises of disapproval.

"And he's sending his followers here?" Lucinda finally asked.

"Not sending, but apparently it's common," Frances said. "He promised me he would tell them it was only available if they call and order in advance—and honestly, I'm not mad if we get a couple of orders for well over a hundred bucks. If it does super well, Alex will have to learn to make the cakes in single serving tins. We did sell them all, but I was worried for a bit."

Lucinda joined in the tidying. "And how is Alex? I haven't seen him much...you two okay?"

"Yeah?" Frances shrugged. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"Just...oh, nothing. I'm sure his visceral dislike of Clarkson has nothing to do with the fact that you've gone on two dates with him now..."

Frances rolled her eyes. "No! Alex and Clarkson never got along,

even way back in high school. Clarkson was the football superstar, the basketball favorite, and the prom king, for heaven's sake. He didn't like that when he joined the track team, Alex beat him every time. And anyway, I went out to dinner one time with Clarkson. It's not like it was a proper date..."

"He expressly told you that if it was too soon for a date, he'd understand. It was a proper date. Don't tell lies. And what about the cocktail bar a few days ago?"

"That was friendly!"

"Mmm hm," Lucinda said, flicking her hair over her shoulder. "And remind me why you said yes, again?"

Frances felt her nose screwing up into a less than flattering expression, but she knew Lucinda wouldn't let it go, so she answered, "Because Malcolm—"

"We don't say his name! He doesn't deserve a name," Lucinda chided. Groaning, Frances rolled her eyes.

"Fine, that dirty rotten ex-husband of mine apparently legged it off to Texas to take his high school sweetheart to fancy balls."

"Does that woman who told you at least feel bad about it?"

The food locker wouldn't get any tidier, so Frances stepped back and shoved the heavy door closed.

"Don't call her that woman," she said. "She's an old friend of mine and she was mortified to have upset me...but with Hayley being Hayley, she thinks I'm better off knowing. Not to mention she had to be actively convinced by both me on the phone and a friend of hers in real life not to make a scene the next time she saw him. Luckily she's leaving Dallas today, so it won't be a problem anymore."

She moved on to the inventory list. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she needed to stay on top of her ordering—there would be trouble in the kitchen if she ran out of something. Frances never would have guessed that not only was Alex a phenomenal baker, but he was also borderline precious about his kitchen and ingredients.

"Feels like I'm surrounded by 'old friends'," Lucinda muttered under her breath.

Frances wasn't really sure what to do with that. She and Lucinda hadn't been close friends for long in the grand scheme of things—just over five years, when Lucinda moved to LA to get out of the Michigan winters.

"Luce...are you ok?"

A snort of laughter...forced laughter.

"Of course I am! Don't be a goose. I'm just tired, is all. Vincent and I feel outnumbered sometimes, you and your pack of high school chums."

Goose? Chums? What exactly had gotten into Lucinda's vocabulary.

"I hardly think Kennedy counts as anything other than a pain in my a..."

A loud bang from downstairs cut her off mid-sentence. Looking at each other in alarm, the two women lurched into action and jogged downstairs.

The warm yellow glow of the solar powered string lights that she and Alex had wound around some of the knickknacks on the higher bookshelves was the only thing that illuminated the café. Peering around the corner into the gallery portion of the store where Vincent's artworks hung, Frances could only see moonlight streaming in the front windows.

Another loud bang made her jump, a small yelp escaped her but Lucinda strode towards the door that led to the garden.

In a much deeper voice than her usual speaking voice, she almost barked, "Oi, get lost! Whadda you think you're doing, hey? Get out of here!"

Staring in surprise, Frances watched as Lucinda banged a heavy fist on the door itself. Scrambling noises came from outside, and they listened keenly to what sounded like jogging footsteps fading away.

"Should we go and look around?" Frances whispered.

"No," Lucinda said. "We call the cops and they go poking around."

"The cops?" Frances repeated, shocked. "Uh...okay."

She pulled out her phone and dialed the local station number. It was hardly an emergency...

TWO



“Are you alright?” Alex asked as he pushed through the door. Frances barely had time to step out of the way before it swung in towards to let Alex in.

"I'm fi—"

The tight hug he pulled her into squeezed the air out of her lungs and stopped any attempt at a response.

"Next time, call me straight away! I would have come right over! Are you sure you're ok?" he said, releasing her from the hug, but his hands lingered on her arms. "I'm serious, none of this next morning BS, ok?"

Lucinda called out from the kitchen. "I'm also fine. Thanks for asking. Did you want coffee?"

"Uh...Yes, thanks," Alex said, stepping away from Frances and dropping his hands to his sides. "I'm glad you're both alright. I just didn't know you were down here."

She could see some color glowing on his cheeks, and Frances wondered if Lucinda knew the effect she had on people.

"Come on in," Frances said. "And thank you for the offer, but there will be no next time. I'm getting a motion sensor light and a security camera out there."

Nodding, Alex followed her into the kitchen and took a seat on one of the shiny silver stools that stood in front of the main preparation counter.

"Absolutely no next time, but if anything happens, you know you can call me—both of you?"

Lucinda leaned her weight onto one elbow as she reached across the metal counter to pinch Alex's cheek.

"Aww, that's sweet, honey," she said. "We'll get a big red 'Damsels in Distress' button."

She winked at him as he swatted her hand away.

"If it helps, think of me as the damsel in distress," Alex said. "I will be extremely distressed if you don't tell me. You're doing us all a favor by calling me straight away and then we won't have to deal with me the next day. Deal?"

The coffees Lucinda pushed towards them smelled incredible—if she ever wanted to do something other than be a world-class business coach in international demand, she would make one heck of a barista.

"Fine, deal," Frances said, clinking her coffee mug against his. "Now, we need a double bake of both cakes and an extra tray of the blueberry and white chocolate muffins. Kennedy is coming by and she wants to take a sample of what we make to the council meeting."

Alex gave a cartoonish double take. "Wait, what? Kennedy is taking our goods to a council meeting? Why? And don't avoid the topic—what did the police say?"

With a shrug, Frances sipped her coffee.

"Probably kids who didn't realize the place wasn't empty anymore. They caught teenagers drinking beer in here every couple of months when it was empty," she explained. "And yes, she is taking a selection of our menu for the council to try, a donation from us, of course."

"Ah...that makes more sense," Alex said. "I can't imagine her buying

anything with her own money. As for the kids...we didn't find any beer cans or anything when we were cleaning this place up...or am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong," Lucinda chimed in. "About the beer cans or the fact that Kennedy Pine is a cheapskate. She thinks she can lord it over us just because she's on the permit committee."

Standing, Alex yawned as he stretched his arms high over his head and made eye contact with Frances. He wasn't going to have this discussion with Lucinda again, Frances could tell.

"She kind of can, though," Lucinda said. "We need the business permit, the liquor license, and overall the local authorities have the power to close businesses down for pretty much any reason if they can justify it—you know this."

Lucinda waved her hands like she was shooing something away from her. "Yeah yeah. I know. Come on, let's stop being so negative. We need to get the bad vibes out of here and the baking vibes in."

With that topic closed—apparently—Lucinda flicked open her music app and hit play on her Bakers In The Morning playlist.

Regardless of the fitful night of sleep she had gone through, waking up every hour thinking she could hear someone breaking in, and the stress of the last two months, and Lucinda's straight up refusal to talk about her confession last week, Frances couldn't help but smile as Lucinda danced towards Alex as he tried to resist laughing.

"You want to come with me to check in with Luca?" Alex asked. "Since he messed up renting those jet skis to that group of teenagers who were clearly

going to be unsupervised, I've just been spending a couple of minutes with him every evening to go over what happened in the day. Then we can go to dinner, my treat?"

Frances blinked heavily. She was tired but it was only...she checked her watch—six o'clock!

"I shouldn't. We aren't closed technically...just not really letting people in until the liquor license kicks in so we can clean and stuff..."

She gestured around the empty café knowing full well it was hardly a compelling argument.

"Luce can hold the fort for half an hour. Then Vincent will get here and set the bar up. Come on. It's the middle of the week—it'll be a quiet one."

Lucinda emerged from the kitchen. "Go on, go. I'm going to reorganize the book exchange—we got three copies of the local history book donated today. If this continues, we'll have to start a full library in the spare room."

"You sure you're alright...on your own?"

"Yes! I have my phone. Vin will be here soon..."

Lucinda trailed off as she caught the look on her friend's face. Frances didn't mean to glance at the phone...but she couldn't help it.

"I'm really ok, look, I'll call my mom while I tidy—that lady will not hang up for a minimum of forty-five minutes. She can keep me company until our favorite artist graces us with his presence."

Frances nodded. "That sounds good. Sorry, I just...you know."

Alex didn't know, and Lucinda had made it clear she didn't want him—or Vincent—to know what she'd told Frances the week before. He smiled and waved bye to Lucinda as they exited the café and headed towards

the beach. The warm evening air was starting to cool off with the sea breeze.

Her phone buzzed, the café email inbox showed a new message and she tapped it to see what it was.

"You're that worried about the intruder?"

"What?" Frances asked, confused. "No...it's not that."

The email was taking ages to load but the subject line was weird and Frances felt her stomach drop.

Don't be so sure you're right that you end up broken

She read and re-read the subject line trying to figure out what it could possibly be talking about.

"So...?"

"Uh...it's kind of complicated," she said, staring at the screen and willing it to load.

You're smarter than thinking you're the first, it read, and you're not going to be the last.

The text under the single line was blue and underlined—a hyperlink.

Damn, phishing emails were getting worse every day.

Her heart lifted and she felt like she could breathe again. She flicked the email away to spam and turned her attention to Alex's question.

They walked silently for a few moments as Frances carefully thought about what she would say next. She took a deep breath in and savored the smell of the ocean that was rolling in by the time they had crossed the main road to walk along the footpath that led along the beach. July was ramping up and they already had to dodge tourists as they rollerbladed, skateboarded, jogged, and power-walked along the way.

"Look, I won't break confidence..." she said, "...but Lucinda is

struggling with something and I don't love leaving her on her own."

"Okay..." Alex said, trying to leave room for Frances to fill him in.

"I'm not really comfortable saying more. It's not my story to tell."

Plus, she didn't really know what the whole story was. Lucinda had admitted to her that she'd struggled with a gambling addiction—poker mostly—but hadn't really given her any details. Just that she was in recovery but lately, it had been harder to stay away from the game. The number of times she could recall Lucinda leaving her phone behind in the car, at the house, and even in Frances' handbag once had all made sense when she explained that she mostly played online...Which did not make Frances feel better about leaving her there alone with her phone.

"Well, that's fair. I won't push," Alex said. "If she wants to tell me, she will."

"Don't ask her about it!" Frances said quickly. "She'd kill me!"

"Hardly. She adores you," Alex said. "I wish I had friends like that."

Frances stopped in her tracks, earning a startled yelp of disapproval from the roller skater behind her.

"You do have friends like that," she said, her voice betraying her feelings.

Why was she feeling them so strongly right now? She and Alex weren't really close anymore...it had been years since high school and she'd only been back two months.

He flashed her a half smile. "You adore me, do you?"

"Of course! How could anyone not adore you? Come on, I'm hungry."

She was talking too quickly, and she could feel her face burning. Why did she always have to open her big mouth and be so awkward. Alex was

laughing at her. He always knew how to poke and prod at her.

"Luca is waiting!" she called over her shoulder.

Alex caught up with her and playfully batted her shoulder. "What are we having for dinner then? Burgers?"

"Only if they can be like, two or three times the size of regular burgers but also only one layer of bread...and with extra sauce, and toasted under the grill."

He laughed. "So, pizza?"

"Exactly, you're so smart."

THREE



"So, I know this is a big decision..." Lucinda said slowly and calmly, like she was talking to a small child, "...but it has been suggested that we have a Fourth of July party, event, thing."

Frances cocked her head to one side. It was only two days from now, but they really wanted to get in as much of the tourist crowd as possible. Not that they weren't run off their feet as it was. Their regular early morning coffee and menu planning in the kitchen was well underway, and Alex was already poking around in the fridge to get started.

