

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Alice Clayton



**ONE MORE
ROUND**

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“This tale is dedicated to everyone who made it through 2020 with their laugh track intact, and everyone who is bringing some much needed peace into 2021.”

PROLOGUE

A great love story never truly ends. It evolves, it changes, it adapts and becomes something new. What was there from the beginning never really goes away, if the two are true. It deepens, it matures, and two individual stories become inexorably linked and overlap into a new story, one that is full and interesting and beautiful on its own.

Plus, if after years of throwing a leg around, the colors still blur and the thumps still occur, well, then you've stumbled into a love affair for the ages. And this is where we find our couple. Wrapped up, in love, settled but never settling...and in a canal? Well, *next* to a canal. Well, technically, *next* to a canal while *arguing* about a canal and—ah, love.

Once upon a time it ended—not with a whimper but with a bang. But what if it ended with, a cry?

Take a breath. Grab some popcorn. And zoom in... Let's get to banging.

CHAPTER 1

“They freeze, you know.”

“Freeze?”

“Freeze. In the winter. Solid.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“It’s true. It doesn’t happen that often—not anymore at least. But it does happen. And when it does, it’s a big deal.”

“I would imagine. Doesn’t that, I don’t know, cause a problem?”

“Nope, they just skate on it.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, rolling my eyes and pushing Simon away and towards the canal. “They skate on it?”

“They do! I swear!” He laughed, stepping lightly over the cobblestones, his sapphire eyes dancing. “Why would I make something like that up?”

“You’re telling me that the canals freeze and people skate on them,” I challenged once more as he picked up my hand, threading it through and placing it back onto his arm. My husband loved a promenade.

My husband. After all these years, Simon Parker being my husband still gave me a thrill when I thought about it like that. Husband. *Husband.* I looked up at him, a full moon and softly falling snow creating a perfect picture to frame my *husband.*

That same husband leaned in, kissed me swiftly on the cheek, and whispered, “They freeze. Why would I lie to you?”

“You told me everyone would be wearing wooden shoes,” I pointed out, and the corner of his mouth crinkled up.

“True.”

“And you told me everyone ate raw herring for breakfast, along with a side of chocolate milk,” I replied, and the tilt turned into a wicked smile. “Which was a terrible combination, by the way.”

“Technically you ate the cooked herring, not raw.”

“That’s the sword you’re falling on? It was still awful.”

“That one’s on you, Nightie Girl. That one really shouldn’t have snuck by you.”

“So you can imagine why I might question anything you say right now,” I insisted, choosing to ignore his last comment. I really *should* have known better. I shuddered as I remembered the combination. What’s Dutch for *gross*?

“I didn’t lie to you about the poffertjes,” he reminded, pulling me closer into his side. “You loved those little pancakes.”

“True.” I nodded but still wasn’t sure whether he was feeding me a line of bullshit. I asked my tour guide, who was about ten feet ahead of us.

“Hey, tour guide! Do the canals really freeze in winter?”

She spun around on her heel, which should have been nearly impossible considering that we were on 300-year-old cobblestones and the heels she was wearing were insanely high—at least three inches, if not higher. But Jillian remained the epitome of grace and style, whether navigating the steep hills of San Francisco or moving effortlessly across an uneven walkway adjacent to a moonlit canal in her newly adopted home of Amsterdam.

“I’m so glad you asked about that, Caroline. I was going to discuss this exact bit of local trivia over dinner tonight. In fact, they do freeze—”

“Ha!” interjected Simon, as we caught up to Jillian and her husband, Benjamin.

“However,” Jillian continued smoothly, ignoring Simon and his *ha*, “it rarely occurs anymore. Global warming has affected this city just like everywhere else on the planet, and

one way it's manifested here in Amsterdam is the canals no longer freeze—”

“Ha-ha!” I shouted, punching Simon on the arm.

“—very often. Maybe only once every ten years now. It's not common at all anymore.”

“Wait, so who's right here?” I asked, still punching Simon. *Punching Simon*—what a great name for a—

“Neither,” Benjamin said, tucking Jillian's scarf tighter around her neck. “Or both.” He nodded toward the oaken door in front of us. “Here's the restaurant.”

“Great,” I sighed, stamping my feet. “I'm freezing.”

“You know, the canals freeze sometimes, although not as much as they used to,” Simon said, holding open the door as I slipped under his arm.

“Shush it, you.” I laughed and followed my friend and her husband inside the restaurant.

Simon and I had flown over to Amsterdam to visit Jillian and Benjamin before the holidays were in full swing and my life got even busier. It was a wonderful chance to get away, a chance we didn't get nearly as often as we used to. Our lives were very...*full* these days.

So when Jillian had asked if we wanted to take a trip abroad and visit them before things got too crazy, we'd jumped at the chance. Simon had to reschedule a job or two, and I had to make sure everything was nailed down on the home front, but we made it happen. Late November could be a dreary time to be in the north of Europe, but Amsterdam was dressed in her holiday best, and the city was warm and glowing. And an early dusting of snow made it seem all the more magical.

“So you haven't told me yet, how are things going down at the station?” Jillian murmured to me as the boys hung up our coats and we waited for our table.

“In a word? Nuts.”

“How about two words?”

“Fucking. Nuts.”

She laughed. “Got it.”

“I mean it. Who would have thought one little appearance on *Wake Up San Francisco* would have led to all this?” I exclaimed, weaving through a crowd of well-dressed Amsterdamians (this makes perfect sense in my head) toward our table. Like many structures in this town, the ceilings spoke of their creators’ shipbuilding past. Thick wooden beams punctuated throughout, carving up the ceilings and supporting the weight of usually several floors above. But instead of feeling heavy and weighted, it made everything seem cozy and cared for. Warm candles lit the space, with pale linens and wintertime arrangements of cream-colored amaryllis studded through with pine and holly on the tables. Oh, it was a beautiful room.

And it was goose season!

“I honestly had no idea this was even a thing,” I remarked to Benjamin as we were seated. “Who knew?”

“Oh it’s a big deal. Roast goose is the thing to eat in Europe this time of year. You know, in olden times—”

“Oh hush up about your olden times. My protégé is on television every week nowadays, and I want to hear about it!” Jillian cried, waving her husband off and zeroing in on me once more. “I can’t believe you’re on *Wake Up*. I pitched segments there for years, and they wouldn’t have me on.”

“Well, then you shouldn’t have moved across the pond just as their new station manager started.” I pretended to peruse the menu—the non-goose side. “The same one who has a crush on the number-one sportscaster in town, my good buddy Neil.”

“Whose good buddy?” Simon asked, and I raised an eyebrow. Neil was one of his oldest friends and the sportscaster on the local NBC station. He happened to be married to Sophia, one of *my* oldest friends.

“He’s *my* good buddy, at least now that I’m on TV and my new gig paid for the business-class pods we took over here. And when the new station manager, who is head over heels for

Neil, found out he had a friend who was a designer, it all came together like two pieces of perfectly mitered Carrera marble.”

“Which is quite supportive, if anyone cares to know,” Simon added, squeezing my knee under the table.

“Okay, I can’t handle all this banter.” Jillian sighed. “Just fucking tell me about *Wake Up San Francisco* while Benjamin orders us some champagne, or I’m going to throw someone in the canal. Which isn’t frozen.”

I grinned as I watched the tableau unfold in front of me. Jillian had given me my first job right out of college after an internship. She was, and remains, the woman I aspire to be one day. Smart, quick witted, stunning, and fashionably astute, she defined *city chic*. I had grown into her lead designer under her tutelage and now headed up her interior design shop in San Francisco since she and Benjamin, an investment banker in very early retirement, decided to start splitting their time between the west coast and their new home in Amsterdam. She’d started taking some design jobs almost as soon as she moved across the pond—a few here and there, and only when it didn’t get in the way of them living the most ridiculously awesome lifestyle. But her keen sense of style meshed perfectly with the clean aesthetic of her new town, and Jillian Designs now had an official second shop. Located in the Nine Little Streets district, she was surrounded by tiny vintage shops and young fashion designers, with just enough of a touch of whimsy to suit her to a tee.

Whimsy touched with class, that was Jillian.

And with her spending more and more time in this, her new city, we didn’t get nearly enough time to spend together. Which is why, after landing early this morning and begging off only two hours for a disco nap, she was all up in my grill.

“Honestly, Caroline, just spill it already. Tell me everything.”

“You’ve seen the video clips I sent you. You know everything there is to know!” I insisted, blushing a little. This new development was pretty cool—wonderful, in fact, not only for myself but for our company. But it still made me a

little...*hmmm*...what was the word? I wasn't embarrassed, but it just wasn't in my nature to—

“Boast. Brag,” Simon interjected, raising a glass of the champagne that had been delivered to the table and opened with a flourish. “My girl won't do either, so I'm gonna do it for her.”

“Simon, come on, that's not really necessa—”

“First, to Benjamin and Jillian, for inviting us and also for offering to pay for dinner.”

“Every time. He does that to me every time,” Benjamin muttered, and I couldn't help but smile. Simon really *did* do it every time.

“And to my wife, Caroline, who just signed a two-year contract to appear on *Wake Up San Francisco* every week, and be featured on over thirty NBC affiliates around the country. Congratulations.”

He clinked my glass while Jillian shrieked. In a restaurant. Surrounded by wonderfully fashionable and Euro-restrained Amsterdamians.

Still not sure that's what you call them...

Her eyes flashed. “You little shit, you didn't tell me about the affiliates.”

“I know, I know. I didn't want to make a bigger deal of it than it is.” I sighed, but was having a hard time keeping the smile from creaking back in. It was pretty epic.

Several months ago, I'd been working on a kitchen remodel for a house in Pacific Heights that was owned by the grandmother of the new station manager at Neil's station in town. A happy accidental meeting, a cocktail or two, and once he made the connection between me and Neil, I'd been extended an offer to appear on our local morning show.

All I was supposed to do was talk about chintz. That's it. I threw up three times in the thirty minutes before I went on, and twice in the thirty minutes after my only-five-minute segment was over. Chintz—the fact that it was coming back,

and how it could be integrated into the modern home without adding a side of Grandma Beverly. Who knew chintz was going to be my calling card? If I were the kind of person who did, in fact, boast, I would tell you it was the most highly rated segment of the first quarter. And the second. And maybe the third. And that my five-minute segment on chintz ended up selling out most of the large-floral-print chintz fabric at every Joann Fabrics store in San Francisco. And San Jose. And maybe inland all the way to Sacramento. So yeah, they invited me back...

“But this is incredible! Think of all the work this will generate for you—for us! We’re going to need to hire a new designer,” Jillian said, cutting into her goose with wild abandon.

I couldn’t do it, but I’d been thrilled to realize that Amsterdam had some of the best Indonesian restaurants this side of the South Pacific, so I was in heaven with my rijsttafel, a Dutch creation of many Indonesian flavors—dish after tiny dish of highly flavored and incredibly seasoned rice and vegetables and meats and basically the best way to try a little bit of a lot of different food. Delicious.

“Forget that; we need to hire *three* new designers, with at least two new assistants to assist them,” I told her. “And *I* need a new assistant.”

“What about Monica?”

“She’s taking her own clients now. She almost needs help herself. There’s someone I’ve got my eye on. She interned with us last summer from Berkeley. Remember the one with the super-long hair and the super-thick glasses?”

“With the super-long legs? Yep, she’d be perfect! She’ll need some help, though, with her—”

“Attitude? Agreed. I spoke with her about that when her internship was over—that she needed to let her guard down a bit and remember she’s still learning.”

“Oh, yes. Well, and you should speak with her about her constantly mentioning who her mother is. She doesn’t need to

—”

“Name drop.” I nodded. “Yeah, we discussed that too. Just because her mother is a senator doesn’t mean she gets whatever she wants. She’ll start out just like I did—at the bottom—and she’ll work her way up. I also thought her work was leaning a little too dark. I told her to work on lightening up her palette and hello, everything didn’t need to suddenly be kelly green and... What?” I paused, a skewer halfway to my mouth.