She noticed Lucinda open her mouth to start speaking again, but Frances could see she was right.

"Sure, sounds great," she said. "We'll get Vincent to mix up some sparkler red, white and blue milkshakes. Pity we can't open the back garden. Maybe that should be the next project."

"What!?" Lucinda exclaimed. "That's the quickest you've ever made a decision! No graphs? No spreadsheets? No risk management spiel?"

Alex burst out laughing as he emerged from rummaging in the fridge. "Dang...you got boring after high school. Remember when we used to throw dice to decide where we would go?"

Looking appalled, Lucinda's gaze snapped from Alex to Frances and

back again. "Excuse me? Explain?"

Laughing as well, Frances turned in her seat to face Lucinda.

"We used to go for nighttime adventures," she explained, noticing her friend start to wiggle her eyebrows suggestively. "Shut up. Walks! We went on walks! We knew every corner of town so we started out flipping a coin, but then that got boring, just left or right options, so when we found a fancy set of dice at some renaissance fair in Boston, we assigned different things for each side. We had twenty-one options now...turn around, cross the street, turn left, go home—stuff like that. All entirely up to chance."

The look on Lucinda's face made her laugh even harder. It was hardly scandalous, but Lucinda's expression would have been at home on some trash reality television show.

"You did whatever the dice told you to, without question?"

"Yeah, until about four in the morning, then we'd have to turn back or we'd get caught. I'm still amazed we never got in trouble..."

Lining up the eggs and milk in the order he'd need them, Alex scoffed.

"My mom called your mom and told her you'd stayed over after studying," Alex said. "She trusted us."

Wait, Mrs. Lockwood had covered for her—without her even asking?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Alex shrugged. "She knew you didn't always have the best time with your dad and your mom worked so much she was exhausted. My parents always figured, at least if we were together, we weren't out getting in trouble alone."

"No, getting in trouble together!" Lucinda laughed.

Frances shrugged. "Not really. We were more like melancholy outsiders than real troublemakers."

"Not Prom Queen?" Lucinda teased.

"Hardly," Frances responded. "That was Clarkson and whoever he decided was the flavor of the month."

"Until you," Alex said quietly. "Until now, at least."

Turning away before Frances could meet his eyes, Alex bit his lip as he measured milk into a large jug.

Mouthing the word 'sorry' at her, Lucinda stood to put her music on, but a heavy rapping on the front door drew all their attention—especially after the intruder incident.

"Stay here," Alex said, moving to investigate.

Frances and Lucinda looked at one another, amused.

"Yeah, right," Frances said.

"Dream on, Shining Armor Boy," Lucinda said.

As they approached the front door to the café, they could see through the glass that it was a woman in her fifties or sixties banging on it hard with a closed fist.

"You let me in. I need to talk to you! You don't know what you're doing!" she yelled.

Alex stepped forward.

"Ma'am, please stop pounding on the door," he said calmly. "Who are you looking for?"

The woman looked confused and pressed her hands against the door to help her peer into the darkened room.

"I want to talk to that floozy-looking woman who thinks she's

special," the woman shouted. "She's not! She's an idiot to think she is, and I've got proof!"

The three friends looked at each other in confusion and then back to the woman pressing her face up against the glass.

"I think you've got the wrong shop," Alex offered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That Frances Crawford woman! She's in there. I know she is!"

What!?

"Excuse me? What did you just say?" Frances exclaimed. "How dare you!"

"Hah! I knew it. Let me in. We need to talk."

A disappointed expression from Alex made Frances curl up her toes—she shouldn't have said anything.

"Go away!" she called, but she didn't even sound sure to herself.

"It's important, you stupid woman. Let me in!"

The lady smacked her hand on the door again, harder this time. The whole thing shook, and the bells at the top of the door frame jangled jarringly.

"I won't go away until you talk to me! I can't just talk about this anywhere. I need to speak with you. You're in over your head and he's going to eat you alive. You think you're smart enough for him? Here, look, look at what he's done."

Lucinda whispered. "Who's 'him,' do we think?"

"No idea," Alex said quietly.

The strange woman kneeled and they lost sight of her. Before they could get closer to try and see what she was doing, the letter slot in the door

began to jiggle. They had secured it closed. The letterbox was their preferred method of mail delivery, but that wasn't going to stop her. She stood, cussing under her breath and aimed a hard kick at the letter box.

The letter slot had burst open on one side and she was rapidly shoving paper through it.

"Ma'am..." Lucinda said, "...if you don't leave in the next five seconds, I'm calling the police."

That might not have been a great idea. She banged loudly on the door before picking something off the ground. It was a briefcase.

Of all the random things she could have brought, Frances thought, why a briefcase?

She swung the briefcase hard against the door, and a small scratch appeared in the glass where the corner collided.

"Hey!" Frances yelled. "Stop that!"

She pulled out her phone and started recording—she really needed to get CCTV. Lucinda was in the process of pulling out her phone to call the police when Clarkson seemed to appear out of nowhere next to this woman.

He held her wrist tight with one hand. The other was clamped firmly around the briefcase.

"Be careful!" Frances shouted. "She's in a hitting state of mind. We're calling the police."

"Don't!" Clarkson replied, loudly through the door. "She's not hurting anyone and she hasn't broken any laws—yet."

Alex raised an eyebrow, quietly adding, "not true. She has broken at least two."

"Shh! I'm trying to hear what he's saying," Lucinda scolded.

Clarkson was leaning forward and talking quietly with the woman, her face was twisting in anger, but Clarkson was very calm. When he noticed the three of them staring, he smiled awkwardly. Pulling her by the arm, Clarkson ushered the woman away from the door. After a few more moments of his quiet lecture, she wrenched her arm free, pointed her finger in his face, and stormed off down the street.

Frances unlatched the door, pulling him inside.

"What was that all about?" she asked. "Who was that horrible woman?"

She had never seen Clarkson look so incredibly uncomfortable.

"Well, she is kind of a stalker...my stalker, sort of."

FOUR



"Your what?" Alex asked, clearly confused.

Clarkson's face was bright red, but Frances couldn't tell whether it was from the excruciating conversation he'd just had with that woman or the incredulous tone in Alex's voice.

"She's one of my followers on social media," he explained. "Can I get a coffee, please?"

He sounded exhausted and Frances wondered why on earth he was there so early.

"Sure, but you're going to need to keep talking."

"I know," he said as they moved through to the kitchen. "She's a bit obsessive. I shouldn't have encouraged her, but she was a fan from the start and I needed the engagement back then. But about a year or two ago, we met at a fan meet and greet. She'd bought all my afternoon sessions and it freaked me out, so I stopped replying to her comments, and blocked her generally, but she comes out of the woodwork every now and then."

They were sitting down now, and Lucinda poured him a coffee as he spoke—glaring at him all the while. She wasn't convinced. Frances could tell.

"How did she know who I am?" Frances asked. "Why is she here at all?"

Clarkson barely got halfway through a shrug when Alex emerged back into the kitchen.

"Bet I know," he said, slapping a magazine down on the table.

From the glossy pages, a little raggedy though they were from their abrupt delivery through an unwilling mail slot, smiled Frances's face.

"What is that?" she asked, standing from her stool and pointing at the offending picture.

Lucinda grabbed the magazine and read aloud, "Red Hot Property King and the Sweet Treat Maker—a steamy rooftop date to seal the deal. Clarkson!"

Frances felt sick, her stomach clenching and unclenching as she tried to remember to breathe.

"What is this?" she asked again.

Clarkson swallowed hard. "It's a gossip magazine."

"Well, obviously!" Lucinda scolded.

Frances took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Why is a gossip magazine interested in us?"

"Well, they actually approached me. It's why I'm here," he said sheepishly.

It seemed like he was going to continue but Frances didn't let him finish.

"You sold your own story?" she exclaimed. "Are you seriously kidding me right now? I spend decades—literal decades—in Los Angeles, Hollywood for Pete's sake and I never once get snapped by a tabloid rag and somehow I earn the moniker of the Sweet Treat Maker and accused of...doing whatever on a rooftop with you in New Hampshire!"

Clarkson was staring at the coffee in his mug while Lucinda and Alex looked on in awe—it wasn't often Frances got really mad.

"How could you do this to me?" she asked, quiet now.

"I thought you could use the money," he said, equally as quiet.

Lucinda opened her mouth to speak but Frances held up a hand.

"What?" she asked icily.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a check made out in her name. Ten thousand dollars was written on the amount line.

Putting it down on the table between them, all four of them stared at it.

Reaching out, she slowly picked up the check.

Ten grand...it would make a dent in the expenses portfolio she was running up.

"I'm sorry. They said they wouldn't do anything distasteful."

Lucinda cut him off.

"Seal the deal!? Really, that's not distasteful to you?"

"Of course it is!" Clarkson retorted, standing to face her. "They didn't exactly run it by me!"

Silence descended again as Frances worked to contain her emotions.

"And you..." she said, "...didn't run any of it by me."

Taking his seat again, Clarkson hung his head.

"I really am sorry," he said. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Frances considered the check in silence for a moment before folding it neatly and putting it into her pocket.

"That damage is done...the money will be used. I can only hope no

one reads this trash?"

Clarkson looked up at her sheepishly. "It's got a national readership—they specifically mentioned the café as a sweetener. It's basically an advert we'd have to pay thousands for if we were contacting them..."

"Don't try and talk it up," Frances said, "...please..."

He fell silent again and Alex scoffed. "Look, can you all please take this out of my kitchen so I can get started for the day and actually make it to my real job before customers start showing up?"

Frances looked at him. His kitchen? Well, she supposed it kind of was, but it was also her kitchen...though he did have a point about this not being his real job, the jet-ski rental company was. He'd been coming here every day before sunrise and helping her for free. Guilt and shame twisted at her stomach. How could she be mad at Clarkson for taking advantage of a situation when she let Alex work for her for free...

"Let's get everything ready for the day," she said quietly. "If we're doing this Fourth of July party, we need to get the word out."

Clarkson stood and filed out into the café zone, followed closely by Lucinda, who started listing things he could do to help—none of which sounded like Chores Clarkson would be used to doing for himself.

Frances turned to Alex. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, are you?"

She took a moment to try and figure that out.

"I...think so?"

"Very convincing," Alex said. "Shall we try again in a few hours?"

She nodded and headed out to the café to help set up and start planning for this party.

FIVE



This was getting old, Frances thought as they entered the fifth party supply store. Sure, they'd waited until almost the exact last minute before the Fourth of July to start getting ready for a party, but it wasn't even like they were going for something huge! Just some sparklers and red, white, and blue sprinkles...along with the rest of the country.

"You look like you're flagging," Alex said, bumping her shoulder gently with a pinata shaped like Uncle Sam's top hat.

"I...don't want one of those," she said, batting the novelty thing away. "I just feel like we're getting ahead of ourselves—it doesn't need to be a massive deal, just enough to participate and have fun...right?"

Alex smiled knowingly. "Stop panicking."

"I'm not! Just maybe I jumped into saying yes a bit...hastily."

"Or...just hear me out...you made a solid choice with very little risk, a large payoff, and an excuse to set some things on fire..."

She glanced over at him and saw his mischievous smirk, which made her laugh in itself.

"Well...that's one way of looking at it."

Frances hmphed as she sat on the overstuffed purple velvet couch in, apparently, the last party store on the coast to still have anything Fourth-

themed.

Alex joined her. The impact of him sitting down heavily caused a small disturbance in the balance of the stuffing and Frances felt herself lift slightly as he landed.

"Frances..." he said seriously, "...all we need are three or four things that look good enough to go on some social posts, a good playlist, and Vincent serving up the biggest and most unnaturally colored milkshakes this side of a dentist's office—and people will love it. There is absolutely nothing to be worried about."

She winced. "I don't really think we should be spending money on something like this..."

"What if I can get it all for under fifty bucks?"

"No way," she said.