Jillian stared at me, her mouth hanging open a little bit.

I looked at her strangely. “What’s wrong with your goose?”

“When did you grow up?”

“Huh?”

“I mean it. When did you become the mentor?”

“You wanted me to be partner a few years ago, Jillian. Didn’t you think I was a grownup then?”

“Yes, yes, yes. But now—good lord, woman. You’re an actual woman!” Jillian insisted, reaching across the table to clasp my hand in hers. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you.”

“Well... I just... Dammit, Jillian,” I sputtered, patting her hand and reaching for my napkin.

“Why is she crying?” Benjamin whispered to Simon, stopping their discussion of football or balls or whatever it was they were talking about during my moment.

“Jetlag?” Simon shrugged as I dabbed at my eye.

“You two, just zip it,” Jillian laughed, now dabbing at her own eyes. “It’s not often you get to see someone succeed, and surpass you. Well, at least not someone you like and you’re actually happy for.”

I laughed, struggling to swallow against the lump in my throat. “I thought this was just supposed to be a nice dinner to welcome us to town.”

“Welcome to town, Caroline,” Jillian said, patting my hand once more and going back to her goose. “So, where shall we go tomorrow?”



“I feel like she wanted to ask, but didn’t.” I sat on the edge of the bed in our hotel room, brushing my hair.

“What do you mean?” Simon stuck his head out from around the corner, pulling his toothbrush from his mouth.

“I mean, did you ever notice that people have stopped asking us?”

He rubbed his tummy. That was his tell. When he was uncomfortable, he rubbed his tummy. The fact that I’d been with this man for years now and the tummy remained unchanged—still flat as a board—spoke volumes about how he was going to age. He’d age *well*.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Did Benjamin say anything?”

“No,” he replied, still rubbing his tummy. “But to be fair, it’s not something he would ask.”

“Well, it *is* something Jillian would have asked. Before, at least.” I attacked my hair with my brush like it had done something to me. *Before*. What a word.

“I think you’re overthinking it,” Simon replied, disappearing back into the bathroom. I heard him spit, rinse, spit again, and then the bathroom light went off. As he walked toward the bed, I took another moment to regard him. Simon Parker, resplendent in navy-blue-plaid pajama pants, was a sight to behold. Was he getting better looking the older he got? Yeah, he was.

“Besides, I’ve got a really good feeling about this time,” he said, standing in front of me, taking the brush from my hand.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have come.”

“You’ve been careful, Caroline. We’ve been careful, haven’t we?” he asked, and I leaned my head against his tummy.

“Yes,” was my muffled answer.

“And the doctor said you were in great shape, totally fine for travel, right?”

“Mm-hmm,” I breathed. Breathing in the scent of his skin always calmed me.

He ran his fingers through my hair. I turned my head up to look at him, resting my chin just above the band of his pjs.

“It won’t be like last time,” he reassured, the sapphire blue of his eyes warm and soothing.

“You don’t know that. We can’t know that.” I sighed, my eyes growing wet. That was me these days: waterworks at the drop of a hat. My hands dropped to my belly, searching, feeling for the roundness that was so familiar to me now. “That’s why no one asks us about it anymore, not even Jillian.”

“Why don’t you tell her, then? Tell her the good news,” he soothed.

“Is it good news? Is it going to stay good news?” My voice broke a little, and he swept me up into a tight hug. We breathed together.

We were pregnant. For the fifth time.

Maybe *this* time, we’d finally start our family.

CHAPTER 2

After the first miscarriage, I could barely get off the floor. Visions of Simon and babies and family and carpool and play dates, holidays and report cards—it all danced in my head until it almost made me crazy. I'd found out I was pregnant the day we held our backyard wedding and Simon made me an honest woman. I was planning to tell him the following morning and have our wedding day be truly just about the two of us, but Clive had other thoughts. Simon waking me up, holding the business end of a pregnancy test with a disbelieving look in his eye while Clive calmly but deliberately licked his behind on the dresser wasn't the way I'd planned to tell my husband he was going to be a daddy. But that's the way the cookie crumbled.

We'd spent the first two weeks of our married life decorating the nursery and buying every toy and baby blanket in the East Bay. And when it happened, just before the third month, it was like every light in the world went out at the same time.

But eventually, I pulled it together. "You're so young," everyone said. "This happens to so many women," everyone said. And I was. And it does. Small consolation, but you figure out how to go on and move forward.

But after the second, and then the third, it got harder and harder not to think something was seriously wrong with me. We went to the doctor. Then to another. Then to another. After having every test run on both of us, our fourth doctor told us virtually the same thing the other doctors said: that there was nothing physically wrong with us; there was no medical reason why we couldn't *stay* pregnant. Clearly there was no problem *getting* pregnant—we were both super fertile and supercharged. But staying pregnant was proving to be... There are no words.

So I stayed busy. We made the nursery into a second office. We didn't change our lives. We lived and we loved and we planned and we traveled and we were happy. Mostly happy. We were coming to terms with being alone, just the two of us, and that would be okay, right? Simon and Caroline: we were a bonkers awesome couple. We'd be fine, right?

We discussed IVF. We discussed adoption. We discussed and discussed and realized we didn't want our lives to become lives that were *waiting to become*. We *were* a family, kids or no kids. So we stopped trying. And got pregnant a fourth time. And when I miscarried again, that was it. We hit a wall.

Simon had a vasectomy. It just made sense at that point; we couldn't keep going through this again and again. We made our peace with it, as best as we could. Simon was wonderful about the whole thing—he really was. He called it the old *snippity-snap*.

And so on we went. Our sex life had never suffered. That aspect of our lives remained unchanged, even as everything else had been turned upside down. If anything, it had gotten better, which I never would have thought possible.

I could see how what we'd gone through could wreak havoc on a relationship, but it had actually strengthened ours. Maybe because the lows had been so very low, the highs were even more spectacular? In spite of everything, *we thrived*.

But then all of a sudden, I was late. And my boobs hurt. And I was nauseous. All things I'd felt before, all things I knew and knew well, but should've been impossible. Apparently not for Simon and his super sperm.

“What does this mean?” he'd asked as we stared at the test.

“I can't handle this again,” I'd whispered, sinking into his side.

“But what does this mean?” he'd asked again, still not able to take his eyes off the little pink plus sign.

“It means that surgeon owes us an explanation.”

We made it ten weeks. Eleven weeks. Twelve weeks. And then, like something out of a dream, we were into the second

trimester. And suddenly, I was wearing ponchos.

Because you can't tell people at that point. You can barely even make the deal inside your own brain that *maybe, possibly* there's a reason to be cautiously and tentatively...hopeful. Because that's a dirty word, you see.

And so, into this hopeful, we kept silent. I think Simon would have spoken about it sooner, but he was letting me lead this time. And if I saw one more sad face, one more concerned look, one more *Look, there goes Caroline. Did you hear what happened again? Poor thing*, I'd start screaming and might never stop. So yeah, I wasn't telling anyone.

Maybe once the kid was in kindergarten we'd tell people?



The trip to see our friends felt so short, but there's honestly never enough time to spend with people like Jillian and Benjamin. She went so far beyond the word *boss* to me, it wasn't even funny.

I wanted so badly to tell her. I nearly did when we were in the Rijksmuseum, getting lost with the Dutch masters. We stood in front of a painting of a baby for at least five minutes, and I very easily could have said, *Yep, got one of those in here* while pointing at my belly. But I didn't.

We took a canal tour after dinner one night, the city all twinkling and glowing from millions of white Christmas lights. We were tucked into a houseboat, cruising the canals underneath stacks of cashmere throws and sipping champagne. I'd declined, officially stating that I was feeling a bit seasick and probably shouldn't drink until we were back on land, but I could have just as easily said, *No bubbly for this girl. Simon put a bun in the oven!* But I didn't.

And on our last night, as the four of us found a thousand reasons to linger in the lobby of our hotel, saying one last goodbye and showing one last picture of the hateful herring stand, and Jillian looked at me with that thousand-yard stare and raised that quizzical eyebrow that meant she could see

right through me and knew there was something I wasn't telling her, I could have nodded, patted my belly, and grinned. The secret would've been out.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

Simon and I flew back across the Atlantic, all the way across the country, and when we finally landed at SFO, tired and full of stinky airplane air, he leaned across the partition and whispered, "You're going to have to tell people eventually, if for no other reason than to explain that I haven't kidnapped the child I'm always pushing around in a stroller."

I nodded, rolling my eyes. "Point taken."

"Christmas with your folks?"

I flashed on an image of a crowded house, endless stockings, and family bursting from every room—cheering and clapping and back-slapping for Simon and cooing for me. "Too much."

"New Year's?"

"Leap year has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

Now he was the one to roll his eyes. He reached up to grab our bags from the overhead. "New Year's Day, or I rent a blimp to fly over the city with the words *I knocked up Caroline* stretched across the side," he stated, matter of fact.

"Way to go, man," a guy said from across the aisle, giving him the congrats chin lift.

"Thanks, man!" Simon turned back to me, wide grin spread across his face. "See?"

I laughed and nodded. New Year's.

CHAPTER 3

“One egg plus two egg whites, scrambled, with tomatoes and green peppers. Low-fat yogurt cup, raspberries only, and on the side. Fresh-squeezed orange juice, and a cappuccino, please and thank you.”

“Two eggs, poached. Whole-wheat toast, dry. Spinach on the side, wilted, but no butter. Honeydew and cantaloupe sections please, no pineapple. Black coffee, three sugars.”

“Two eggs over hard, whole-milk yogurt with blueberries, wheat toast with butter and strawberry jelly. Oh, and can I do a green juice please, and a chamomile tea? Thanks.”

One week back from our quick trip to Amsterdam, and at our normal diner for breakfast with the girls, I looked at my two best friends. Mimi was scrubbing furiously at her fork, removing an offending spot that only she could see and she alone could remedy, waving off the waiter when he offered a new one. Sophia whipped out her compact to apply a fresh coat of lip gloss, primping and preening and enjoying her image almost as much as the table of men behind her. I stifled a laugh.

Christmas was a super hectic time for everyone, but we always made time for our Sunday-morning breakfast ritual at the diner.

“Rumor has it the old Connor mansion is finally going on the market,” I reported. “It’ll need a total gut rehab, and yours truly has the inside track.”

“I booked the McLaren-Heismann wedding,” Mimi said. “It’s going to be a big one.”

Sophia sighed. “Speaking of big ones, Alex is potty training, and it’s not going well.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say about your son’s... well, your son’s...” Mimi searched for a word.

“Poops?” Sophia asked, frowning over her compact. “What’s wrong with that? My life is baby poop now. Although, to be frank, my life has been baby poop ever since Mary Jane was born, but her poops were much easier to deal with. Alex takes after his father.”

Mimi rolled her eyes. “I’m so glad no one ordered sausage this morning.”

“Sausage. Sausage! Let me tell you about sausage,” Sophia said, pounding her fist on the table. I held my head in my hands as the waiter brought our drinks. “If I’d have known that turning thirty was going to turn Neil into a penis machine, I would have figured out a way to bring in a backup vagina for him to prove his manhood on. I can barely walk these days!”

“What does that have to do with sausage?” Mimi asked.

“Oh, sweetie, come on. Stay with me. I don’t have all day. I’ve got a dance recital, a playdate, and two lessons, and that’s all before dinner. I’ll also have to carve out time for a quickie in the pantry somewhere in there, so keep the fuck up!” Sophie said, still pounding on the table.

“Sorry, sorry. Sausage equals Neil’s penis. Got it.” Mimi nodded, attacking her fork with increased ferocity.

“Did you want hot sauce with that?” the waiter asked as he set down our plates and practically *ran* away from our table.

Kids, marriages, new jobs—it didn’t matter what changed out there, because once a week, over breakfast in this shitty diner, we got to still be the same sorority girls that fell in love with each other a thousand years ago at Berkeley.

“I can’t believe he’s still proving his manhood about being thirty. Like, thirty is nothing.”

“Says the girl who is the closest to thirty,” I replied to Mimi, raising my eyebrow at her. She would be the first of us to fall over the *three-oh* cliff like our boys had last year.

“Did Simon react the same way?” Sophia asked.

“You mean, did he try to have sex with me multiple times every day?” I asked, digging into my eggs.

“Yes,” they both said in unison.

I paused, the fork halfway to my mouth. “That had nothing to do with Simon turning thirty.”

“Nice,” they said, once more in unison.

It *was* nice. Like I said, no matter how long we’d been together, our desire for each other remained unchanged. If anything, it had gotten stronger.

“So sausage and poops aside, how’s the teaching going?” I asked Sophia.

She thought for a second. “It’s good. It’s actually better than I thought it would be. Giving up my seat at the symphony, even just to take a break for awhile, was tough. I mean, they said I can come back whenever I want, but will that always be true?”

“They’d be crazy not to take you back, girl,” Mimi insisted, practically wriggling out of her seat at the imagined offense. “The San Francisco Symphony is nothing without their bombshell cellist.”

“I appreciate that, Tiny.” Sophia sighed, her face a wee bit wistful. “It’s actually working out better than I thought it would. I’m having to turn students away, it’s gotten so busy.”

“Soph, that’s great!” I exclaimed, scooping up another spoonful of yogurt.

Sophia had stepped away from her first-chair position with the SFS after the birth of her daughter, Mary Jane. She’d barely made it back from her maternity leave when she found out she was pregnant with their second, and just like that, she was a stay-at-home mom. A stay-at-home mom who tutored kids from some of the wealthiest families in San Francisco, families that loved the idea of their son or daughter learning from one of the finest cellists in the country. It was great for her, as it enabled her to stay home with her kids during the day, while Neil continued to anchor the sports desk for the NBC station here in town. It was a charmed life.

“McLaren, McLaren, is that the family that has the big big house up on Steiner? They’ve lived there, like, forever?” Sophia asked.

Mimi nodded. “For the McLaren-Heismann wedding? Yep, that’s the family.”

“Good lord, woman, you’re gonna be able to retire off the commission from this job alone,” I remarked, thinking about that house high up on the hill. There was old money, and then there was pre-earthquake old money. And the McLaren family went back even further than that to the miner-miner-forty-niner days.

Between the high of her own wedding and then the planning she’d thrown herself into for Sophia’s wedding (a very glamorous affair with the prettiest pregnant bride this town had ever seen), Mimi’s work had been photographed by some of the chicest wedding magazines on the west coast. When a client of mine had noticed a photo in my office of my friends at Mimi’s wedding, she’d asked who had designed it. One chat became lunch, lunch became cocktails, and before you could say *cream-colored shantung*, Mimi had morphed herself from a professional organizer to one of the hottest wedding planners in the city.

Which, if you know anything about Mimi, it’s that she likes to be in charge, be organized, and be fancy. Wedding planner was a perfect segue into a new career for her. And oddly enough, considering the clientele I was moving and grooving with these days, we still saw quite a lot of each other professionally.

“So what’s new with you, Hollywood?” Sophia asked me, nibbling at her melons.

“Stop calling me that,” I warned. “You don’t call Neil that, and he has an actual job on television. I’m just pretending I know what I’m doing and somehow they let me in front of the camera.”

Mimi was now the one pounding the table. “Stop it. You stop it right now Caroline Parker.”

“Caroline *Reynolds* Parker,” Sophia chimed in. Maiden names were very important to her.

“Don’t interrupt my flow when I’m scolding someone,” Mimi said, pointing at both of us now. “You’re exceptional, Caroline, and I won’t have you taking the wind out of your sails or, or, or minimizing your accomplishments or, or, or—”

“Apologizing for her success,” Sophia added, and Mimi nodded her head so hard I thought it might knock itself loose and bounce right on out the door.

“Yes, exactly, apologize for her success. You’re a badass, Caroline, and we’re not going to let you say otherwise.”

“Wow, okay. Settle down,” I said, aware that several nearby tables were now looking at us with all the fist pounding and feminine machismo. *Femchismo*? “But I thank you. And things are going good—really good, in fact. There has even been talk of widening the segment a bit beyond design. I hesitate to say it, because who knows if it’s actually going to come true, but it’s pretty cool.”

“Why would you hesitate to say? Do you think saying it out loud makes it not come true? Who knew you were so superstitious?” Sophia said, leaning across and snatching some toast from Mimi’s plate. “You’re not going to eat this, are you?”

“No, no, I get it. I know what she means,” Mimi said, nodding. “And yes, go ahead take it. It’s like, if you say it out loud, it makes it real, and then once it’s real, it becomes something you can’t control anymore.”

I nodded, my throat suddenly tight.

“And then if you can’t control it, you can’t control anything, and then poof, chaos,” she continued, oblivious to the gnawing feeling that had set up shop in the pit of my stomach.

My hands threaded across my lower belly.

“Chaos, my ass,” Sophia cut in. “Caroline is totally in control of this. Nothing is going to stop her from doing whatever it is she wants, right? Right. Now, why didn’t anyone

order bacon? We should order some, right? I'm gonna need some more protein if I'm gonna make it through pantry sex later on today. Hey, waiter!"

I left brunch a little while later and went straight home.

Simon was waiting for me when I got there.

"Did you tell them?" he asked as I sank onto the couch.

My back ached, my feet ached, and I was tired. Really tired. "Did I miss Christmas? How is it New Year's already?" I asked.

He sat on the arm of the couch next to me. "Caroline."

"Simon," I answered, looking up at him.

It was killing him not to tell Neil and Ryan, and especially Benjamin. But he was letting me take the lead on this one. "I promise I'll tell them after New Year's."

"After New Year's?"

"*On* New Year's. I promise." I nodded my head, forcing a smile. Imagine not being able to share something like this, something so incredible and normally so very, very happy. I was too scared to tell anyone.

"They're gonna figure it out, especially if you take off that poncho," he joked, lifting the edge to reveal more than a little bump.

"It's San Francisco. People wear ponchos year round, Simon," I replied, pulling him down to me. "I'll take that kiss now."

"What kiss?"

"The kiss I've been thinking about since I walked in that door, and don't even try to tell me you weren't thinking about it too."

He kissed me stupid.



“So what you’ll want to do is make sure—if you’re going to have an accent wall with a wallpaper this strong—to make it the focal point of the entire room. Nothing else should compete with it. Make everything else subservient to this print, and you’re going to end up with a room that really harmonizes and sings to you every time you enter.”

“I never would have thought a print that...well...”

“Loud? Garish? Seriously large and in charge?”

“Yes! All of those things. I never thought a print like this would be something I’d like so much.”

I grinned at the camera. “Well, hang on to your twinset, Becky, because you’re going to love how incredible this wallpaper looks when all decked out for the holidays!”

In an instant, television magic was made and carts were wheeled onstage from right and left, loaded up with poinsettias, candles, and empty boxes gift wrapped to the Nth degree—all set off by a newly revealed backdrop of artificial falling snow.

“See? Your new living room really can transition from season to season!” I waved goodbye to the audience with a fistful of jingle bells.

“Caroline Reynolds Parker, thank you as always for these great tips and tricks! And for more from Caroline, you can check out our website or reach out to her directly through Jillian Designs right here in the city. Thanks, Caroline!”

“And we’re out. Great segment, Caroline!”

“Thanks, Harry!” I replied, nodding to the director. I gave a wave to the anchor, who was already talking with the weather guy about the cold front moving in, and quickly exited the set, headed toward the dressing room.

I’d just completed another live segment for the morning show, and was going to spend the rest of the day pre-taping segments they could air around the country on the other affiliates. How to have a strong wallpaper wall, and other assorted design dilemmas, was the topic at hand, and I had

plenty to say. Not to mention all the holiday design ideas, perfectly timed for the season.

Harry followed me into the dressing room. “Say, Caroline, we’re going to be taking some pictures later today—seasonal shots for the holidays, just publicity for the station. You know, on-air talent.”

“Oh, sure. I bet you need the dressing room. I can be out of here by three. It won’t take long to tape all these segments, as long as I can remember not to hiss when I say those Ss. I’ve almost got that habit kicked.”

He shook his head. “No, no. You misunderstand. You’ll be *in* the pictures, with the rest of the team. And since we run your segments on the afternoon shows now too, we’ll need you with the am and the pm crew.”

“Oh. *Oh!*” *Wait a second, does that mean I’m considered...*

Harry followed my interior monologue. “Yep, you’re on-air talent. Don’t worry, we’ll touch up hair and makeup before the shoot.”

“Wow, I’m on-air talent.”

“You are.”

“*Talent*. Emphasis on the talent, right?” I laughed, showing him finger guns.

He also laughed, heading back toward the studio with a wave over his shoulder. Then he spun around. “And by the way, I know those ponchos work for the segments, especially since we tape so many outside, but you’re going to need to wear something less flowy for the publicity shots. I’ll send in wardrobe to pull some things for you.”

I gulped. I literally gulped like I was in a *Tom and Jerry* episode.

“No poncho?”

“No poncho,” he affirmed, shooting me back with his own finger guns.

Oh boy.



I could do this. I could do this. I could do this.

I kept up this mantra the rest of the morning, letting it marinate on the back burner of my brain while the front of my brain kept up appearances. I taped segments about occasional tables, nightstand organization, and whether or not pineapples should appear on your front porch. I instructed a young couple on how to set up their first kitchen (complete with My First Kitchenaid), explained how to make a tablecloth out of a repurposed sari, and discussed why plaid was, in fact, making a comeback. Millennial pink was out, kelly green was practically out, and gray was dead, dead, *dead*.

And beneath all this of this pretty and fancy, I had to keep up a running mantra of *I can do this*. Because once you stripped away the poncho, I was one profile shot and some backlighting away from the world knowing I was on the nest.

“Okay, everyone. Everyone on a diagonal by the Christmas—I mean, not Christmas but *holiday*—tree. We’re going to have everyone pivot just slightly to the left. Think Prom pose... Perfect. Everyone give me a little bit of a profile... Excellent. With the backlighting, this is going to look sensational.”

Christ on a crutch. I was snuggled between Molly Friday, the am meteorologist, and Dean “Duff” McDuffin, the morning sports reporter, and wondering whether a dose of nausea would in fact be something I should be praying for instead of wishing it away like most days. I didn’t need to be here. I wasn’t a permanent member of the news team, something Molly and Dean seemed quite keen on reminding me and everyone else in the Prom huddle.

“Well, look at this. What a great-looking morning crew!” I heard a booming voice from the back of the studio say, a voice that boomed regardless of the size of the room. “Don’t you

think it's about time to step aside and let the nighttime anchors take over?"

Neil, AKA Mr. Sophia, AKA Simon's best friend, AKA the sports guy that became ultra famous a few years ago when he was told on camera that Sophia was in labor and the entire Bay Area watched live as he stole a production van to make it to the hospital in time for the birth. He'd become a viral sensation, negotiated a new contract with a huge social media bonus, and become even more of a hometown hero than he'd been before. An overgrown teddy bear, Neil was sweet and kind. And loud. And a bit of a Neanderthal.

"Hey, Caroline! Looking good!" he shouted, bringing a smile to my face and drawing additional side-eyes from Molly and Dean.

"Hey, Neil," I answered, not shouting.

He stood behind the cameraman, bumping and grinding a little bit to an unheard beat, trying to make me smile wider. I did.

"Stop that," I mouthed to him.

He just shook his head and kept on grinding the air. He was the walking, talking description of the term *manchild*.

"Okay, everyone, let's all turn just a little more to the side. Just like that... Perfect. Caroline, a little more to the side. That's it. Okay, everyone, smile, but try to look newsworthy, like you're ready to break a story."

"Or break wind," Neil stage-whispered, and I rolled my eyes.

That'll make for a great picture, Caroline... Time to get serious. The lights were hot, and it was getting a bit uncomfortable.

"Caroline, you keep turning out/ Make sure you're in profile and in line with everyone else. That's it," the director said.