"Yes way," Alex retorted. "Fifty bucks to decorate and absolutely no way you'll regret this party. Deal?"

She looked at him skeptically. Fifty bucks wouldn't get the piñata he was holding on to, hopefully.

He grinned. "I'll take that as a yes."

He bounced up off the couch and made his way towards the counter, where a surly-looking older man stood glaring at them as they chatted.

Shaking her head, Frances stood and wandered back towards the front of the shop.

PING!

Her phone chimed, making her wince—for a party supply shop, it was deathly quiet in here.

From Hayley: Hey! I'm in LA for a job, but then I'm heading to Boston! I was thinking I might swing by Hampton Beach. It's been wild reconnecting with you, but like, no pressure to say yes.

She bit her lip. Did she really want to see Hayley? It would be kind of weird, wouldn't it? After all, the major thing they had spoken about was the very recent divorce...and considering they hadn't spoken at all in the last twenty years, it felt like a huge deal to be talking about Hayley coming down to visit.

Turning a corner, she came face to face with a life-sized Elvis statue that made her yelp. The waxy staring eyes would have been intensely creepy even if the paint hadn't been cracking and peeling.

"You ok?" Alex called.

"Uh...yeah..." she replied, "...just met Elvis unexpectedly."

She could sense Alex's confusion even from this far across the room. That was alright—she'd let him sit with that sentence with no context whatsoever.

A reminder buzz from her phone made her look down. Maybe it wouldn't be so weird to see her old friend...besides, it's not like she was asking to stay or anything...

To Hayley: That sounds amazing! Seeing all the places we used to hang out through adult eyes has been very odd. Let me know your dates.

Locking her phone quickly before she could second guess herself, Frances opened a small briefcase that sat on the table next to a mannequin

dressed up like a mobster from the 1920s.

The plastic blocks of cash were yellowed with age, and the paper note glued to the top read, “Unified Status of America”, which made her giggle.

What had that woman had in her briefcase this morning? Was it just a prop, something to bash the door with? Or was she some bananas conspiracy theorist? Poor Clarkson, having to deal with a stalker.

Frances closed the prop briefcase and turned around to find a grinning Alex.

“You are going to eat your words, Lane,” he said with glee.

His use of her maiden name, like he had when they were young, was equal parts strange and heartwarming. It brought her back to their high school days, where they had made the strangest pair of friends. Despite what she had insisted upon this morning, she was somewhat of a golden girl in high school. Though she had never gone the prom queen and cheerleader route, she had good grades and stayed out of trouble for the most part. On the other hand, Alex had been a bit of a wild child. When they became close in high school, many of those midnight walks she had talked about were primarily to keep Alex busy while his other group of friends were off being delinquents and trying to get him to join in.

“Am I now?” she asked, smiling.

It was also a sharp reminder that though she was still technically Crawford, Lane was maybe more apt since the divorce. A double weirdness since her mom had reverted to her own maiden name, Price. That left Frances identifying most with the name of a man that she hadn't seen in over two decades, didn't know why he left, or where he went. How did it always come back to a man letting her down, even when it was a guy like Alex making her smile?

“Yep...” he said, “...you’re gonna love it. Just wait.”

“Hey...I know this is a big ask, and a bit weird, and very inconvenient, so feel free to say no....”

PING!

“Weird and inconvenient? Don’t worry. I’m used to you by now,” he teased.

She glanced down at her phone, a text from Hayley.

“Yeah, I know, I’m the worst, seriously though...do you think you could help me find out some stuff about my dad?”

That shut him up. It was like someone had pressed pause.

“Uh, yeah? Of course, what do you need?”

Swallowing hard, she unlocked her phone to see what Hayley had sent.

“Just, like, what he was doing before he left, if anyone you know might...you know...know?”

Pausing, she flicked her gaze back up to his. He knew she was asking him to talk to some of his old friends...ones he might not want to talk to. The silence stretched out for a few moments until he nodded.

“Of course, whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Alex.”

He smiled a little awkwardly and turned to head out to the car. Frances managed to actually read the text this time.

From Hayley: So excited! By the way, if you’re missing anything from LA, let me know, and I’ll do my best to cram it in my luggage.

Suddenly filled with an odd homesickness, Frances could almost taste the Pistachio and Rose Halva from her favorite Greek, Nikos. He owned the bakery on the corner by her old office...Halva would last a few days in a bag...right?

To Hayley: Well...now that you mention it....

SIX



The Red, White and Blue milkshakes were disturbingly popular, even after patrons discovered that the blue syrup turned their teeth a rather alarming shade of teal. It was too much for Lucinda, who burst into fits of giggles every time someone spoke to her and flashed their bright blue smile.

Luckily, everyone was in a jovial mood and assumed that she was too. Frances leaned her hip against the stunning carved bar that Vincent had made for them. She still couldn't get over how ornate the piece was. For the first time, she felt like the art they had on the walls was too Avant Garde and maybe he should focus on something more traditional like sculpture...

"Excuse me?" a nasal voice broke her train of thought and Frances remembered that she was actually at work, not a guest.

"Hello, hi, how can I help?" she said.

"You can sell me that stunning thing in the window," the woman said, gesturing at the driftwood sculpture that had first drawn Frances into Vincent's old gallery space.

"Well, I'd be thrilled to!" Frances said.

They moved through the small crowd towards it, and Frances scanned the room for Vince—he normally liked to be present for the sales.

"Can you confirm the price for me? And the delivery costs," the tall woman said, a note of hesitancy in her voice that made Frances wince.

"Sure thing," she said, reaching for the guide that hung on the wall.

As she read through the details, Frances caught sight of Vincent and waved him over. The woman was nodding as she came to the conclusion of the price guide.

"...all quoted prices are final, and full payment must be made before taking the piece or pieces." Frances finished as Vincent stepped closer and smiled wide, extending a hand to the woman for her to shake.

"These pieces are all dreadfully underpriced," she said as she shook Vincent's hand. "I can say that now you've confirmed that little line in your price guide."

Frances blinked twice. What?

Vincent laughed. "Oh, you're too kind. I'm glad you like my work, though."

Her gaze flicking between the two of them, Frances wondered about what the woman had said—no one ever told people art was underpriced.

"Are you a regular investor in artworks, then?" Frances asked, wanting to stay in the conversation.

They turned back to her, and the woman nodded. "Lauren Daniels, I am. Both for my personal collection and for a select group of clients. How long have you been in the gallery business?"

Ten minutes, Frances thought. Managing not to say that out loud, she cleared her throat.

"Actually, on the vendor side of things, this is my first venture..." she said, "...but I've always loved art."

Lauren Daniels was nodding. "Interesting, well, I'd like to discuss commissioning a piece from your stay here—"

"Vincent Stone," Vin supplied as she paused.

"—yes, Vincent. I have several clients who would love to add something like this to their collection. Of course, there would also be a...finders' fee. I suppose you'd call it."

Trying to keep an appropriately sized smile on her face, Frances looked over at Vincent to gauge his response. The way he was grinning uncontrollably told her all she needed to know—and that he really needed to work on his negotiating face.

"That sounds like something we'd be interested in discussing," Lucinda said, surprising Frances.

"We?" Lauren asked, her eyebrows raised.

Vincent's cheeks turned a deep red but Lucinda remained calm and smiling.

"Yes, I'm a consultant for Mr. Stone and any commissions or long-term arrangements will need to be overseen by my network—to provide protection to both parties."

This was not how Frances liked to do business, but Lucinda's warm smile, coupled with her cold words, seemed to do the trick on Lauren.

"It's fabulous to see creatives' with a proper network of support and advice," she said, extending her hand to Lucinda. "In my line of work, you see far too many people taken advantage of."

"I bet," Lucinda responded as she took Lauren's hand in a visibly firm handshake.

Lauren continued, "This piece, though, I'll finalize now—this one is

for me."

Frances felt her heart rate quicken and her hands started to tingle. She glanced down at them with a small frown. This was the rush she was used to when making multi-million dollar deals or delivering a completed project to her clients—not selling an apparently underpriced artwork.

While the thrill of excitement was kind of strange in these comparatively modest circumstances, it was incredible to feel it again. The last few months, though exciting in their own right, had been hard to compare to her fast-paced life in LA. Frances smiled and shook hands, leaving Vincent to deal with the paperwork and Lucinda to hover intimidatingly.

She turned her gaze to the party going on. It certainly was not a party by LA standards—there was no DJ, entertainers in the crowd, hired security, or throbbing music that wouldn't abate until the early hours of the morning. There were, however, about fifty people milling around, talking, admiring the art, and celebrating. The subtle decorations Alex had organized were nice. They added to the theme without being overwhelming or tacky—and for fifty bucks, Frances was incredibly impressed with him.

It was the perfect balance of jovial and chill—something to fill the space between a quiet dinner with friends and a raging dance party on the beach. Frances felt something coming together. This was potentially the perfect gap for her to fill in Hampton Beach. There was plenty of choice for young partygoers and concerts as well as for the Stay-at-Home crowd—but that in-between space was interesting...

"You..."

Frances turned at the familiar voice, her heart sinking.

"Kennedy?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

Kennedy Pine stood in the doorway. Her mouth pressed into a thin

line.

"You're dating Clarkson now?" she said. "You come back here, to my town, and you weasel your way in and now you're dating him? You were always too good for him in high school—even though he was too good for you. But now? What's changed?"

What?? The words hit her like a series of slaps—dating Clarkson? Too good for him? Too good for HER? A number of things were starting to make sense, though. Kennedy's overt dislike for her, the simpering way she agreed with everything Clarkson said, even bending the rules for him.

"Your town?"

"Yes, my town," Kennedy said. "It's all your fault, the least you could do was stay away."

"Kennedy, I don't know what you're talking about. We aren't even dating, not really. We've been out less than five times! That gossip rag just wants to stir up headlines."

The crease between Kennedy's eyebrows deepened.

"So this is fake?" she said, jabbing a rolled-up magazine at Frances.

"What's going on? Why are you crying, Ken?" Clarkson said, sounding worried as he approached.

Looking down, Frances saw a snap of her and Clarkson on the roof of the house where the influencer dinner party had taken place. It was taken from below and showed him leaning in towards her—she had to admit that it really looked a lot like he was going in for a kiss.

"Fake? No, but not true either! We were just talking! He's just helping me with this place—that's it. We're working—"

"...like I would help any old friend," he said quickly. "Advice and

support—that sort of thing. You know I don't get involved in local business, Ken, come on."

Frances looked at him in disbelief. As a friend? Advice only? Had she hallucinated all the business talk, arrangement, favors he'd called in, and not to mention his agreement to help her sell the place at the end of the season? No, she hadn't. He lied to Kennedy to play into her ridiculous vendetta against anything that might cater to tourists.

Kennedy's expression softened. "And you're not dating?"

Her voice was so small. Frances suddenly felt a wave of pity for her.

"No, we're friends," Clarkson said. "We have gone out a few times, but it's nothing serious, right, Frances?"

His casual dismissal of their dates riled her more than it should have. She hadn't exactly been enamored with him. But something in his tone suggested that dating her would be absurd, which hurt a little. Keeping Kennedy happy, though, was more important than a bruised ego.

"Right..." Frances said, "...three dates and an overeager paparazzi, that's all."

She wanted to smile reassuringly but knew that Kennedy would probably take it as a smirk.

"Good..." Kennedy said, forcing some cool detachment into her tone as if she could never have cared in the first place, "...because I'd hate to have to consider a conflict of interest that arises when a famous and successful real estate agent shows interest in what is supposed to be a local business for local people—especially if he was dating the owner."

And there it was, the veiled threat Frances knew was coming.

"Perfect, there's no conflict of interest so you don't have to consider it," Frances said. "Now, would you like a milkshake?"

"I don't want your alcoholic abomination of dairy."

"They aren't alcoholic, Kennedy," Frances said. "They're just milkshakes—there's beer and wine available, but the milkshakes are just milkshakes."

A tinge of red came to her cheeks. "Oh."