I complied. Whew, it really was getting warm in here. I could smell the cologne wafting over from Dean. Was it

always this pungent?

The first tiny waves were gaining momentum in my tummy, making me wince slightly. Okay, yeah, we were going to need to move this photo shoot along a little more quickly. My left hand fluttered down, rubbing at my belly, the mound that was becoming more and more impossible to hide. And the tiny waves were becoming larger waves and—

“Caroline, turn sideways once more. We’ve almost got it.”

My cheeks got that weird, crinkly feeling. Oh, man.

“Holy shit, Caroline, are you—” Neil’s voice boomed.

I decorated the not-Christmas-but-holiday tree in a very new way this year...

CHAPTER 4

“I can’t believe I threw up in front of everyone,” I moaned, leaning over the bathroom sink and splashing water on my face.

“I can’t believe it either,” Neil said. “And I watched you do it.”

“I can’t believe you called Simon.”

“Are you kidding? I know what to do when my own wife vomits—it’s my job to stand outside the bathroom and slide Saltines under the door when she tells me to. But I didn’t know what to do for you.”

“It’s fine, Neil. There’s some oyster crackers in my bag. Can you grab them for me?” I motioned toward the door. “It was on the side of the—”

“Not-Christmas-but-holiday tree. I’m on it!” he said, sprinting for the door.

I looked at myself in the mirror: mascara smudged and lipstick gone, but my skin had never looked better. My eyes were bright and clear. I actually had that glow people talk about. I’d never made it far enough to get the glow.

“How did he know?” I asked, looking myself over. I heard Neil mumble something from the other side of the door. “Wait, what did you just say?”

He stuck his head around the door like a kid, sheepish and a little guilty. “Nothing?”

“Bullshit. What did you just say, Neil?”

He blushed. “Listen, I’m trying to get better about keeping my inside voice, you know, just on the inside.”

“Don’t make me say bullshit again. It’s okay. Just tell me what you said,” I prompted.

“It’s inappropriate.” Again with the blushing.

“Neil, you’re married to my best friend, who lives in Inappropriate Town. I promise, whatever you said, I won’t get mad.”

“Promise?” he asked.

“You’re officially boring me now.” I sighed.

“Okay, okay,” he said, disappearing once more and coming back with my purse. “It’s because of your tits. Dammit, your boobs, breasts! Shit, what is the culturally correct word these days for, you know?” He gestured, handing me my purse, now blushing all the way up to his ear tips. “Here you go. Soph hates it when I go through her bag looking for gum, so I just brought the whole thing.”

“Wait, what?”

“Gum. She’s pretty much always got gum, and I never do, so if I want it, I have to bring her the bag and she gets it—”

“No no, the part before, about my tits? And I don’t care what you call them. How did you—”

“Look, there are a few things I’m really good at.” He held up a finger. “One, sports stats. I can tell you who the leading point guard was in the NBA in 1994.” He held up another finger. “Two, fucking—sorry, doing it. I’m great at that. And Sophia wouldn’t mind me telling you that. She probably already has.”

He was right. She had. And he was right about the other part too. Apparently he was her best ever. I nodded in agreement. I wanted to hear the third thing.

“And three...” He held up the final finger. “I can tell you any woman’s bra size just by looking.”

“Bullshit,” I whispered. “Come on, that’s crazy.”

“When Simon first started dating you, you were a good solid 32C. A little small for my taste, but I wasn’t the one tast—I wasn’t the one dating you. A few months into it, you moved up to a 32D. They filled out nice, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Oddly, I didn't. "Continue."

"Now—especially since you're not wearing the poncho, which, looking back, makes a lot of sense now—I'm gonna say you're at least a 34D, but I'd bet all the gum in my wife's purse that you've moved into double-D land."

"That's ridiculous."

"It isn't. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong. I admit, I did go up to a 34, but I am most certainly not a double D."

"Your bra doesn't fit, does it?"

"What?"

"Maybe two weeks ago, you started spilling out the top?"

"This is the strangest conversation I've ever had...but yes."

"You take yourself down to the lingerie department at Saks over at Union Square. Ask for Mel. She'll measure you and get you into the right fit." He grinned.

"Unbelievable."

"Congratulations, by the way," he added, then leaned in. "So seriously, do you have any gum?"

While I rummaged through my bag, looking for gum, still stunned that Neil was one-hundred-percent correct about my bra size and wondering if there was a way to monetize a talent like that, Simon stuck his head in the door.

"Babe? You in here?"

"Come on in," Neil yelled, surprising him. "And congratulations to you, you big jerk. I can't believe you didn't tell me!" He swept Simon up in a giant bear hug, nearly cracking his back in the process.

"Congratulations?" Simon managed, being shaken like a ragdoll.

"We're gonna have a baby!" Neil bellowed, setting down a very surprised Simon.

Simon looked to me for confirmation, and I just shrugged. “He figured it out,” I said. “Neil, come on. Put him down.”

He complied, a wide grin on his face. Simon still looked bewildered. “It was her tits, man. I knew from her tits.”

“Oh, for goodness sake.” I sat back down on the toilet and watched my husband get swept up into another giant bear hug.

So, Mel at Saks, huh?



“Well, I guess we’re telling people, right? I mean, we don’t need to wait until New Year’s anymore.”

I sighed from the passenger seat. Simon had finally gotten loose from Neil, asked him to please wait a day or so before he told Sophia in case I wanted to be the one to tell her myself, realized there was absolutely no way Neil was going to be able to keep that secret, but we appreciated him trying anyway, and bundled me into the old Range Rover. Which had a new rattle lately. The machine was held together with duct tape and a promise these days as it was, but the new rattle was more worrisome than normal.

“Are you going to get that checked out?” I asked, stretching my feet toward the warmth from the heater.

“Are you ignoring my question?” Simon asked.

“Are you ignoring mine?”

“You first.”

“That’s how this whole thing started, remember?” I laughed, reaching across the console and threading my fingers through his. “Also, how come you never told me Neil is some kind of idiot savant when it comes to women’s bra sizes?”

“You’re half right about that. And I guess it just never came up?”

“He was dead right about my tits, you know.”

“I’m sure. My palms almost aren’t big enough anymore.”

“Really?” I asked, lifting his palm to my breast and encouraging him to grab a handful. Not that I ever needed to encourage. “Damn, you’re right. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.” I nodded, then looked to my right. I smiled at the older gentleman in the car next to us, who’d been watching me get felt up on the onramp to the bridge. “Eyes on the road!” I mouthed and pointed in front of him. “I can remember a day when you would have used any excuse to talk about my tits.”

“Your tits, babe...” He tweaked my nipple through my shirt. “...are magnificent. The fact that they’re bigger right now, and the reason for their extra heft, makes them even more magnificent.” He shifted in his seat slightly, moving onto the bridge. “And I never need an excuse to talk about your tits. Or touch your tits. Or see your tits.”

“Or kiss my tits?”

“Caroline,” he warned, shifting again in his seat. The lights of Sausalito twinkled in the distance. We were still a ways from home, however. Probably best not to distract him while we were suspended in midair over a very cold body of water.

“Seriously, though, will he be able to keep a secret? Until New Year’s?” I asked, moving Simon’s hand delicately but purposefully back to the steering wheel. He seemed relieved.

“You’ve met Neil, right?”

“Yes, I was hoping this one time he might be able to keep it together.”

Simon chuckled. “I love that guy, and he’s sure gonna try. But I don’t know.” He shot me a side glance. “Would it be that bad if he told Sophia?”

“I’d like to be the one to tell Sophia,” I mumbled, watching the lights of our hometown twinkle ever closer.

“Forgive me, but you had the perfect chance to tell both Sophia *and* Mimi on Sunday, but you didn’t.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Explain this to me again?”

“This is well-covered territory.” I sighed, leaning against the door, away from him. “It’s the same reason I couldn’t tell Jillian, the same reason I didn’t want you to tell Benjamin.”

He was quiet. I watched his jaw clench. “Because it makes it real?”

“Mm-hmm,” I replied, not trusting actual words right now.

“Babe, I know.” His jaw clenched again. “But it’s different this time. Doesn’t it feel different?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And we’re so much further along. Dr. Spencer says that a good thing, a very good thing.”

“Mm-hmm.”

We were over the bridge now. He took the exit for Sausalito. The little town began to reveal itself within a turn or two. “You trust Dr. Spencer, don’t you? You said yourself, she’s the best doctor we’ve seen yet, right?”

“She is,” I admitted. “She really is.”

“And she told us it was okay to start telling people. It made sense not to tell anyone before twelve weeks, but we’re past that, babe. It’s time.”

I nodded, not able to answer yet. Our little town was so close to one of the biggest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world, and yet once you crossed that bridge, it was like a different planet. The streets were quiet, the water more gentle, and even the air seemed softer somehow. Street after street of charm and substance. Make no mistake, you had to have some serious bucks to live in this town—or have inherited a home already in your family—but at its heart, Sausalito really was a small town.

The Christmas lights made it look like something out of Norman Rockwell. Rockwell on a trip west, of course; this wasn’t New England. This was coastal California, so our Christmas lights were interspersed with cabbage shrub roses, twining and shining right along with the tiny, white lights.

We lived outside, year round, so every porch had a second Christmas tree. This time of day, with the lights on inside and the light leaving the sky, you could sneak a peek into everyone's home life—families sitting on the porch, or spilling out into the backyard. Dinner tables being set, everyone talking about their day, a few more hoops into the net over the garage. And just like that, we turned onto our street.

When we'd first looked at the house that would become ours, I never could have predicted my adventurous Wallbanger would want to come live his life in the 'burbs. But he surprised me at every turn, and as we'd walked through our old, rambling Victorian, we could see past the mauve wallpaper and shag carpet, and we knew we'd found our home. We'd made it exactly that.

And we both wanted to fill it up with babies. So maybe it was time to tell people. And enjoy this a bit.

We pulled into our driveway. We always left a light or two on in the house, and it glowed warmly, welcoming us home. Also waiting to welcome us home was our sentry, Clive. He watched from the second-story window, where he could see everything he needed to see to maintain order.

It was a leap of faith—faith that things would be okay, that this time really was different. That I could lean into this and decide that whatever was going to happen was going to happen, so I might as well enjoy this magical time. And it was magical. Suddenly, I longed to tell everyone, to share this news with my favorite people and bring them into this circle. Maybe it would be easier, not keeping this just between the two of us.

I looked up at Clive, looking down on his kingdom from his window. He gave me an almost imperceptible nod.

I *could* do this. And with that, a warmth spread across my skin. I think my body relaxed for the first time in months. And a great smile crept across my face. "Okay."

Simon stopped gathering his things and watched my face carefully.

“Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay, let’s tell people.”

“You’re sure?” he asked, the corner of his mouth twitching and threatening to mirror my smile. “We don’t have to wait until New Year’s?”

“Nope.”

He jumped out of the car, slamming the door hard enough to rock the Range Rover. There was a spring in his step as he came around to my side, a lightness I hadn’t seen in a long time. He needed this too. His blue eyes twinkled in the twilight. He opened the door, pulled me out, and grabbed me up in a long, close hug.

“I love you so much, Caroline.”

“I love you too,” I whispered and let him kiss me. Once, twice, then a third time. “Who should we tell first?”

“Well, I was thinking we should—”

My phone ringing interrupted his thought. And then his phone interrupted my phone.

“Sophia?” he asked as I looked at my phone.

“Oh yeah.” I nodded. “Neil?”

He nodded, looking away from his phone and up at the sky. “That jackass didn’t even make it an hour.”

I answered my phone, pre-wincing at the shriek I knew was waiting for me.

CHAPTER 5

When you refuse to let hope in, you box several other things out too. I went to see my doctor as often as I was supposed to, which was a lot since all my pregnancies were classified as high risk. But after the second miscarriage, I never had a sonogram. Correction, I never had *the sonogram experience*. I didn't want to hear anything, didn't want to coo and ooh over a blip on a radio and try to sort through what looked like a Doppler radar screen and try to convince myself I was seeing the life inside me, not a high-pressure system stalled outside of Tulsa.

The sonogram experience is joyful and happy, grasping hands and sweet teardrops falling as a couple looks at new life.

I could never allow myself to go through that again. So instead I went, I laid down on the bed with the paper trail, and the doctor did what she needed to do. She listened to the heartbeat with headphones; I just couldn't hear it. She watched the monitor with a careful eye, I kept mine steadfastly shut. It was only when she was entirely finished and giving me the thumbs up that I'd breathe again, stumble off the table, and wonder when this was all going to end, just like the other ones.

I couldn't have *the sonogram experience* because I simply couldn't risk letting that hope in.

But now, hope was running wild, and we were ready.

Together.

“So, Caroline, how have you been feeling?”

“I've been good, Dr. Spencer, feeling good.”

“Any more nausea?”

“Some, but not like at the beginning.”

“Are you feeling a lot of movement?”

“Oh goodness, yes. He’s kicking up a storm in there.”

Simon’s eyes fell out of his head. “He—wait, did you say he?”

“Just a feeling,” I said, catching his hand and pulling him closer. “I officially don’t know anything. Right, Dr. Spencer?”

“Simon, I can tell you with all certainty that since I don’t even know the sex of your baby, your wife definitely doesn’t know.”

“That’s right, babe. I could have just as easily said, she’s kicking up a storm in there.”

“She—wait, did you say she?”

“Oh boy,” Dr. Spencer said under her breath.

“Wait, did you say boy?”

“Oh for pity’s sake. Let’s find out what this baby is so my husband can start breathing again,” I cried, reaching for the sonogram wand. “This goes here, right?”

“Only if you want to see whatever it was you had for dinner last night, Caroline.” Our doctor laughed, taking the wand back firmly. “Tell you what, you lay back. Simon, you keep on holding her hand, and let the only person in here who’s licensed to practice medicine do the actual, well, *medicining*. How does that sound?”

“She just made up a word, Caroline. Should we be concerned?”

Dr. Spencer wisely didn’t let me answer. “You need to be concerned about breathing, Simon. So you concentrate on that, and I’ll concentrate on my job, okay? And I’ll come up with some big medical words to make you feel better about my overall judgment. How would that be?”

“He thinks that sounds great. Now let’s get this show on the road, yes?”

“Yes,” Simon muttered, finally breathing. At least he didn’t look as pale anymore.

“Yes,” Dr. Spencer replied with an authoritative tone. “Here comes the cold, squishy part.”

She applied a light layer of jelly to my stomach and smoothed it out. She was right; I’d had the wand too high.

“Okay, let’s see what we can find in here. Give me a moment.”

Ten seconds is nothing. It feels like nothing. You barely have time to do anything in just ten seconds. You can maybe butter some toast, but only if the butter is really soft. It’s possible that you could do a somersault off a diving board. Maybe. You can’t make anything, though, unless it’s an ass of yourself.

But on that day, in that room, ten seconds was a lifetime. As the seconds ticked by with no sound, our eyes searched, our hands clenched, and silent words drifted upward. I mentally gave away not only my Kitchenaid mixer but my signed copy of the Barefoot Contessa’s cookbook too if I could only hear...

“Thump.”

Oh God. My eyes filled with tears.

“Thump-thump.”

I looked at my husband. His eyes were as wet as mine.

“Christ on a crutch, is that...”

“Wait, so that’s our...”

“Thump-thump-thump.”

And just like that, we were officially a trio.

Simon let out his breath in a huge whoosh.

“Quiet, that’s too loud!” I admonished, in a whisper-yell.

“I will try to go back to not breathing,” Simon whisper-yelled back.

“That would be great,” I whisper-laughed. I adjusted slightly on the bed. “I’m trying to listen to the kid here.”

“I’m trying to listen, too, you know. It’s not like you’re in here alone.” Simon’s grin was so wide it ran around the circumference of his head.

“Guys?”

“Simon, it’s obvious I’m not in here alone. It’s me and this little heartbeater here, get it? Now you sit there, not breathing, and you can listen in while I create life here, got it?”

“Pretty sure I had something to do with the creation of life—this life at least, Caroline.”

“Uh, hello, guys?”

“Oh, well, look who thinks he’s in charge of intelligent design now. He can just create life on his own, on a whim. Simon, really—”

“Well, I was there for the big bang, so—”

“Guys!” Dr. Spencer broke through.

“Sorry, what?” I said, still holding Simon’s hand, with a head-wrapping smile of my own.

“I’m hearing something else.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“An extra heartbeat.”

I paused. I raised an eyebrow. “An extra heartbeat?”

Simon raised his own eyebrow. “Like, he’s got great rhythm?”

“Simon, hush.”

“Like, a separate, individual, extra heartbeat.”

Ten seconds went by again. Now, the world was filled with a different sound, generally the same as the last but perfectly distinguishable as its own sound. Somehow a higher pitch, and the tiniest bit faster than the other. Ten seconds to allow this information to land, permeate, carve in, and reveal itself.

“Wait, so... Wait. Wait just a minute,” I said, as Simon did the best imitation I’ve ever seen of a solid stone statue. “Are

you telling us we might have, that we have somehow cooked up—”

“Twins.” She nodded. “You’ve got two babies in there.”

“Oh,” I whispered. I was capable of only a vowel. My own heart beat faster. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing: two tiny little heartbeats, already their own unique sound that filled my eardrums and quite possibly the entire world. Because my entire world was rocking to the very foundation.

Simon clutched my hand. He couldn’t even manage a vowel. But he squeezed just the tiniest bit harder, to let me know he was still in there, just overwhelmed.

“I can’t believe it,” I whispered, still not able to really speak.

“Well, believe it,” Dr. Spencer said, moving the wand back to the original spot. The first heartbeat filled the room again. “Here’s baby one...” The heartbeat was low and steady, like a little *shu-shu-shu*. “And here’s baby two.” She moved the wand again, and here came the higher pitched and slightly faster *shu-shu, shu-shu*.

“Let’s hear baby one again.” I clapped my hands, which still included Simon’s.

Dr. Spencer laughed and obliged. “Here’s baby one...”

Shu-shu-shu.

“And here’s baby two.”

Shu-shu, shu-shu.

“I realize you do this every day, Dr. Spencer, but these two heartbeats are probably the best heartbeats you’ve ever heard, am I right?” I asked.

“They’re wonderful, Caroline.”

“But they’re the best, right?”

“They’re the best,” she agreed. She started to take the wand away.

“No no, let’s hear them just the one more time.”

“You got it.

Shu-shu-shu.

Shu-shu, shu-shu.

Shu-choo, shu-choo.

“Wait a minute,” Simon said, his hand clenching down harder.

“Well, look who finally woke up! Simon, did you hear?”

“Shush, what was that? The one that was almost like a *choo-choo* but slower.”

“Simon, I think Dr. Spencer knows what she’s doing and —”

“Holy shit,” the doctor breathed.

“What? What is it?” I asked, a sudden wash of adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream, hot then icy cold. “What is holy shit?”

Dr. Spencer listened once more, and now I could hear it. She moved the wand back and forth, carefully, purposefully.

Shu-shu-shu.

Shu-shu, shu-shu.

Shu-choo, shu-choo.

“Simon. Caroline.” Dr. Spencer paused, lifting the wand. “You’ve got three babies in there.”

Silence.

Thump.

Simon had passed out cold and hit the deck.



We drove home with wide eyes. I mean, seriously wide eyes. I can’t say for certain whether or not Simon blinked, but judging by the fact that when we got home, my eyeballs were dry as a

bone and covered in sandpaper, I'm fairly certain his were the same.

How do you find out you're going to have triplets, and then blink? I mean, can you blink when you have triplets? Triplets. *Triplets.*

For fuck's sake, triplets!

Blinking was for pussies. Blinking was for people with one baby. You can blink all the live-long day when you have just the one baby. I daresay with one baby you can even do more than blink—you can close your eyes for minutes at a time! Triplets, *trip-pull-lets.*

I imagine if you blink with triplets, one ends up on the chandelier while another is inside the kitchen sink. Maybe one stays where they're supposed to, but that doesn't matter because there are three of them and they outnumber you three to one. Three, three, three. And then if you indulge in the luxury of the second blink—hey look, the third one just took your keys and went to the store. Triplets.

And let's assume you figured out the blinking—which I can't imagine, but just go with me here. Let's pretend you figure out how to nano-blink. Even so, when you open your eyes, there are still three mother-loving babies. With three mouths. And three butts. And three screamings. And three different brains that they'll band together and use against you in a court of law.

Three.

"I'm not going to prison for blinking, Simon."

He nodded numbly next to me. "It doesn't even matter that I have no idea what that means. From now on, whatever you think, I think."

"We're going to need a unified front."

"Yes. Because there are three."

"It doesn't even seem possible."

"Maybe she was kidding?"

“She does seem the type.”

“We should go back. We should go back and demand to see the calibration records of that machine. Who knows the last time it was serviced. It could have been wrong.”

“It probably was. We had Thai for dinner last night. For all we know, most of those shu-shus were spicy peanut sauce talking back.”

“Those water chestnuts looked spiteful.”

“I thought so too. They seemed almost angry.”

“They really did.”

“So we should go back?” Simon started to put the car in gear.

“We probably should. And tell her no.”

“No?”

“No, we don’t accept the news. It’s just not possible.”

“Agreed.”

“And let’s pick up Chinese on the way.”

“If we keep you in spicy Asian food for the next few months, it’s reasonable to assume that those extra heartbeats are just tummy rumbles.”

“We should do things that are reasonable.”

“Agreed. So, spicy good, and we go back and tell her no.”

“Why aren’t you driving?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because my eyeballs are stuck.”

“You haven’t blinked either?”

He turned to me. I turned to him. We stared at each other for an unknowable amount of time. It would have seemed, to anyone walking by 816 Cherrywood Lane that afternoon, that

a couple was enjoying a long, meaningful look deep into each other's souls.

In fact it was two people—unable to blink—trying to come to terms with the fact that their bundle of joy was *three* bundles of joy, and no amount of spicy-peanut dreaming could discount the undercurrent of *this is real* and *this is happening* and *Hello, family, here we come all at once*.

“It’s probably not the best idea to drive back there,” I told him. “I mean, she’ll try to tell us it’s not the Thai food.”

“Right! And we don’t need that kind of negativity right now.”

“Agreed.”

We stared for another few seconds. Or hours.

“My eyeballs actually hurt,” I said.

“Mine are glued in place like marbles,” he agreed. “We should try to blink.”

“We might as well enjoy that for now, before one ends up on the chandelier.”

“Totally.”

We stared.

I reached out and patted his hand. “Okay, on three, we blink.”

“Why does it have to be three?”

“I don’t know. Let’s blink on four.”

It shouldn’t have been optically possible, but his eyes widened. The tiniest puff of dust floated out. “Don’t say four. Don’t you dare say four.”

“Okay, let’s blink on one.”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, ready? One...”

We blinked. Eyelids weigh seven-thousand pounds.

“Let’s discuss this, but after some Visine,” Simon said.

“I thought we were getting Chinese?”



“Are you awake?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Caroline?”

“Yes, Simon.”

“How are we going to do this?”

“Usually I just close my eyes, start to count wallpaper samples, and I’m out like a light.”

“Caroline,” he warned.

I lifted my head from his chest to sneak a quick kiss, then went back to the nook. “I’m awake. And I suppose we’ll do this like any other parents do, just by a factor of three.”

“How did this happen?”

“Well, a penis—”

“Caroline!”

I started to laugh. I couldn’t help it. It was rare that I was the sane one, and Simon was the one flipping out, so for the moment, I was enjoying this. Sometime between putting the car in reverse to go back to the doctor’s, and actually getting some pot stickers and mu shu pork (heavy on the *shu*), I felt a wave of contentment and peace wash over me. And I was able to blink again. Simon, still not much with the blinking.

“Wallbanger, I get it. I do. This is like, *beyond* beyond ridiculous. And yet...”