"Oh, come on," Clarkson said playfully, "Let's turn your lips red."

He took Kennedy's hand and led her to the bar they had set up for milkshakes. As they walked away, he looked over his shoulder and winked at Frances. Her stomach turned, and she felt like she should feel something...positive. Instead, she felt like she was on the nasty side of a prank.

SEVEN



"Hey, you," Lucinda said as she poked her head around the door of the storeroom.

"Hi," Frances replied sharply.

"Uh...you ok?" Lucinda asked.

Regretting her tone instantly, Frances flashed a smile over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I just wish I'd gotten on this earlier. I let the Fourth of July party get the better of me, I think..." she said, "...and now it's been nearly a week, and I'm still not caught up. Can you count these for me? I feel like I'm landing on a different number every time."

She handed over a box of filters for the pour-over filter coffee that had become so popular in the last week or so.

"Have we figured out why these are the new hot item?" Lucinda asked as she opened the box and started counting them in pairs.

Frances snorted with a little more derision than she really meant to.

"One of Clarkson's influencer herd posted the video they took here back at the opening," Frances said. "Three million views in two days."

Lucinda was muttering under her breath, and Frances really didn't want to know what she was saying. If she was totally honest, she just wanted to be left alone with her stock take.

"Sixty three left in this one," Lucinda said. "And those two boxes are a hundred each, so even if this rate of virality keeps up, we should be good for a few months."

The stab of annoyance was disconcerting. Why was she so snarky today?

Yikes. I need to get out of my own head, she realized.

"Can you cover for me tonight?" she asked. "I really want to go out for a run."

"A run? Girl, are you feeling alright?" Lucinda asked jokingly, but her face fell when she realized Frances was serious. "Wait? For real?"

A second prickle of irritation—oh, she needed to go badly.

"Yep," she said. "I think I just need to go and really exhaust myself."

The silent moment stretched out, and Frances wondered if her tone had come across even sharper than it had before. She was just about to turn and say something when Lucinda spoke in a quiet, arresting voice.

"Sure, but...Vin isn't going to be here this evening either..."

Turning to face her friend, Frances saw Lucinda almost hunched over the boxes of paper filter. She looked like she was trying to curl into herself.

"Isn't he? Alright," Frances said. "No problem, I'll go in the morning or tomorrow afternoon."

"I don't want you to not go. I just...I don't know, I'm sorry," Lucinda said, running her long nail along the crease in the cardboard box. "I don't know why evenings are the worst. Even when it's fairly busy, all I can think

about is what I shouldn't be doing."

"Have you done what that guy at the Gamblers Anon meeting suggested, the bank account block?" Frances asked, crossing to stand next to her friend.

Lucinda shook her head. "It feels so...dramatic, you know? Like, I should just be able to not do it, and getting my bank to block any gambling site feel likes...overkill. Plus...I feel like knowing the block is there would make me think about it more...I also think that maybe it's...well, maybe I don't want to block myself like that—just in case I really want to."

She leaned her shoulder against the door frame and sighed. Frances noticed that she was giving her a look—the same look Lucinda gave her when she wanted to be extracted from a conversation but didn't want to be rude to the people she was bored of. Frances knew what she was being asked to do.

"Do you want me to do it?" she asked. "Totally no pressure, just an offer."

Biting the inside of her lower lip, Lucinda looked genuinely torn—maybe Frances had been mistaken?

Suddenly nodding, Lucinda pulled out her phone and punched the passcode in. With a few more swipes, she had opened and unlocked her bank accounting app.

Frances took the phone and silently tapped through the settings until she found the gambling block, full precautions in place. Lucinda would not even be able to buy gift cards at this rate.

"There..." Frances said as she handed the phone back, "...and I'm not going to go for a run tonight. I'm going to stay here, ok?"

"I hate that I'm like this," Lucinda said, her voice shaking. "I'm so

stupid..."

It hurt to see her friend like this, but Frances knew that there wasn't a lot she could do but be supportive and non-judgmental—she'd been reading a lot online about how to be there for a loved one with a gambling problem.

"Come here," she said, putting her arms around Lucinda and drawing her into a tight hug. "You're doing amazing. You want to change it, so you are. There are always going to be hard days, which is why you have a bunch of tools, coping mechanisms, and support networks to help you on those days. I'm so proud of you, ok? So don't you dare call my best friend stupid, or you'll be in so much trouble."

That made Lucinda laugh, even though Frances could feel damp tear patches through her thin t-shirt. As Lucinda pulled away smiling, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Thank you, and I'm sorry," she said.

"Stop apologizing and help me count these bags of beans," Frances said, poking Lucinda in the arm as she walked past.

Together they counted every item in the stock room, twice. Three hours later, when Vince came up to tell them he was leaving, they were exhausted—and they now had to go down and deal with the post-sunset crowd.

Pulling two strong espressos, Frances hummed a tune while Lucinda wiped counters and took advantage of the momentary lull to straighten the books and re-plump the cushions.

"Well, hello, you two," Clarkson said as he stepped through the door, his hand behind his back.

"Hey," Lucinda said. "Where have you been all week? Normally we can't get rid of you."

He laughed and strode across the room towards Frances as she stood behind the bar, espressos in each hand.

"Organizing something really special," he said, winking at her.

Frances felt her stomach knot. He looked amazing in a wonderfully cut suit and just enough cologne that she caught a hint of it as he leaned in and pecked her cheek.

Pulling his hand out from behind his back, he handed to her a large bouquet of purple flowers spotted with yellow daisies.

"For you..." he said, "...to apologize for being somewhat of a prat at the Fourth."

"Prat? Have you been in London for a week? Is that what you're telling us?" Lucinda stepped towards them and grabbed the bouquet.

Clarkson laughed. "No, though that would be a laugh, hey. I've been in Boston, organizing something pretty cool..."

Lucinda was smelling the flowers, her face buried in the vibrant display.

"Yeah? How exciting?" Frances asked.

"What would you say to three traditional print media reviewers, travel writers, and world-class journalists?"

Lucinda snorted. "Something to make them like me."

Frances raised an eyebrow. "Probably something along the lines of 'why are you here and please stop sniffing the fresh baked goods?'"

Throwing his head back and laughing even louder than before, Clarkson put his hand down over hers and the warmth of it startled her.

"Well, let's hope not..." he said, composing himself, "...because we have a date with three such people tonight."

Date? We? What!?

"Uh...I can't leave the store tonight," she said, confused. "I need to run a track on intake so I can do some projections..."

Lucinda caught her eye, and Frances could feel her silent thanks. There was no way Frances would tell Clarkson about her personal issues.

"Oh, come on, that can wait. You've done nothing but work all week, I can tell. You're all tense."

The doorbell chimed as Vince bumped it open with his shoulder. "Evening one and all—apparently, my truck has some other ideas about me going anywhere tonight. Will you have me, ladies?"

Frances noticed the warm blush that crept up into Lucinda's cheeks as Vince talked, not to mention the sparkle that was in her eyes as she watched him saunter across the café.

"Oh...Hi Clarkson," he said, stopping just short of the counter. "I guess you're 'ladies' too now."

Clarkson smiled and clapped Vince on the shoulder. "Well, I'd be surely flattered to be included in a group that has these two, so I'll take that as a compliment, thank you very much."

"Good choice," Frances said, smiling at Vince. "Where were you heading anyway?"

Vince shrugged. "Oh...just out to one of the coves to source some wood for that piece Lauren Daniels has commissioned. But if the truck says no, then the time isn't right. So here I am at your disposal."

"Perfect timing. You can run this intake tracking thing Frances needs, and she can come with me to this very exclusive opportunity I negotiated for her."

"Oh...no, I don't...I can't! I—"

Lucinda held up a hand. "We can handle it. Vince can do all the hard work and I'll tell him what to do—it's my specialty, after all."

He cocked his head to one side. "Is it now?"

She was blushing again. Frances noticed. "You're a business coach, not a drill Sargent. And...are you sure, like sure sure?"

"Drill Sargent, business coach—sometimes it's hard to tell the difference," Lucinda replied. "And yes...you should go."

Looking her friend straight in the eye, Frances tried to telepathically get the truth out of her, but she was, as always, frustratingly human.

"Stop staring at me," Lucinda said. "Does she need to change her outfit?"

"No, no," Clarkson said. "She looks absolutely perfect."

EIGHT



Looking down at her outfit, she wished that Clarkson had erred on the side of social anxiety minimization rather than flattery. All the bright young things around her were at least fifteen years younger than her and wearing fifteen times nicer clothes. She hadn't felt this out of place since her first Beverly Hills Barbecue, which was more like a formal dinner for thirty people. She had shown up in slides, jeans, and a blouse, thinking that it was LA, so it was hardly going to be a casual backyard get together—and yet, somehow she still ended up being the least put together.

Tonight was a little different. She'd never wear a lot of the things she saw around her—maybe twenty years ago if they'd existed then! The restaurant-club-bar-hybrid pop-up was about an hour away and the concierge had informed them that they had arrived too late for dinner,. It was a very strange mix—dinner early enough for a Seniors Early Bird Special but heavy-based music blasting out lyrics that Frances was sure would make her blush if she listened too closely.

"Let's get a margarita," Clarkson said, gesturing at a bar set up that looked like some kind of cartoonist's idea of a tropical island.

"Uh, ok, but just one, ok? I don't need the headache," she said. "I haven't eaten."

Winking at her, he turned and departed as her phone pinged her a text message.

From Alex: Hey, I came by the café, but Lucinda said you were out partying. She and Vin have the place under control, don't worry, lol. Just have an update about the whole, 'finding some stuff out about your dad', thing. It's nothing major, pretty boring, honestly. I just didn't want to hold on to it and let you think I was skiving off.

Her heart clenched. She'd almost forgotten that she had asked Alex to do that and being reminded made her glance around and publicly cringe as if these people knew that she was digging for dirt on her own father. She tilted the screen towards her to try and obscure it from any prying eyes.

To Alex: Not a text kind of convo? I know you wouldn't skive. You're far too honorable for that, Lockwood. And no, I'm not out partying—

Looking again at the pulsing crowd of twenty-somethings on the dance floor of the restaurant bar, she backspaced.

To Alex:—And no, I'm not exactly partying. Clarkson said there would be reviewers and journalists here—tho all I see is about a hundred people half my age having twice as much fun.

Clarkson arrived with a margarita in each hand and a wide smile on his face. He handed one of them over, and she lifted the obscenely neon pink

stemware to her lips.

"There you go sweetheart," he said with another wink. "And don't worry. I've booked a room where we can have some privacy."

The sentence sent a shock wave through her, and the involuntary sharp intake of breath sent tequila and some rimming salt down the wrong way. She coughed heavily, and would have slobbered the cocktail all over herself and Clarkson if he hadn't swooped in to support her drink.

"Whoa, you're alright, right?"

He was gingerly patting her back and sounded panicked. He held out one of the equally neon green paper napkins.

"I'm fine..." she croaked, "...sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Just don't die on me, ok? I want my reputation to be as a Lady Killer, not a lady-killer."

Laughing did not improve the breathing situation, but she had to admit it was nice to laugh. Well, she would admit it when she caught her breath back.

"Stop it. Don't make me laugh," she said, tears in her eyes.

"Can't help it, I'm a brilliant man to date—funny, charming, brings you cocktails," he quipped.

"Gee, thanks," she replied, dabbing under her eyes with the folded napkin he had handed her.

Her phone pinged again, and she cleared her throat to look at it.

From Alex: Not NOT a text convo. Like I said, it's nothing bad or anything. I just thought you'd want to talk in person about it, right?

She smiled. She liked that he was thinking about her reaction as well as giving her time to prepare herself for the discussion.

To Alex: You're right. You'll be in to bake in the morning?

Alex's presence at the café was still pretty constant, but he had taught her how to bake a few of the simpler things so that he wasn't entirely split between basically volunteering at Café Bruno and running his own actual business.

"Everything ok? You look worried?" Clarkson interjected.