“And yet? How can you be *and yetting*?”

“I’m yetting because these babies are here, inside me, ready to party in a few months. And we can either figure it out or not figure it out, and somewhere in between is where we’re going to live for the foreseeable future—at least until they’re in college.”

“Oh fuck, we’re going to have three kids in college at the same time.”

“Good thing I married money, huh?”

“I just don’t see how you’re not freaking out right now.” He sat up in bed, turning on his nightstand light. I stayed where the nook had been.

“Oh, I’m freaking out. But I’m kind of, well, I’m kind of enjoying it too.”

“You are?”

“You’re not?”

“Babe.”

“Okay, come back down here, please. Now you get to come in my nook.”

He grumbled. “Pretty sure that’s how we got into this mess.”

“Look how cute you are. You made a funny.” I smiled as he did indeed come into the nook. One hand snuck across my belly, which in olden times would’ve gone all the way across to tuck me closer to him. Tonight, his hand weighed heavy on my belly, warm and secure. The simple band he wore on the third finger of his left hand was warm too, and impossibly sexy to see on the bump that seemed to have grown just since this afternoon. He laid his head on my breast, his breath warm as well, and I don’t think I’d ever felt so cozy.

“So let me tell you a little story, and let’s see if we can get you feeling better.”

“A story? Caroline, please.”

“I’m literally carrying a litter right now. Don’t fuck with me.”

“Should a mother-to-be say such things?”

“This mother says fuck. And will continue *to* fuck, so don’t get any ideas about holding out on me.”

“Caroline, I love you to the moon and back, but the thought of having sex with you now scares me to death. There are quite literally, children present in there.”

“I know, Simon. Now shush.” I ran my hand through his hair, and up and down his back, scratching softly with my nails. Up and down and all around, drawing shapes and pictures on his skin. “Once upon a time, there was a girl, who loved a boy. And this boy gave her the world.”

“That’s me.”

I smothered a laugh. “Yes, Simon, that’s you. And this boy loved this girl so much, and I mean on the regular *loved* her, you know what I mean?”

His hand began to draw shapes and pictures on my skin. Slowly at first, but then he began to really feel my skin, feel my belly.

“And she loved him back. And it was wonderful. And the boy bought her a house that she got to make pretty in whatever way she wanted to, and all he had to do was write the check.”

“He sounds like a great guy.”

“Oh my, yes. And he even made sure the countertops in the kitchen were a perfect height for...you know...”

“Making apple pies?”

“Fuck yes, making apple pies by the thousands. And as they began to build a life together, things changed a bit, and the girl got nervous that things were changing too much, and they wouldn’t be the same anymore. And he told her it was okay, that if change meant more ways to love each other, then what could be wrong with that?”

“He said that?”

“He basically said that. She just made it sound a little more fancy.”

He nuzzled at my neck, and I could feel his smile on my skin. “This story so far is pretty great.”

“And then one day, he asked her to marry him.”

“And when I’ve heard this story. She was naked, right?”

I twisted my legs a bit, the bloom of heat impossible to ignore when he said words like *naked*. “She was, and he was, and they were, and apparently it was pretty great.”

That hand on my belly began to dip slightly lower as he continued to draw pictures. I shuddered a bit. He noticed. He always noticed.

“Continue, Caroline,” he whispered.

“So,” I began again, my voice a little wavery, “the girl and the boy started to plan their wedding. And it wasn’t going so well. But they moved forward, knowing there were so many people excited about this big day. And then the boy went away, to photograph a really big and really stupid hole in the ground.”

“I heard he was to be one of the first to do a photographic study on one of the largest and most recently discovered cave systems in all of Vietnam. He even won an award for that series, didn’t he?” His hand now skimmed the tops of my thighs.

“He did. But he also won an award for dumbest fiancé. Apparently he fell, like, a thousand miles straight down and crashed into solid rock because he wasn’t being careful and—”

“—and he got hurt. But then...”

“But then she came to him. And the girl took care of the boy, and then she whisked him away from the hospital and took him to a quiet beach and married him, surprising him in the process, but she couldn’t spend another day on this earth not tied to him in every way.” I kissed his forehead. “But it turns out it wasn’t legal, so the girl and boy went home and made it official in their backyard.”

I took a breath. “And then on their second wedding night, a little kitten cat brought something into the bed that he shouldn’t have, and spilled the beans about something the girl should have already told the boy but wanted to wait a little bit longer because it just didn’t quite feel right.”

His hand stopped.

“And then when she did tell him, he was so happy, he cried right there in their bed.”

“He sure did. He was so happy.”

“And then something terrible happened, and their stupid, perfect world was crashed into pieces.”

We both sighed.

“And then they figured out how to go on, to be happy again. And then something else terrible happened. And it just never seemed like these two were going to have everything they wanted, because sometimes it just doesn't happen that way.”

“No, it doesn't.” Simon went still. He was quiet, barely breathing. Neither of us moved for what seemed like an hour. He finally spoke, and his voice had that haunted quality it took on every great once in awhile, usually late at night. “And it sounds like maybe the boy knew sometimes it wasn't really up to you anyway.”

Oh.

He had such a well of old pain inside, and he was so careful to control it. He'd lost his family in an instant, just as he was hovering on the edge of becoming a man. I pulled him closer. “But then, something crazy happened that absolutely no one could have predicted.”

He snorted. “No way, no how.”

“And the girl was happy. I mean, she was petrified, but underneath that part, she was happy. And she wanted desperately for him to be happy too. Because she realized something.”

He lifted his head, his blue eyes searching mine. Blue eyes that were rimmed in red.

“She realized it didn't matter what she *thought* was supposed to happen, because it just meant the boy and the girl were going to get all their happy in one fell swoop. Somehow, somewhere, the universe figured out that this couple had always been a little too much, so this actually made perfect

sense. And she was happy because the girl knew something that the boy kept forgetting.”

“What’s that, babe?”

“She knew he was going to be an incredible father, so she didn’t need to worry so much. Because with him, everything would always be right and exactly what it was supposed to be.”

His eyes searched mine, bouncing back and forth, intense. Piercing. He saw through me, all of me, punching out the back and into the pillows beneath our heads, in the bed we had made our family in.

And then he smiled.

And then he kissed me.

And then he *kissed* me.

Oh, and he poured everything into that kiss. Everything he was feeling—the doubt and the turmoil and the nervous and the raw fear, partly because of the unknown, sure, but mostly because of the fear of wanting this, and needing this, and being able to be bare-human honest enough to realize even though we could do everything right, things still go wrong. But fuck it all, we were going to do it anyway because it was *us*.

And I know he was feeling all of those things because I was feeling them too, and at the very edges there was hope blooming now for both of us, and it was running rampant all over everything else, and that was the scariest part of all.

And he kissed me deep and true, and he loved my body and kissed me everywhere deep and true, and took everything and gave it all back to me and when he sank inside—shallow but still full of everything he had and needed to give me—when he grabbed at my skin and every fingerprint told me how sacred I was and how much he honored me, and when I knew I could be enough for him to allow his hope to explode... Oh, there is just nothing like that in the world.

Not in our world. For this boy and this girl.

And now our hearts were expanding for three more.

CHAPTER 6

Some women wait their entire lives to become mothers. I didn't. I wasn't sure I wanted kids. I wasn't opposed, but I wasn't obsessed either, preferring to concentrate on my career, and on my friends, and on my travel, and then on my smoking-hot neighbor/boyfriend/fiancé/husband. Those were the things I really stressed out about, you know? Like, if was meant to be, then it was meant to be.

And then I was pregnant. And oh my God, it was instant. *I Wanted Kids*. So it was meant to be, right? But then I wasn't, so was *that* meant to be? You could turn yourself inside out trying to figure this out. But in the end, once I had accepted that this was really happening and I just gave over to it?

I couldn't wait to be a mother.

And once I pulled off the Band-aid about telling people, I told everyone! And I read every book. And I watched every video. And time flew by. We took Lamaze, we practiced the drive to the hospital with ten different routes, we packed and unpacked my hospital bag over and over again, and we spent every night working our way through the *Big Book of Baby Names*.

And there is nothing sexier in the world than watching Simon Parker's hand on your belly, watching it rise and fall, wedding ring glinting in the light from the fireplace, in the home he built with me, for us, for all of us, while Bing Crosby sings "White Christmas" on the record player.

Except maybe when he pushes into you from behind, low and slow and careful, red rose petals showered across the bed you made babies in, a bottle of sparkling cider on ice in the kitchen because we just couldn't wait to have Valentine's Day sex.

Except maybe when he makes you choose between another Cadbury Crème Egg and another orgasm, which you know and he knows and you both know the other one knows that there really *is* no choice because he's going to give you both, because for fuck's sake, who ever says no to a pregnant woman, especially when he's got you wild and writhing and naked from the waist down on the countertop, while he kneels on the kitchen floor, his mouth moaning and groaning right into the center of his world, swirling his tongue and making you beg and cry and kick and scream, with your head in an upended Easter basket and a fistful of Peeps.

But the sexiest is when he gives you a push present early, on Mother's Day, when he gives you the keys to a brand new, dark green Range Rover with a row of three car seats already installed in the tan leather backseat, and this time, there's no question about whether you take the fucking car this man is giving you. *You take the fucking car.*

And then you *really* celebrate Mother's Day by letting him steal you away into the headlands, and you go down on the man and the myth and the legend in the shade of the Golden Gate while he fills the night air with the filthiest words imaginable because he loves nothing more than to have his dick in your mouth, his hands in your hair, and to know his wife isn't going anywhere. You're still his Nightie Girl, and you will always want him this way.

And then poof, it's summer, and you're six weeks away from everything changing. And people are throwing you a baby shower!



“I finally know what you meant about Neil being in love with your big pregnancy ass, Sophia.”

“I told you. I tried to tell you, but no one ever believes me.”

“Who said she didn't believe you? We all saw it. He'd rub your ass every time you came within three feet.” Mimi sat on

our back porch, sparkling cider in her hand, my feet in her lap as she massaged my fat-little-piggy-goes-to-puffy-town toes. “Once I saw him cross an entire ballroom just to get to your ass—remember at that benefit, Caroline?”

“Oh yeah, he was a man on a mission.”

“So it was never that she didn’t believe you,” Mimi clarified. “I’m guessing what Caroline meant was that now that she is the one with the big pregnancy ass—no offense, dear...”

“You’re rubbing my feet. Say whatever you want about my ass,” I assured her, my eyes crossing as she worked on my instep.

“I’m guessing what Caroline meant is that now she understands what it feels like, since her ass has captured her husband’s attention like it’s his job.”

“Technically, it is his job, as all he needs to be focused on is her. Which includes her ass.” Sophia nodded, raising her own glass of cider and mock-saluting Simon from across the patio. He was clustered with Neil and Ryan and some of our other guests at our couple’s shower.

It was now mid summer, and Sausalito had rolled out its super green just for my, I mean, *our* shower. The world was beautiful, the sun was shining, the flowers were blooming, the birds were chirping, my ass was officially big, and my stomach was in its own orbit.

I mean it. It was like nothing I’d ever seen. I knew women with multiples carried large, but this was bonkers big. I was cooking up three tiny people in there, with very large wingspans, and when I moved, it was like an aircraft carrier: no fast turns, took me a while to get going, and I’m not kidding when I say small planes could launch off my deck.

It wasn’t natural. Except it was the most natural thing I’d ever done.

My pregnancy had been the picture of health. Technically it was high risk because of the previous trouble I’d had, so we were extra careful, of course, but everything had been

proceeding like clockwork. I had gained about seventeen-thousand pounds, mostly from the zucchini bread and apple pie I couldn't stop baking. Cinnamon rolls, monkey bread—I couldn't stop. My mother said I was nesting. I don't know if that was it, but I can tell you there was a shortage of butter, sugar, and flour on the West Coast that summer, and a pregnant woman who could be seen from space.

We told our friends about the babies, and no one believed us. They thought we were lying. Then they were convinced we'd done IVF secretly and not told anyone. But once everyone calmed down and realized the universe had just decided to give us everything we wanted all at once, then it was...fun.

Mimi managed everything. She'd better never run for office, because no one would ever be able to run against her. She was unstoppable. She created my online baby registry, she planned the shower and designed my cakes, and even street-tested strollers for me.

When you were pregnant with multiples, everyone had something to say. And planning for three babies, well, it takes a village. So I took all the advice anyone wanted to give me. And if it came with some diapers, a tube of butt ointment, and a onesie, I'd listen to literally anything you had to say. I knew lots of first-time moms got overwhelmed with the preparation and hated when strangers asked them questions or tried to touch their stomach (point of order, that one bothered me and anyone trying to do that got a stern eyebrow and *a back the eff up*), but the questions and the advice and the *in my day we...* I freaking loved all of that.

Preparing for a baby was fun. Preparing for three was freaking awesome. Because anything is cute when it comes in threes.

We had everything planned. I had just taped my last few segments for the station earlier this week, finished up my last design job, and I was going to be doing video consulting from home now, working remotely with the designers back at the shop. Jillian and Benjamin were home for the summer, and she was stepping back into her role, taking on some of the duties I

had assumed and taking over the mentorship program seamlessly. I wasn't on bed rest per se, but my doctor had advised that I stick closer to Sausalito and her office now that we were getting closer, especially knowing that multiple births tended to come early.

Simon had one more job to finish up, a photo series he'd been planning for months with a producer he'd started his career with years ago. He and Mac were heading out on one last adventure before the stork dropped in, sailing for a week down the coast of South America.

He wanted to go, but he *didn't* want to go. This kind of trip was exactly who he was—exciting, historically driven, out on the edge, and a little dangerous. Oh, he *wanted* to go, but then I think he also felt *guilty* that he wanted to go. And because I knew he wouldn't if I asked him not to, I made sure to tell him daily he *needed* to take this trip.

I would never try to change who this man was. Because I fell in love with *him*, not who I thought I could shape him into. He'd mellowed over the years, sure. He traveled way less than he used to. But his job and who he was were wrapped up in each other. He photographed the world, and then showed the world what he saw. And I never wanted him to give that up. He'd always put his family first; I knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But my husband had a wanderlust, and since most of his lust would always be directed toward me, I didn't want him to ever feel like he was giving something up.

And hey, I loved to travel too, and we had already planned to be the kind of family that showed our kids as much of the globe as possible, letting the planet be a part of our lives as much as anything else. We wanted global kiddos—we knew that in our very core.

So yeah, he was going to take this one last trip. And I was excited for him.

But I'd miss him.

I watched him, across our backyard, talking with his friends and the closest thing he had to a father figure at this point, Benjamin, and I marveled at the man he was. I felt so

very lucky to have him by my side, in all things, in all ways. He truly was my partner.

I wasn't sure there was a heaven, necessarily, but I liked to believe that if there was, his parents were looking down and smiling, so pleased with the life their son had created for himself.

They'd been taken so quickly from him, and family was everything to him. He turned just then, caught my eye, and winked at me, giving me my favorite grin.

“Hey, Caroline!”

I turned, aircraft-carrier-style, away from Simon.

“Why the hell haven't I been down here before? This house is amazing!”

I knew before I finished the turn—that voice sounded like no other in my circle. As she came into view, I couldn't help but smile. Barely five feet one inch tall—in combat boots, no less—with spiky brown hair framing a gorgeous pixie face, was Viv Franklin. And she was once again sporting a pregnancy belly.

“Goodnight nurse, are you pregnant again?” I shouted as she waddled my way. As a fellow waddler, I could say this. You, however, should never refer to a pregnant woman as *waddling*. Let that be a lesson. “No wonder you've never made it down here before.”

“What can I say?” she puffed, as she made her way over to the patio. “Clark likes to get it in.”

“Vivian, that's hardly necessary,” huffed her husband, Clark. A tall, handsome drink of water with eternally smudged glasses and the most artfully parted brown hair this side of Henry Cavill, Clark exuded librarian-nerd chic. Viv was one of Simon's oldest friends from Philadelphia, where he'd grown up. We ran into Viv at his high school reunion several years ago, and then when a great aunt left her this fantastic house in Mendocino, Viv pulled up stakes and moved out west—and right into the arms of the town archivist and sexiest man-geek, Clark Barrow.

Catching pregnant nearly right away, the two of them were married after their second child was born. Simon and I had driven up to Mendocino for the party. It was a wonderful event on their property overlooking the Pacific, their old Victorian rambler the backdrop for the ceremony. I'd helped consult on some renovation to the home, which was on the town historic registry, and the dismantling of which had resulted in some of the biggest arguments between these two the town had ever seen.

It had also resulted in some epic sex and now several children.

“Wait, so this is...” I mentally counted. “...your fourth?”

She heaved herself into a lawn chair, displacing Mimi with a withering glance and a shoo-shoo motion with her hand, upon which sparkled an elegant, pale pink diamond. “No, hell no. This is number five right here.”

“My God, are you going for some kind of record?” asked Sophia, who had wisely stopped after two kids with Neil. Not sure the state of California would allow them to have any more kids, as loud as they were.

“Yes, Sophia, that’s exactly what we’re doing. Clark is determined to fuck his way into the Guinness Book of World Records with a record number of spawn,” Viv challenged, one of the few that would go toe to toe with Sophia.

“It’s true,” Clark said, getting Viv settled and giving me a kiss on the cheek. “I’m trying to set a record.” He sighed, resigned to his life and absolutely ecstatic about it. “Where’s your husband? I brought him a great bottle of apple brandy after he told us about that orchard in Normandy.”

“Oh, did you two finally get to take your honeymoon?”

Clark’s ears turned pink. “That’s how we got to five.”

“Nice,” I admired, then pointed. “The boys are over there. Have fun.” I watched as the man in the perfectly pressed chinos headed over to join the other guys, and noticed—not for the first time—that there were some seriously good-looking men in our world.

“Hey, ladies, did you ever notice—” I started, as all of us stared at the guys.

“—that we are some lucky motherfuckers?” Sophia finished.

We all nodded in unison.

“And apparently they all have super sperm. How are you not on this kidlet train too, Mimi?” Viv asked.

She swung her feet, perched on the railing. “Simple. Ryan had a vasectomy.”

“Wait a minute, say what?” I asked, sure I had heard her wrong.

“Tiny, when did this—what the, wait, what?” Sophia sputtered.

“She said her husband had a vasectomy,” Viv said like she was working with the slow reading group.

“Yes, we got that, Viv.” I sighed, looking at my friend. “I guess we just don’t understand.”

“And why in the world didn’t you tell us?” Sophia followed.

Mimi kept swinging her feet. “We assumed we would, we planned on doing it, but the longer we waited, the more we realized, we love our life. Like, *love* it. And I’m so busy, and he’s working with Google now, and it’s just...not for us.”

“But you always wanted kids.”

“I did.”

“And I thought you said Ryan did too?” I asked, looking over at the sweetest husband of them all—tall and lean, with a mess of curly blond hair falling over his sharply good-looking features. Once upon a time, he was with Sophia, and Mimi was with Neil. Thank goodness they figured that shit out before anything was consummated. But the conventional wisdom early on had dictated that Mimi and Ryan would be the first couple to procreate. It had never crossed our collective minds that they wouldn’t have a family.

“Ryan grew up the same way I did—huge family, lots of kids, lots of cousins. So he assumed he’d have the same giant family. But he and I both came to this together. We like being just us two, against the world.” Her voice got the tiniest bit wistful. “That doesn’t mean we won’t change our minds later on down the line.”

“The snipping of the penis kind of makes that impossible, doesn’t it?” Sophia asked, making a *snip-snip* with her fingers.

“What the hell do you think happens in a vasectomy, Sophia?” Mimi rolled her eyes.

“They cut it off and set it on a side table while they take out all the sperm.” Sophia responded promptly.

Now they were nowhere near us, but I swear that at that exact moment, all four of our guys adjusted themselves, followed by taking extra-big swigs of their beer.

“First of all, you’re insane. Promise me you’ll never homeschool,” Mimi said, pointing at Sophia. “Second of all, they can be reversed. But honestly, we wouldn’t do that. If we really change our minds one day when things have quieted down a bit, maybe we’ll look into adoption. Maybe.” She nodded her head, making it clear that this discussion, for now, was over.

We all sat in silence for a moment, seeming lost in thought. I wondered whether I should tell her that Simon had also had a vasectomy, and that sometimes, when the universe decides it’s time for something new, life finds a way.

Jillian changed the subject. “So, are you still sure you don’t want to know the sexes of the babies beforehand?”

“She better not change her mind. It took some serious voodoo to make this a gender-neutral party,” Mimi said, rolling her eyes in my direction.

“You still don’t know?” Viv asked, her eyes as big as pies.

“Nope.”

“And Simon is on board with this?”

“He doesn’t want to know either,” I insisted.

Everyone had been trying to get us to find out. But we were determined to find out the old-fashioned way.

“But, how are you planning? You really don’t know? Come on, I bet you peeked and just don’t want to tell,” Viv said.

“I didn’t peek. We don’t want to know,” I replied, for the thousandth time. “Nothing is a surprise anymore. Everything is over-planned in our lives as it is—”

“Not possible,” Mimi interjected.

“—and I love the idea that we will meet our sons, or daughters, or any combination of, at the same time.”

“When they start flying out of your hoohah like a slide at the carnival,” Sophia offered.

“Yes. Exactly like that, hopefully holding cotton candy and a corndog,” I replied, adjusting in my seat. I was starting to get a bit stiff. Sitting in one position for more than twenty minutes anymore made me uncomfortable at best. And I had passed *best* a few minutes ago.

“There you are!” I heard from the other side of the lawn—a voice I didn’t know, didn’t recognize. Female. High pitched. Excited. “Oh my God, it’s been so long!”

I turned—again, aircraft-carrier-style—to see a blonde torpedo shooting across the lawn, all hair and legs and whimsical white linen in a blur as the torpedo leapt into the air and landed on my husband.

Wait. What? No, seriously, what?

“Whoa, whoa, Nicole, hang on here. Give me a chance to get my feet back underneath me. What are you doing here?” Simon exclaimed, extricating the torpedo from his waist and planting it firmly back down on the ground.

Nicole?

The blonde pushed her hair back from her face, handed Simon a fully loaded duffel bag, and smiled up at my husband. “I couldn’t wait. I had to stop by before the trip. I can’t wait to set sail!”

Set sail?

The blonde looked around, saw that literally everyone at the shower was staring straight at her, and grinned. “Hiya, everybody! I’m Simon’s producer, Nicole MacDonald! We worked together ages and ages ago, and now the dynamic duo is together again, ready for another adventure!” She waved a hello to everyone, turned in a circle, and made eye contact with me.

I saw her eyes light up—but not in a happy-to-see-me kind of way.

“Oh boy, you must be Caroline!” she said. “And holy crap, he was right. You’re huge!” She grinned at me.

I looked at Simon.

He blinked.

Mac? I mouthed.

He blinked. Then gulped. Then nodded. Then dropped the duffel bag.

“No,” Mimi said, rolling her neck.

“But I—” Simon stammered.

“No,” Sophia said, stretching her shoulders.

“It’s not like—” Simon hedged.

“No,” Viv said, cracking her knuckles.

“Oh come on. Like I would—”

“No,” Jillian said, taking her godmother corsage off her wrist and using the elastic to tie her hair back.

“Caroline, you can’t honestly think—”

“No,” I said, kicking off my shoes. Well, I tried to. They mostly came off. Then I pointed toward the driveway. Mimi, Sophia, Viv, and Jillian all did the same.

“Dude,” Ryan said, shaking his head.

“Du-hude!” Neil said, quietly and calmly taking several steps backward.

Simon picked up the duffle bag. Benjamin took it from him, put an arm around “Mac,” and quietly walked her back around the house from whence she came. He shot a “Dude,” over his shoulder.