"I'm fine." She laughed. "Just wondering if tequila straight to the lungs is like drinking five shots in a row."

Clarkson laughed. "I think if you inhaled enough tequila to intoxicate you, we'd be calling the ambulance."

She laughed but swallowed hard. What had he meant by booking a room? She hadn't given him THAT impression? Right? Frances ran through their interactions to try and pinpoint where she might have implied she wanted to get a room, simultaneously berating herself and hating the fact that she felt she needed to audit her jokes and mannerisms in case he had misinterpreted something.

No, she decided, and stopped. Even if he had decided that her coming out with him tonight was some kind of invitation, she hadn't done anything to encourage that, and she would just have to be firm.

"Clarkson, this private room..."

He stood up, beaming in what she now recognized as his business face.

"Madeline, Gus! Over here!" he called, waving.

Madeline and Gus? Who?

"Clarkson, you didn't say the venue was a rave," an overly tall man said, a lilt in his voice making the tone playful instead of a reprimand. "I'd have brought my catsuit and feather boa if you'd said."

Frances smiled. Funnily enough, if he had shown up in a catsuit and feather boa, he wouldn't have even stood out that much. In fact, she was pretty sure there had been a man wearing a fully sequined and skin tight three piece suit dancing near the entrance. Being here with all these eccentric and showy people made her feel like she was right back in La La Land.

"Yes, you could have mentioned I'd nearly be denied entrance," a woman's voice from beside Gus said.

Frances leaned around to try and see the speaker, who she presumed was Madeline. Sure enough, a woman stood nearly two feet shorter than the immensely tall Gus, who must have been at least six foot nine, judging by where Clarkson came up to on him.

"Hi..." Frances said, "...me too. I don't think I've ever felt this underdressed."

Madelaine stepped toward her and offered her hand. "Bet it helps that people don't assume you're Danny DeVito."

Unsure whether or not to laugh, Frances stalled by putting her thinking face on. She couldn't deny that the very short woman wearing a dark gray suit probably didn't help the situation, but LA had its perks.

"You know I've met him once or twice," she said. "He was always lovely. He's got a good reputation for being genuinely kind to people."

Madelaine laughed. "Well then, I guess they're picking up on my warm and cuddly soul, not my sub-five foot status."

The wide grin Gus gave made Frances pause—had she completely misread this situation?

"Maddy is renowned for being incredibly harsh," he said. "Nice to meet you. I'm the nice one."

Frances shook his hand, too, and tried to hide her confusion.

"I think you'll find incredibly high standards is more accurate..." Madelaine interrupted, "...standards which Clarkson here tells me will be entirely satisfied by your establishment?"

Oh lord, Frances thought, what has he done?

"Look, Jenny's here," Clarkson waved. "I can't believe she agreed to fly in. Isn't she on her way to Bora Bora or something?"

Gus smirked. "Something like that. She never stops moving. Now, where's this private room and please tell me there will be food there? I can't talk publicity on an empty stomach."

NINE



Sitting down heavily on her bed, her hair wrapped in a tight towel on top of her head, Frances pulled out her phone and opened her usual series of apps.

The eBook she should be reading but couldn't concentrate on, the music she couldn't play on the café speakers because customers wouldn't like it, her email with nothing new—what a surprise at five in the morning—and finally one of her few social media accounts.

Frances hadn't avoided social media so much as she had only used it for work—a shocking number of corporate clients wanted to build a social network outside of the professional channels. As she flicked through her accounts and their various notifications, she realized that while her actual intent was very different, she was engaging in the same behavior the influencer Clarkson brought into the café did. Clarkson, too, now she thought about it. Her 'personal' profiles were all pretty tailored to appeal to high-strung business types, while the accounts for Café Bruno were much more aesthetically relaxed. She'd scheduled out the next three months of posts, so it was a weight off her daily task list, but now she needed to add in some bonus posts for the articles Madeline, Gus, and Jenny were going to write.

She was blown away that these three showed interest in her venture. From what she could tell, they were three of the biggest names in their business without stepping over into the fine-dining and Michelin star side of

things. Lucky for her, too, because she did not want that kind of pressure—or the backlash from Kennedy.

How strange her life was now, she realized, sitting up straighter. A weird mix between tiptoeing the same fine lines around the same people she had in high school, a total change from her life in corporate risk, and yet elements of her LA life like the ridiculous party that had kept her out until midnight.

Holding her phone tightly, she counted back on her fingers—four hours of sleep. That was, fundamentally, not enough. Sighing, she reached up to release her hair from its wrap. She needed to prepare for the day—and the conversation with Alex.

Her morning routine was down to a formula—blow dry, whatever clean combination came off the laundry pile first, mascara and lipstick only—who has time for foundation these days?

Catching her face in the mirror as she headed downstairs, she wondered if she should make time for it, the fine lines around her eyes were what she found the most startling. After all, she'd spent so many years covering them up in LA. Here though, did she really care? Would anyone notice? Probably, she realized, but this thought pattern was starting to feel more like a habit than actually caring about the outcome...

Huh, she thought, *that's different*.

Heading down the stairs, still musing on the subtle difference between caring if people knew her age and feeling like she should care but didn't, Frances nearly walked straight into Alex as he came around the corner.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "Off with the fairies much?"

She laughed. "Sorry, just solving half the world's problems in my head."

"And all before six?" he asked, putting his arm around her shoulder and walking alongside her into the kitchen.

"Obviously," she retorted. "What have you achieved this morning?"

Lucinda wasn't up yet. She had closed with Vin the night before and then gone on to do some client work after—she wouldn't be up until at least ten. That meant that the coffee machine would not have been turned on and prepped, Frances realized as they came up to the counter and sighed.

"I think you'll find that you'll be very pleased with what I've spent my morning doing," he said smugly, disappearing as he ducked down behind the counter.

"Oh, you think, do you?"

Reappearing with a huge butchers' block laden with mini-waffles, tiny pancakes, breakfast sausage muffins cut into quarters, and an entire pitcher of coffee, Frances gasped as Alex grinned.

"Yeah, I think I do," he replied, placing it down and busying himself with pouring her coffee.

"This is without a doubt the best breakfast you have ever made me—did you know that?" she said nearly 20 minutes later, popping the last of the tiny waffle in her mouth topped with half of a strawberry.

"Have I made you that many breakfasts that make that a compliment?" he asked.

Frances put the fork down with a heavy thud. He must be joking.

"You must be joking," she said, deadpan voice engaged. "Come on, you made me breakfast every time I stayed here!"

Alex turned slowly from the stove and looked at her quizzically.

Slowly, he nodded. "You know what...I think it actually was every

time."

He returned to the counter where his own half of the plate still had a few lingering bites left for him to finish.

"Yeah, I know that, but how can you not remember? Your breakfasts were the best!"

Alex smiled at her. "You're just saying that. Come on, it was like, pancakes and sometimes a waffle if the iron was clean."

Frances nodded vigorously. "Look, I'll be honest, I have no idea how any of it tasted—my memory isn't that good. But I do remember absolutely loving you in the kitchen—you'd ask me what I wanted, and within five minutes, you'd be zipping around like a cartoon character fixing it up. Those were some amazing mornings...the best mornings, actually."

He'd slowed his pace down now to a complete stop. A fork full of pancake hung in the air in front of his mouth, and Frances snapped her own shut as she realized he was staring.

"I can't believe you remember those mornings," he said. "Not like, in a 'your memory is failing you' way, just that I didn't think they were...I dunno, important."

She felt herself tinging red at this. "I mean, you never had breakfast at mine, right? It was usually me alone, cereal if I was lucky, and most of the time, it was those cardboard tasting bars. It was a real treat to come over here...plus, you've always made me laugh."

It was his turn to blush now, and as he realized he was doing so, he stood and turned away.

"We were an odd pair...you with the fraught family life and me with the pretty calm one," he said as he cleared the bench. "Yet it was me who was getting in trouble and lashing out while you were the golden girl of the whole

school."

A snort of disbelief escaped her and she clapped her hand over her mouth to try and keep it in, but it didn't work, and a second burst of laughter followed.

"Look, I know, I know I was all good grades and all that, but I had to be," she said. "I didn't really have a choice. I was sad we weren't better friends, and when my parents thought you were trouble but I was helping you back on the straight and narrow—all the while we were spending half the night walking the streets and eating junk food—it was too perfect. I'm just glad we became so close. You really made my life so much better, you know."

She was speaking to his back but knew he was hearing her. Alex had gotten in with some pretty risky guys back in the day, but when they'd become friends, he had foregone hanging out with them in exchange for spending time with Frances and her other friends—even though they'd all thought he was a bit weird. Frances knew as well that he hated talking about it.

"Oh, speaking of high school—"

"Like we don't spend our whole lives talking about Clarkson," he said, flicking a look over his shoulder. "Or Kennedy."

Frances frowned. "Well...not them this time. Hayley is coming to town for a visit!"

This time Alex turned around. "Hayley? As in, 'please don't tell anyone I can't inhale. It's too embarrassing,' Hayley?"

A giggle burst out of her and was followed—for the second time in two minutes—by her slapping a hand over her mouth.

"I thought she'd only done that in front of me!" Frances said.

"No," Alex replied. "She really thought it made her look cool..."

They both sighed in a, 'oh teenagers', kind of way, which made them laugh again.

"That's cool, though. When is she coming?" Alex asked.

Checking the date on her phone screen, Frances noticed the time. "Uh, like two days? She'll be here for the weekend. We need to start baking..."

"I know," Alex said. "The thing is, well, I wanted to fill you in about your dad."

She froze. In all the fun and reminiscing, she had kind of forgotten about the entire reason he had come over so early—he had information for her.

"What?"

"Well, he had a bit of a reputation..." Alex said, "...a not nice one."

"How not nice? Like Serial Killer Not Nice or Get Off My Lawn You Dang Kids Not Nice?"

Instantly she regretted asking. Her dad wasn't a serial killer...right!?

Alex laughed. "More like a Don't Let Him Come Over and Fix The Boiler When I'm Not Home Honey kind of not nice. Apparently, he flirted with a lot of the married women in town."

That was better than being a serial killer, Frances reassured herself.

"Oh."

"Yeah, I haven't heard anything more than rumors. Keep in mind this was kind of twenty five years ago. Most people have forgotten or moved on by now. There are a few more old timers around who you'll want to go and talk to about it—that is, if you want me to keep looking?"

She swallowed hard. Yeah, sure, of course she did...right?

"Yeah, please, I want to know."

TEN



The bell tinkled as the last customer opened the door to leave Café Bruno for the evening. "Thank you, guys! I'll be in tomorrow for that flan thing!"

The older woman stepped through the door and latched it tightly behind her.

"Did you have to say flan?" Alex said. "Do you know how hard flan is to make?"

He sauntered over to where she was sitting in the wingback she favored and leaned his hip against the side.

"I do not, but I have faith in you, master chef," Frances said lightly.

Her laptop was open on the table in front of her, and graphs and spreadsheets filled the screen.

"You going to be here a while?" Alex asked. When she nodded, he continued, "Okay, well, I'm going to clean up out back, then Vince has asked me to go through the sales for his stuff with him. He's trying to work out his tax stuff."

"Are you sure? Let me clean up. You go do taxes."

Frances tried to stand, but Alex firmly held her shoulder. "You sit. Maybe relax a little in between progressive forecasting compound overloads."

She sighed deeply at him. He knew that what he had just said was nonsense, so she didn't need to say anything.

Turning back to her computer as he wandered out to the kitchen, she wondered if she remembered what it felt like to just sit back and relax rather than be constantly thinking about what she was supposed to be doing next.

With a quick click, she minimized the Café intake tracker and opened up her personal browser. Without even thinking about it, she found herself on social media and scrolling down post after post of her friends being ridiculously aesthetic for no reason.

The itch was back, she could just type in two words and she could see what he'd been up to...

She glanced over the top of her laptop screen—Vince and Lucinda were flirting over the milkshake bar, even though neither of them would admit it. Alex was singing along to some song in his headphones as he cleaned up the kitchen. She could...you know...just...

Search: Malcolm Crawford

The tightness in her chest wound around itself as she watched the bar loading on the new page.

"Oh my God..." she gasped.

There was nothing. She was blocked!

Suddenly not nervous at all, she opened up an incognito browser and logged into the old account they had set up for the rescue dogs they were sponsoring a few years ago. They—well, Frances—had run the page with a different dog's profile for months until they got adopted and then moved on to the next one.

Search: Malcolm Crawford

There he was.

That jerk.

He'd blocked her! As if divorcing her wasn't enough, he wanted to try and stop her from even internet stalking him. What the actual...

"Oh..."

His latest photograph was of him and the same woman Hayley had seen him with at an event in Texas. They stood, her hand resting on his arm and the two of them smiling into the camera.

Was that in his dad's old office? Frances leaned into the screen and squinted at the paintings on the wall.

Yep, there were the hideous—and hideously expensive—imports that Malcolm Senior thought made him look European and sophisticated. They just made him look rich, which she'd soon learned he felt was the same thing.

Malcolm really didn't like his dad, and he hated his dad's law firm—there was absolutely no reason he would be there voluntarily.

Frances shook her head...what if it was all a lie, though? What if he never really hated them and secretly resented her when she was so relieved that he never wanted to go back to Texas? They'd treated her so badly. She wasn't the rich little old money girl next door that they had picked out for him.

She was a poor, unsophisticated, scholarship student that spoke her mind and didn't really care about being a wife. They liked her because all she did care about was that Malcolm loved her...

Or had he ever? Was she just his exit strategy? How could he have ever done this to her? He had never been exactly romantic or over the top but...he'd never been overtly nasty. Cold, short-sighted, and kind of boring sometimes, but...

Tears streamed silently down her face as she stared. This was why she never wanted to stop being active. If she was doing stuff, she didn't have to be thinking, or feeling, or giving in to stupid whims and searching him up on a dogs' social media profile just to hurt her own feelings.

"Luce!" she called, unable to stop staring at the picture.

Lucinda's attention snapped away from Vincent immediately. Frances could see her shape moving towards her.

"What? Babes, what is it? Oh..."

She came to a stop next to the chair.

"That son of a— I'm going to kill him, or have him killed. We'll feed him to some pigs—or hogs, whatever they have in Texas."

Frances could almost bring herself to laugh, and Lucinda leaned down and slowly used the trackpad to log her out of the screen. Closing the lid, she turned and perched her butt on the table.

"You didn't laugh at my pig-based murder suggestion. You must be really upset," she said solemnly.

That did actually make her laugh, which Frances thought was ironic considering she had actually really wanted to laugh at the pig thing but knew it would have come out more like a sob.

"I just...I don't even care, about her. I mean," she said. "It's not her, it's not even him...I'm not explaining this very well."

She sniffled, and Lucinda handed her a napkin. Frances wiped her eyes and took a deep breath.

"It's just...she was his destiny," she tried to explain. "Their families are some of the richest and oldest in their town, and they had this great dynasty-making plan, you know? Malcolm started dating her in high school,

took her to prom, they both went off to college, and he...met me."

Silence descended as she trailed off, Frances could almost feel Vincent trying not to eavesdrop in the other room and Alex had stopped singing.

"Yeah?" Lucinda prompted. "And?"

"And...well, it feels kind of terrible that I broke them up, but now he's back with her? What if it never meant anything? It was all just a lie? What if, by dating him and loving him...I ruined his life?"

Lucinda squeezed her eyes shut and held a hand up to stop her talking.

"Wait, no, shut up. I need a second," she said. When she opened her eyes again after a moment, she looked angry. "You're going to sit here, in front of me right now, and try to tell me that because some crusty rich boy from Texas cheated on his hometown girlfriend with you and fell in love with you that you ruined his life? Nah, nah, sweetie, you need a talking to. He chooses you, of his own free will, marries you, treats you like garbage, then divorces out of the blue and goes running home to mommy and daddy? And somehow, some way, that's your fault? Absolutely not."

Frances swallowed hard. She rarely saw Lucinda get this riled up about anything at all.

"Not exactly—"

"No," Lucinda said. "No, I won't accept it, I refuse. You told me before, you didn't know he had a girl back home?"

Frances shook her head. It wasn't exactly the way Lucinda was painting it, but...

"And he had some super prenup, right?"

Confused now, Frances raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, so?"

"So, he could've shot his shot and said bye bye whenever the heck he wanted, right? So, he didn't need to stay with you, he could've upped and left whenever he chose, but he didn't. He stayed. I don't know why he left when or how he did, but I'm sure as my nose lives on my face that he stayed because he wanted to."

Why did that make her cry more? Frances covered her face with her hands and let the tears roll down her face—she hadn't cried over him in weeks. Why was she so emotional now? If she was completely honest, she'd barely thought about him in weeks either. She'd been realizing more and more lately that even though she was devastated by the whole thing, she hadn't really been in love with him for a long time.

As the last of her emotion drained out of her, she wiped her eyes with her shirt front.

"The better part of my honor needs to clarify something," she said in a small voice. "He didn't cheat on her with me, we were in a study group together and even though there was a spark there, we never went out. One day, he showed up and the first thing he said was that he'd broken it off with his high school girlfriend, and would I like to go on a date with him. I'd had a crush on him for ages by that time so of course I said yes. Didn't think I'd marry him, though."

Lucinda huffed in the way only she could. "Fine, I'll grant him that. I still think we should feed him to the pigs."

A metallic click drew their attention and they all turned in time to see a white envelope fall to the floor next to the door.

Frances rose from her seat and crossed to the door, stooping to pick it up.

The front was blank, but the folded note inside was handwritten.

"Open your eyes. He's not doing this for you, foolish girl."

Frances gritted her teeth and refolded the note.

"What is it?" Lucinda asked from the chair.

"Oh, nothing, just that guy from down the road who's always pushing to ban music on the beach," she said, feeling a little guilty about the lie.

She pushed the whole thing into her pocket and stared out into the dark street, the warm light of the café encompassing her like a blanket of safety. Turning to Lucinda, she smiled halfheartedly.

"Thank you for putting me in my place," she said. "I think I just needed a pity party."

"Happens to the best of us," Lucinda said. "Now, you go and get a cup of something hot and sweet from that someone hot and sweet in the kitchen."

"Luce!" Frances exclaimed. It was weird to hear someone talk about Alex like that.

"What? He *is* sweet!...and hot," she said, laughing. "And go to bed. You need an early night."

Swallowing hard, Frances knew that Lucinda was right. She often was, and Frances rarely got enough sleep even when ridiculous stalker fans of someone she wasn't even dating were shoving letters through her front door.

ELEVEN



"So...do you want to come with me to the barber across the other side of town after lunch?" Alex asked.

Turning to look at him, Frances frowned. "You're probably old enough to go on your own by now, dontcha think?"

He flicked the dishcloth that he was using at her. "So funny, please stop. I can't handle the comedy."

Acting entirely like the teenager he once knew, she darted out of the way and pinched his arm on the way past him to the fridge.

"Ouch! Who gave you fingers of steel, woman?"

"No, but seriously," she said. "Why? Will they not let you sit in the racing car now that you're six feet and tall and forty?"

The dishcloth came again; this time, she wasn't quite fast enough to get around the flicking tip that stung her leg.

"Hah, gotcha," he said. "I win."

"The most antagonistic way to end a game you were losing is to call time the second you manage to score."

She opened the fridge to offload more milk into the storage containers. They used way too much to rely on cartons and bottles.

"And yet you always let me, so kind," he said in his teasing tone.
"Queen of humility and generosity—"

"Alright, calm down," Frances said. "You're so annoying."

Even though the fridge door was between the two of them and entirely blocked her view of him, she could tell he was smiling. He could always make her feel almost giddy, just by being himself. She guessed that was why she had always been so protective of him, despite him being much bigger and meaner looking than she could ever pull off.

With the skim container full again, she was satisfied that they would get through the afternoon rush without resorting to the backup cartons on the top shelf. Closing the door slightly, she realized that she could see Alex through the narrow opening between the door and the side of the fridge. It felt like spying, but...Well, he looked so happy! Smiling at his hands as he dried the last few drops off the freshly finished load of cups from the dishwasher—they really needed to get a better one or more cups if they wanted to cut this ridiculously time-consuming task down.

"So..." he said without looking up from his task, "...this barber was your dad's. Well, he was everyone's barber, actually, until about twenty years ago. He used to be the only one in town, but then he and his apprentice had a falling out. The apprentice set up shop across the road. Mac's and Mike's—we're seeing Mac."

Frances stepped back and snapped the fridge closed.

"Mac? He knew my dad?"

"Yeah," Alex said, though it sounded a little guarded. "I heard he was the one to talk to about town history—gossip really—but I thought as he actually knew your dad, you might want to talk to him yourself."

She did....but she also didn't and couldn't exactly put her finger on

why.

"Sure, but Lucinda and Vin will have to do the afternoon shift on their own...plus Hayley is arriving tonight."

"If it's too much, then don't worry about it," Alex said. "I'm more than okay going on my own. I just wanted to give you the option."

She nodded. "Thank you...yes, I want to go with you. It will be weird to talk to someone who remembers him more than I do...someone other than my mom, I mean. She doesn't really talk about him, more just curses his name and changes the subject."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I know. Hey, is Hayley coming in by bus?"

"No, she's going to take a taxi from the train station," Frances replied, glad for the change in subject.

"Well, why don't we pick her up? It's only twenty minutes out of the way," he suggested. "That way we have a reason to cut the visit short if it's too much all at once, and we know we won't miss her because we're picking her up. What do you say?"

Frances nodded. He had two very good points. Plus, he was looking out for her, she knew it.

"Yeah, that sounds good. I'll text her."

Lucinda stepped into the kitchen. "Hey guys, we're thinking about doing a bit of a reshuffle in the gallery—come see."

Alex checked the temperature of the oven before leading the way out of the kitchen and into the gallery section.

They hadn't changed much, but the layout worked, and there were some new pieces that Frances really liked.

"So, has that Lauren Daniels actually commissioned anything yet?"

Vince nodded. "She's getting the contract to me this week—you'll be pretty pleased with the finder's fee."

"Will I?" Frances said. "She's not trying to jerk us around?"

With a laugh, Vince replied. "Well, I think she's going to make a decent penny on her middleman role in the whole thing with her clients, but she agreed to match the gallery percentage."

That took her by surprise. Normally art dealers tried to wheedle a once-off dollar amount to maximize their return on the exchange.

"Is she jacking the price up for the clients, though?" Alex asked.

"Nope, every piece in there is allocated to a specific person," Vince said. "Lucinda and I went through the contract and checked. The clients each know how much she paid for the piece, your commission, her commission, all of it."

Lucinda bumped Vince with her elbow. "She's thinking that he's going to be big and famous. She's out one of the stone pieces in her investment fund."

"How do you know that?" Vince asked, looking down at Lucinda.

"Well, duh, one of the clients is L.D. Alt Growth."

Cocking her head to one side, Frances processed how that might work legally. "So she's listing an investment fund as a client...does that just mean she's allocated it to her own non-traditional investments, or is it a listed company?"

"What's an Alt Growth?" Vince asked.

"It's a type of investment that you expect to grow but isn't a company," Lucinda explained.

"People use it as a protection against market ups and downs," Frances

added. "Like, if you buy a company and it turns out the CEO...I dunno eats babies for breakfast or something universally horrific, that company is pretty likely to plummet in value, but it might come back over twenty years if it's actually a good company. Whereas if you buy something like a piece of art or gold, it's unlikely to be so hugely affected by those sorts of swings. Plus, they'll maintain their value and even grow over time as the economy does, or as the artist gets more popular. If L.D. Alt Growth is what we think it is, she must genuinely think you'll be selling for more than today's value in ten or twenty years."

All three of her friends had paused to look at her. Lucinda was the only one who didn't look entirely shocked.

"What?" she asked. "I've been in risk management for half my life. I know what defensive assets are."

Lucinda laughed, and Vince shook his head. "Well...it sounds like a good thing?"

"Yeah, hon," Lucinda said. "It's a good thing. You want to add investments to our curriculum?"

Alex sent a sideways glance at Frances as if to say, 'look look look!'

She was looking, and she saw—she wasn't sure how Lucinda didn't see the way Vince was looking at her with barely concealed awe and admiration, but he was.

"Uh...maybe, let's get my brain on board with what we've been working on so far, ok?"

Lucinda smiled up at him. "Yeah, sure, whatever you want."

Frances blinked hard. Whatever he wanted? Lucinda was not that kind of business coach...she was a drill Sargent.

Oh, she had it bad, Frances realized and wondered how long it would

take Lucinda to notice.

TWELVE



Standing outside the white clapboard barber shop brought back feelings and memories she didn't know she had.

There should be nothing about standing on this street corner that made her feel this way, but looking down the wide open street with the sign for Mac's on one side and Mike's on the other, Frances could remember standing in that exact spot when she was a child.

Less than ten years old, she reckoned that she wasn't in school for some reason. She was with her mom, and her mom was mad.

Not at her, because if it had been at her, she wouldn't have been allowed to come out with her mom on her errands. This was before her mom had gone back to work, she realized as she thought about it. So, that would have to mean that she was only six or seven....

The version of her mom she saw in her memory kneeled down on one knee in front of her, holding her tightly in both hands.

'You stay right here. Don't move a muscle, ok?'

'Why can't I come in mommy?' Frances remembered asking.

'Because your daddy's getting his hair cut. It's a bit like going to the doctor. You don't really want to interrupt people while they're in there.'

Even as a little girl, this had confused her—she also didn't care if her

mom came into the doctor with her, so the story made no sense. Looking back on it as an adult, she realized it was probably because her mom was going in there to have a whispered argument with her dad about something. She hadn't known, then, of course. It had taken her a couple more years to really catch on that her parents were anything less than perfect. No matter how it looked to Alex, who had always assumed that her family had been completely dysfunctional, they had been a good family. They didn't have a lot of money. Her dad was always away for work—though she never really understood what he actually did for work—and her mom was a nurse who also worked constantly. They weren't bad parents, just...busy.

The guilt she felt over even thinking about her mom negatively started to creep in. That was something she had taken years to get over. Her old therapist always told her, less than perfect isn't evil, but when it came to her mom...

"Let's go in," she said suddenly, realizing that Alex hadn't said anything in several moments while she stared into the middle distance and probably looked like she was losing her mind.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "It might not be...what you're looking for."

"I don't think I know what I'm looking for," she replied. "But I don't expect it to be a lottery win or a terminal diagnosis."

By falling back on the examples of a perfect win and a perfect loss that she and Alex had used as kids, Frances was always able to put things in perspective. A lottery win would fix everything—according to their teenage logic—and a one hundred percent terminal diagnosis was the opposite. The oversimplified thought pattern was useless in the majority of adult decision-making. After all, terminally ill people still had to pay mortgages, and lottery winners still went bankrupt, but as a big picture refocus? It worked.

"Okay," he said. "Just check your phone and tell me the time if you want to leave, ok?"

"What time do we actually have to leave here to pick her up at five?"

"Four thirty, to be safe."

"Yeah, sure, let's go."

They crossed the road and entered the little store, she had never been inside before but she knew almost instinctively that it hadn't changed since Mac was a young man. The chairs were leather, a little scratched up but cared for nicely all the same. The scent of the leather conditioner was sweet and a little cloying, mixed with the smells of shampoo and musky cologne. Frances could see why this was a safe haven for many of the grown-up men in her father's age group when she was a child.

Mac entered the room. "Welcome, come on in, take a seat—oh. Hello, you're new?"

Frances closed the door gently behind her. "Yes, I'm Frances and this is Alex."

The elderly Mac stands remarkably straight for a man who has spent probably fifty years bent over clients' chairs and peering closely at things, Frances thought. His keen eyes took them in as he looked them over, which made her feel oddly exposed. She leaned a little closer to Alex and smiled. Mac's face lit up, a broad and welcoming grin taking hold.

"Well, it's a pleasure, but unless you're looking for a short back and sides, I'm not sure I can help you—or are you just keeping your husband company? A lotta wives have real strict rules what their men do with the hair on their heads!"

Both she and Alex tripped over their words. "Oh no, no, we're not. It's not like that," she said.

"We're friends," Alex said, smiling awkwardly through a rapidly flushing face.

"Oh, really?" Mac said. "Alright, my point still stands about the short back and sides—your hair's beautifully cut, and it's really not my forte."

"That's ok," Frances said. "I actually would really like to ask you some questions?"

The welcoming smile wavered. "You some kind of reporter or something?"

"No," Frances said. Though it would be a good cover story, she wanted to be honest with him.

Alex stepped forward, "I'm Alex Lockwood. My dad used to come in here when I was a kid. He brought me here for my first haircut?"

"Did he now? Lockwood...Lockwood, oh yeah! I remember Harold. How's your mom, kiddo?"

"She's doing great, Mac. They live down in Salem now," Alex said. "After what happened with the shop, they didn't really want to stick around and see a new face in the old house every few months."

Mac nodded. "That was a mighty shame. They did alright for themselves, though, better than some of the offers I get on this place now."

"True, luckily though, Frances has just bought it," he continued. "She's running a coffee shop and art gallery there now. I'm doing most of the baking, though."

"So she doesn't count as a new face?" Mac said with a twinkle of mischief in his eye. "It's a very pretty face, I must admit."

Feeling her face go hot, Frances tried to laugh it off.

"The prettiest, but she's not new," Alex said, expertly turning the

conversation. "She grew up here, but you might not have met her. You knew her dad, though, and that's what we wanted to talk to you about actually."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Frances said. "My dad was Jonathon Lane?"

The playful smile on Mac's face disappeared now.

"Ah," he said. "Well...I don't know what you want to know, but I'm not sure I can tell you."

"Just...just anything you remember," she said, trying not to sound desperate. "I don't really have a lot of memories of him. He was always gone for work. Then he was just...gone."

Mac nodded and took a seat in one of his chairs.

"Well, he was always polite to me, paid his bills," Mac said. "I don't know what else I can say..."

"I'm not looking for pleasantries," Frances said. "I know he had a reputation...I want to know the truth."

"The truth?" Mac said with a snort. "You say that, but...well, it's not my place to tell you what you can or can't handle. He was an excellent swindler, your dad. He had everyone believing he was an upstanding citizen, but he'd take what he could get without putting too much effort in. He made an advance on my daughter when she was in the shop once. When she slapped him right across the face, he shrugged his shoulders and told her he had thought it worth a try. She didn't tell me that until after he left. I'd never let him back in here otherwise."

Frances let her mouth fall open. "Your daughter? in your own shop?"

"Sure did," he said. "He wasn't forceful or nothin' like that, and the fact that he was a real charmer and half good-looking didn't hurt his efforts."

When he left, a lot of the men were happy about it—one more than the other's, though."

"Who?" Frances asked quickly.

"No idea, all I know is he showed up here one morning with a big old black eye, broken nose, and a handful of jewelry he wanted to sell—I asked him why he didn't go down the pawn shop, and he lost his temper. Didn't even let me look at them again, just took off. Didn't come back to town after that."

Stomach swirling and twisting into knots, Frances swallowed hard, trying to clear the nauseous feeling it created.

"The pawn shop? I don't remember a pawn shop?"

"Oh, you wouldn't," Mac said. "Prices' Antiques always tried to elevate themselves above that, but they did whatever made money."

"Price? As in Kennedy Price?" Alex asked.

"Yeah...that girl's done alright, bit uptight though," Mac said.

Frances wasn't sure she wanted the next answer but she couldn't help herself. "Did you see any of the jewelry? Was there a Tiffany Co. heart bracelet in there?"

Mac scratched his head, "I think there was, yeah. Why?"

Pulling out her phone, she stared at the screen through a fog of tears.

"Uh, Alex, it's four," she said.

"Sorry, Mac, we gotta go. We're picking someone up at the station."

Looking confused, Mac bid them farewell and said he'd come by and try the coffee. As they stepped through the door, Frances turned to him. Something in her felt that he needed an explanation.

"That bracelet? I found it on the subway when I was seven, and we

went to New York for a vacation. It was my absolute prize possession, even before I knew it was a fancy designer. I thought I lost it in senior year just before he left."

THIRTEEN



Watching Lucinda and Hayley work each other out had been an interesting entertainment for Frances and Alex over the last few days. Two big personalities in a very small café would always be a sight, and Frances was glad Alex was there to help diffuse a few of the more awkward scenes. Lucinda usually wasn't particularly bothered by other people's behavior, and Frances was sure that it had less to do with Hayley's personality and more to do with the broad smile she kept flashing Vince.

"I think Lucinda may need a break," she whispered to Alex at the counter.

It was one of the few quieter moments in the day, and they'd paused to make themselves a coffee and share some of the Halva Hayley had brought from LA.

"You think?" Alex said, stifling a giggle.

"Do you want to do me a huge favor?"

Alex glanced at her sideways. "What, another one? Your tab is getting pretty high, you know."

Frances smiled. "I know, but you'll have fun, I promise. Take her on one of your lunchtime tours?"

The Jet Ski Eco Tours Alex ran were some of the most well-reviewed

attractions in town, and even though he often came back exhausted, he loved giving them.

Hayley sidled up to the pair and popped a piece of the Halva into her mouth. "This stuff is great. I can't believe I'd never tried it before."

A bell tinkled and Clarkson stepped through the door. "Hey, guys! How are we feeling about the meeting today?"

Frances gave an exaggerated shudder. The formal check-in with Kennedy was happening soon and she couldn't think of anything she'd want less to be doing—except maybe actually talking about what she had learned about her dad. She moved around the counter to greet Clarkson, who gave her a light peck on the cheek.

"You'll be fine," he said with a laugh.

Taking advantage of their route around the hot button areas for Kennedy—primarily the alcohol signage and the locked garden door—Frances leaned into eavesdrop on the conversation Lucinda was having with Vince.

"...well, if you'd just ask for help, I'd be happy to lend you my expertise."

Frances recognized the lilt in her friend's voice was one-hundred percent the same one she used on dates. Maybe this little bit of perceived competition with Hayley would push her to acknowledge the chemistry between her and Vin. Sneaking a glimpse at the artist's face, Frances saw that he wasn't blushing like she expected him to be—he was giving Lucinda a similarly wolfish look, and suddenly Frances felt like she was intruding. She was, after all, eavesdropping. Turning her attention back to what Clarkson was saying, she tried to fully engage in the conversation about getting the garden sorted out.

"We really just can't afford it..." Frances said as they arrived back at the counter with Alex and Hayley, "...it's going to have to wait."

"What if I talked to some guys about getting it done cheaply?" Clarkson asked.

"Depends what cheap means to you, Mr. Versace Suit Jacket," Frances teased, then she noticed the awkward look on both Alex and Hayley's faces. "What?"

Hayley smiled but was forced. "I wanted to check the time, so I turned your phone over to see the lock screen and..."

The phone was on the counter, and Alex pushed it towards her as Frances felt her stomach drop. The screen lit up, dozens of notifications were popping in and out from her email and social media. Trying to halt the feeling of nausea that was tightening around her stomach, Frances reached for it and scanned through the contents.

1 Minute Ago: "who even is she? she's so much less hot than him wth"

1 Minute Ago: "lol what's with the au naturel, get some botox lady look after yourself"

2 Minutes Ago: "leave her alone guys, come on, let's not act like high school bullies"

2 Minutes Ago: "old much?"

1 Minute Ago: "she's literally the same age as him, stop being gross"

"Frances, what is this?" Alex asked, concern tinging his words.

She sighed heavily. "It's nothing...well, it's nothing new, anyway."

When she glanced at Clarkson, who was reading over her shoulder, she saw that he was shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"These guys are idiots," he said softly. "I'm sorry they're annoying you. I deal with it all the time."

He really did sound sorry but he also sounded almost bored to have to be talking about it.

"How long have you been getting this?" Alex asked, sounding angrier now.

Frances shrugged. "Oh, well, since the article really. I thought my socials were pretty well private but...apparently not."

What she had intended to be a lighthearted laugh to brush it off sounded more like a small hiccup and did nothing to remove the concerned expressions around her. Several loud beeps sounded from the kitchen and Alex turned away to go and deal with whatever they signified. Hayley followed after him. Maybe she sensed what Frances was about to do.

"Listen, Clarkson," she said. "I really think we should talk about this. I don't think we should go out anymore...I can't deal with all this chaos as well as all the other chaos too..."

"It's hardly a big deal, come on..." he said, one eyebrow lifting. "You're not freaked out by some online trolls, seriously?"

"It's not just online! I get letters pushed through the door. People leave reviews when they've never even been here. I spend an hour or more every day going through and filing reports on one-star reviews saying that the owner—you know, me—is a lying, promiscuous cow who's using you! It's constant..."

Clarkson shrugged, which made Frances do a small double take.

"Sure, I can see that getting to you," he said. "We weren't exactly

exclusive and serious. Why don't I put up a short post addressing it, and let everyone know we aren't dating? It'll make Kennedy happy too."

That might well be true but the entirely flippant tone he said it in made Frances recoil. He was so casual about it—like she was nuts for thinking they were even dating. And what the heck was up with that one-eighty he just pulled?

"Thank you," she said stiffly as the bell tinkled again.

FOURTEEN



Perfect timing, Frances thought as Kennedy strode into the café like it was her own.

"Shall we get started? Then I think we'll go to the Harbor View for the meeting portion."

Luckily the Harbor View was only a two minute walk up the street and Frances wouldn't have to get in the car with her. Frances followed her around as she took notes on all the things they still had as 'pending approval' on their application.

Within fifteen minutes, they were seated at the cocktail bar at the Harbor View.

"I'll have a Pina Colada please," Kennedy said with a thin-lipped smile at the waiter.

"Just a G&T for me, thank you," Frances said. "So, how are we going in your assessment plan?"

Normally she wasn't so forward but the morning had been tense and her nerves were frazzled. That didn't stop Kennedy from looking at her in surprise.

"My findings are...satisfactory," she said, "...so far, at least. There are a few more things I need to talk to you about. Clarkson said you're planning

on renovating the garden, and while I think that it would make an ideal addition, it will extend your probation until the work is complete and the council can be satisfied that it's safe for patrons to frequent. We wouldn't want your haste or callousness to get someone hurt, would we?"

With just one sentence, Frances felt her nerves go from frazzled to snapped. "My callousness? Are you serious? What makes you think I'm callous?"

Kennedy tilted her head to one side, her eyes widening as she failed to contain her anger.

Kennedy snorted. "What doesn't? You jump into things you haven't thought about for three seconds, treat everyone around you like they're disposable, and take whatever you want whenever you want, with no consideration for the people you hurt. I've said it before and will say it again, like father, like daughter."

Frances blinked hard. This again? Why did Kennedy keep landing on this, and why was she so violently angry about it?

"What is your problem, Kennedy?" she asked sharply. "I've never done anything to you! You were the bully in high school, always! If anything, I should hate you!"

Turning red in the face, Kennedy leaned forward and hissed between her teeth. "Oh, didn't you? Your family ruined my life. Of course I hate you—"

A wave of confusion and nausea rolled over Frances as she watched Kennedy spit this accusation at her—the anger was real. Kennedy was still talking, fast and low—like she didn't want anyone to hear her. Kennedy glanced up and caught sight of Frances watching her with a look of complete confusion on her face, stopping mid-sentence.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Frances said. "I really don't know why you hate me so much."

"How can you not...?" Kennedy whispered. "Oh my lord, you really don't, do you?"

Both women fell silent as the waiter arrived with their drinks. Kennedy snatched hers up and took a long sip from the straw.

"No, I don't know."

Kennedy's face had lost any color that had rushed to it in the moments before.

"I have a little brother, you know, William," she said finally. "He graduated from Yale last year. Now, medical school."

What did that have to do with anything?

"Do you remember that I also got into Yale?"

Frances nodded and Kennedy continued.

"Well, I never went," she said.

"What? Why!?"

She should have stayed silent, she judged from the narrowing of Kennedy's eyes.

"Because I had to stay," she said, her voice wavering. "I had to stay home because my forty-two-year-old mom was pregnant and she had...complications. Complications and no one to look after her because my dad left when he found out."

The smell of gin and lime hit her nose as Frances lifted a shaking glass to her lips. She tried to swallow the bitter concoction but it caught in her throat and she coughed hard against it. She didn't know what Kennedy was about to say, but she was starting to understand.

"When?" she asked in a strangled voice. "When did he leave?"

Kennedy leaned back in her chair, slouching for the first time since they had been reacquainted.

"Almost exactly a month after yours did."

They stared at each other silently for several long moments.

"But that doesn't explain why you hated me in high school..."

Kennedy scoffed, swiping her Pina Colada off the table and taking another huge sip.

"You think that was the first time?" she asked sharply. "My dad went on a 'long business trip' when I was twelve. I was a lot of things in high school but I was never stupid. I knew why he left. Then when he came back six months later and asked me if anyone had been visiting the house while he was gone, I said no because I wanted him to come back. I lied."

"You lied?" she echoed.

"Lied," Kennedy confirmed. "Your father was always popping by, helping out, fixing things. Then when my dad came back, it stopped. For a while."

Every word Kennedy said hit her like a punch in the gut. The nausea was building again and she wasn't sure that she would make it outside to throw up in the street but she was sure she wouldn't make it to the bathroom on the other side of the packed restaurant.

"I hated you because I thought you were like me, that you knew..." Kennedy said, "...your father broke up my family, and as much as I wanted to hate William too, when he was born I just couldn't. Mom never got over any of it. I gave up on college, the plans I'd made, and dreams I'd had. Instead, I loved William and raised him. I made sure he got into whatever school he wanted, and part of me was hurt when he chose Yale, but I got over

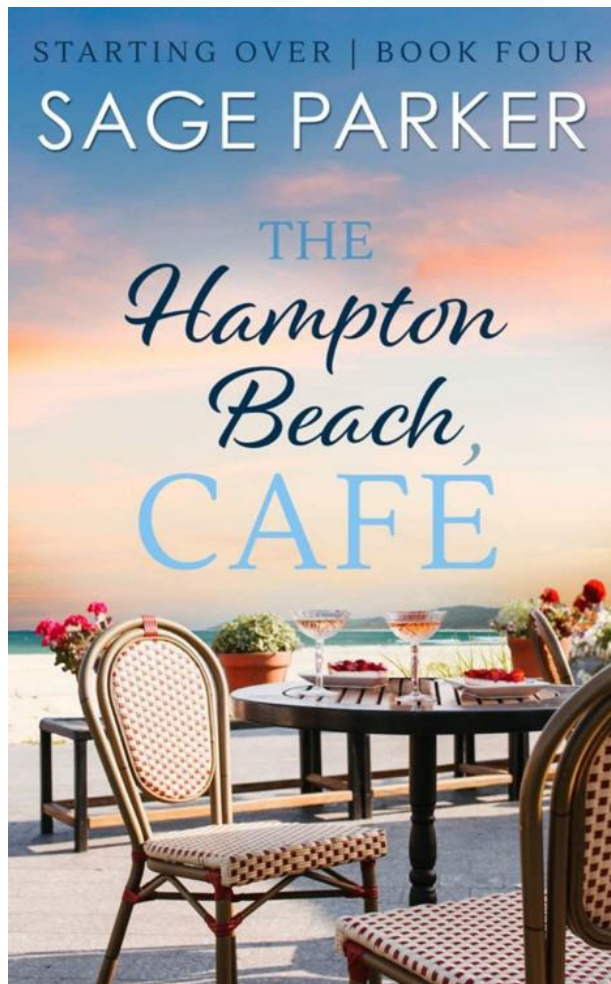
it. He's getting to live the life I had stolen from me. I've never had kids of my own. Your father took that from me, too."

Frances really did think she was going to be sick, but what made it worse was that as much as she wanted to deny it and defend her dad, some part of her knew that it was the truth. Kennedy stood, finishing off her Pina Colada. With a loud bang, she put the glass down, turned, and left without saying another word to Frances.

The timings all added up, the frequent business trips when she was younger, the black eye story just before he left, all of it. Did she even still want to find him? Thinking about the apparently blank letters he had sent her that she'd never seen, the journals documenting her mom's hunt for him that spanned over a decade, and the abrupt halt in her obsession. Frances knew that even though she had some answers, there was a lot more that she didn't know, and that she needed to find out.

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Book 4 Teaser...

ONE



The backyard of the property was still in a state—maybe even more so than when she had bought it because she had been entirely ignoring it while they renovated and launched the café on such short notice. However, sitting out there at night was still delightful after a long day. Alex had arrived later in the afternoon. That was the beauty of a business like his—it had a finite customer-to-jet ski ratio that could not be overbooked. With the next two weeks fully booked out, he only had to worry about cancelations and incidents, which—luckily for Frances—meant Alex could spend more time at the café.

“Hi, guys!” Hayley said as she popped a chair down next to Frances, Alex, Vince, and Lucinda. “Talk about busy, huh? It's like being behind the scenes at a fashion week show—less naked people and shouting, though.”

“Naked people?” Lucinda asked, sounding far more prudish than she really was. “Why are people naked?”

Hayley laughed. “Well, when there are three of you modeling twenty-four outfits, two people on the runway at a time, each walk takes fifteen seconds—you have fifteen seconds to get out of one dress and into another. Getting off the catwalk at a major show, there are usually two or three people there. Someone unsnaps, zips, and shimmies the thing off you while another person shoves the next one over your head.”

Lucinda looked aghast. “Somehow, I always imagined being a supermodel would be more glamorous than that...”

“Oh, I'm not a supermodel, but the behind-the-scenes shows are not

glamorous at all,” Hayley said. “Fun, exciting, and thrilling—absolutely! It's kind of hard to feel glamorous when you've got someone rearranging you, lifting your foot up like a horse to change shoes, and another one dabbing a different lipstick over the top of the other three coats for a quick change.”

The two men in the group looked at each other with what looked like genuine fear on their faces, and Hayley laughed.

“That sounds hideous,” Lucinda said. “I'm glad I'm dumpy and plain.”

Frances started to protest—Lucinda was a knockout—but before she could open her mouth, Vincent started talking.

“Oh please, you are far too intelligent and self-aware to think you're anything less than a walking work of art.”

The pink blush creeping up under Lucinda's tanned skin was adorable—she was rarely speechless, as Frances well knew, and so seeing her retreat into a kind of shocked and flustered caricature was pure gold.

Hayley laughed again, nodding and pointing at Lucinda. “He's right, you know, you might not like the experience of modeling, but you'd absolutely kill it—especially in swimsuit and active.”

The blush deepened, and Frances turned to see what Vincent's reaction was, and her breath caught in her throat a little. No wonder Lucinda was blushing! His intense gaze was focused entirely on her. There was no chance Lucinda could doubt his sincerity—it was written plainly across his face. She made a mental note to talk to Lucinda about it tomorrow.

“Speaking of shows...” Hayley said, “...my booking next week has been canceled. It was international, so I'm not totally out of work—you've been this busy almost every day, and I happen to be a very experienced waitress. You know, being a model comes with being a lot of other things as

well in the beginning. Do you think I could step in and give you a hand?”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NOTE FROM SAGE PARKER

Hi lovelies.

I love writing sweet and clean contemporary romance novels. I was born and raised in a small town in South Carolina, but you can almost always find me at the beach...usually reading a book. I hope my writing brings joy and inspiration to everyone that uses their precious time to read my stories.

Thanks for stopping by!

Stay safe and happy x

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