And that was the end of that.

No trampy, last-minute spoiler bullshit at my shower. That’s how we roll in Sausalito.



Tumbleweeds and tramps aside, a little while later, the party was beginning to wind down. Everyone agreed that had been just the right amount of *oh, hell no* to make for a good story, and then we all moved on. But I was still sore, and I needed to move around. The problem was, getting up was at least a two-person affair, if not three.

“Okay,” I announced. “I’m going to run inside for a few. Does anyone need anything?”

“You’re not supposed to be doing anything for anyone,” Simon said, suddenly at my side and murmuring in my ear.

“I’m not. I’m just moving around a little.”

“You’re playing hostess.”

“I am the hostess,” I responded as he took my hands and hauled me to my feet. Which were swollen to the size of Kleenex boxes. I’d considered cutting holes in the front for my toes and actually wearing Kleenex boxes instead of shoes, but Simon wisely talked me out of it.

“I get that, Nightie Girl, but that doesn’t mean you need to be taking drink orders.”

I nodded at my girlfriends as Simon and I made our way inside, saying a quick hello here and there as we passed a few other guests. Most had already left, and when a few of the younger interns from Jillian Designs volunteered to clean up the kitchen, I said, “Oh my, yes” and “The sponges are under the sink.” Now that I was up and moving, my back was really hurting, and my knees felt a bit stiff.

“I’m going to go upstairs for a minute,” I said.

Simon began looking me over. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just need to pee.”

“There’s a bathroom down here, Caroline.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m aware of that, Simon. I just need a little space for a minute,” I snapped. *Where had that come from?*

Simon’s face told me he’d recognized the sudden change in mood. “You’re not actually mad about Mac, are you?”

“Mad? No. Upset? No. Going to bust your balls for a while, though?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Okay, I deserve that, but do you need some help?”

“‘‘Seriously, I’m fine.’’

“Okay, just, call me if you need me.”

“I’m going upstairs, Simon. I’m not going out to sea.” I went up three steps. “With my ex producer who is super hot.” I went up another three steps. “Who probably has the clap.”

“You’re funny.”

“I’m a freaking riot,” I called back, suddenly exhausted.

He was calling after me, something about how I was the most awesome wife ever and the prettiest and the sexiest and the smartest, as I rounded the landing and continued up to the second floor. From here, I could see the few guests that were still outside, mingling and chatting.

I ended up in the nursery. More and more lately I craved quiet and some calm. And this room was the definition of calm.

At the end of the hallway closest to our bedroom, we had knocked out a wall and combined an old sewing room with the original linen closet. Then we’d designed the loveliest nursery

I'd ever seen. And it was the only room in the entire house that I hadn't done myself. It was Jillian's gift to us.

She'd spent weeks here, taking pictures and sitting with the light at all hours of the day, creating memories of different light patterns and sightlines and shadows. Since Simon and I didn't know what we were having, other than three babies, she'd tried not to use any traditional colors in her palette.

She'd carved under the eaves and created three separate spaces for each baby to have as their own. Three bassinets—with cribs on order for when they were a bit older—that were clean and classic in their design. Cream-colored walls were accented by the palest of sea glass green curtains framing out the lights of Sausalito below. Lining the walls at the top, marching around in a little parade, were oversized antique cards with the ABCs, each with their own softly colored animal. Mahogany changing tables, dressers, and two of the most comfortably deep and padded rocking chairs finished the room. Deeply stained wood floors were softened by a plush accent rug with the city of San Francisco and its grid pattern colored in pale blues, greens, pinks, and yellows.

It was a magical room.

I'd found myself here many nights when I was having trouble sleeping. I'd snuggle into the rocking chair and dream of the babies that would soon be filling this room. Sometimes Simon would join me, but most nights it was just me and the twinkling lights of my favorite city across the bay, in the distance. It really seemed like a world away those nights.

I sank into the rocking chair, the tension in my back diminishing somewhat, and let out a long sigh. I was feeling... I don't know the word. Unsettled? I looked around the room, wondering if we had enough onesies and if I needed any more butt paste. Was I prepared? I was a planner, and I was surrounded by planners, so it made sense that I was good to go. But something just felt...off?

We were ready, I was ready, I knew we were. Simon would be back before I knew it, and... My thoughts were interrupted by male laughter floating up from the yard.

“The look on your face when she jumped on you,” Ryan said.

“The look on *his* face? How about the look on his wife’s face? I thought Caroline was going to serve your nuts on toast for that one.” Neil laughed.

They laughed. They *all* laughed, even Clark.

“Ha-ha-ha,” I called down through the screen. They all looked up, guilty as sin, then quickly began talking about anything and everything except what had just happened.

Stupid girl. Stupid gorgeous girl. Stupid, tiny, gorgeous, traveling-companion girl.

Wait, was that it? Was that why I was feeling restless? That seemed silly. I wasn’t that kind of wife, was I? For goodness sake, when I met Simon, he was fucking three other women. And it never got to me, did it? Nope.

I could see Simon wearing his charcoal button-down, his well-worn jeans, and the giant Big Daddy button Ryan had pinned on his collar. I smiled.

No, I wasn’t that kind of wife. I trusted Simon implicitly. He was about to go sailing around the ocean with that chippie, but I trusted him.

I rocked, and I rocked. And it was all I could do to go back downstairs eventually to say goodbye to everyone. I felt very tired and very overwhelmed and something seemed off now. If it wasn’t her, then why was I feeling so off?

I didn’t sleep much that night, even tucked into the nook, feeling Simon’s good heart beating next to me.



“You’ve got everything you need—the patch, the Dramamine, the sunscreen?”

“You want to run those by me again?”

“Simon, come on. I just want to make sure you have everything you need. I don’t want you getting motion sick, so

make sure you've got your patch and the Dramamine. And did you pack your sunscreen? Last time you went kite surfing with the guys, your nose and forehead peeled for two weeks."

His eyes twinkled in amusement. "Yes, I've got those three things packed, along with everything else you told me to pack, along with the things I've packed on my own, which was easy since I've been traveling more often than not for the past ten years."

"Don't get mouthy, Parker, unless you're putting it on me."

"Babe, I've got a cab coming in ten minutes."

I ran my hands through my hair, which I hadn't even managed to brush yet today. "Don't worry, you'd need ten minutes to find it, as enormous as I am."

He shook his head, took my hands from my head, and wrapped them around his neck. "I don't remember having any trouble finding it last night, did I?" He kissed my forehead. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." I closed my eyes, feeling his lips on my skin. Which normally calmed me, but I was so antsy this morning—exhausted but utterly restless. My eyes flew open wide. "Did you pack the extra phone charger? And the adapter? And the—"

"I've got it all. Now, let me look at you for a minute before I have to go."

"This is the wrong minute to pick, Simon." I was wearing an actual caftan, one I was pushing the boundaries of. My stomach was now so huge, I should have just started ordering fabric from the circus-tent store. My legs were like sequoias, my hair like sea wool sponge, and my breasts were... Oh man, they were like submarines—not the sandwich, I mean ballistic missile submarines, sticking straight out from my chest and ready to launch.

Everything hurt. And I had at least six weeks to go. Someone was going to have to show up, unstitch my side, and start adding panels of skin *Silence of the Lambs* style, *because there was simply no more room!*

“You couldn’t look more beautiful.”

“Simon, you really shouldn’t lie to pregnant people.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m growing eighteen babies inside my oonie. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Oh good. You haven’t taken your crazy pill this morning.”

I squeezed his neck. “I’m going to need you to kiss me, and stop talking, before I have to hurt you with pain.”

“Not crazy at all,” he replied, and obliged.

He was leaving, off on his adventure with his little camera.

That wasn’t a nice thing to think.

Oh fuck off, who cares? I was fat, sore, unreasonable, and fully aware of being so. And I felt fully entitled to be a sassafras right now. I was creating life, for fuck’s sake. He was going away on a boat.

“For real, are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, and I let his arms come up around me. We hugged sideways, because of the aircraft carrier.

“I’m fine, Simon. I really am.”

“You’re not though.” hH pulled back to look me in the eye, studying me.

“Don’t be silly. I’m fine.”

“I knew this was too close to our delivery date. I shouldn’t be going on this trip. This is ridiculous.”

“You’re going on this trip because I told you to,” I insisted, willing my stomach to stop flip flopping. “Decision made.”

He frowned. “I can stay.”

“You can go,” I answered, my eyes filling with tears. “But I appreciate the offer more than I can tell you.”

He looked at me, really looked at me. “Caroline, I don’t think—”

Beep beep.

I wiped my tears and pushed him away a little. “I’m fine, I promise. I’m just waterworks over here. Go. go. Go.” I shooed him.

We’d walked together toward the front door, and we could see the cab parked out front, the trunk popped and ready to go. I gave him a big grin, shaking it off. I needed to make sure he knew I was okay with this, or we’d stand here all day.

Pull yourself together, girl. You can get some Saltines, get on the couch, and then make your friends bring you stuff. Use them. Handle your shit!

I smiled brightly. “Seriously, I’m good. Call me when you land, wherever you land. I can’t even begin to understand how crazy far you’re going this time.”

“I know, and I will.” He ran his bag out to the car but then came back to me. “I love you, Caroline.” He kissed me, hard. Then gentle. Then leaned down and kissed my belly. “Love you too, babies. Go easy on Mommy.”

Oh. Oh wow.

“Love you,” I whispered, and he was gone.

CHAPTER 7

I should have used my friends more. But the longer I was alone, the more I realized that my alone time was going to be on very short order, very soon. And for the next eighteen years, at the very least.

Mimi tried to come over that first night, to bring me soup, but I begged off, telling her I was tired and just wanted to sleep. That was true, but I wasn't doing anything more than dozing at this point. My mind wouldn't quiet. I thought about Simon, I thought about the babies, I thought about the size of my hips and how much they just plain *ached*.

Sophia came over the next day, but I took one look at her two kids—and the amount of shit she was wrangling from the trunk just to come inside with those two kids—and I waved her off the porch and told her I was going to take a nap and I'd call her later. No actual nap happened, but I was very glad I hadn't had to spend the afternoon listening to Mary Jane explain to Alex why he couldn't ever use mommy's salad bowl as a toilet again. I mean, what?

As I said, no actual nap happened, but I damn near wore a hole in the rug in the nursery, pacing back and forth, back and forth. I tried to read—couldn't focus. I tried to watch TV—it all sounded like noise. I felt thick and heavy and too tight, and everything hurt. Not just my hips, but even my skin hurt at this point. Like I was too much for my body, like everything was wound as tight as a drum. The pressure of being inside my own skin when it didn't have enough room for me anymore was making me crazy. I felt like I was going to burst. Which, I am told, is normal.

And fuck, I missed Simon. He called me every day, two and three times a day—whenever they were close enough to land to have good cell service. They were getting farther and farther down the coast, almost to Patagonia. He told me about

the moon and the stars at night, how bright they were and how close they seemed. How he wished I was there to see them, how much he missed me and his little peanuts and how he couldn't wait to come home.

"I'm getting great shots, and the scenery is—wow, I mean, it's incredible."

"But?" I prompted.

"How do you know there's a but?" he asked.

"I know you. And I know your butts, and I know when one is coming."

"You do know me," he said, and I could hear his smile. "And there is one coming. And it's that it's incredible, but I shouldn't have come."

"We've discussed this, Simon. It's only a few more days."

"It's more days than I should be away from you right now."

"It's okay, Simon," I soothed. "I'll be right here when you get back."

"I just..." His voice dropped low, and so very quiet. "I just miss my girl."

I imagined him lying in a hammock up on deck of this old sailing ship, long and tan body stretched out under the stars, silver light dancing along his skin. Hair messy, scruffy beard that hadn't seen the razor I'd packed for him, the ocean rocking him back and forth to the same beat I was rocking back and forth to in my chair, in our nursery.

"I miss you too," I whispered.



The next day, Jillian came over.

"Nope, you're not taking a nap, and you're not taking a bath, and you're not sending out thank-you cards, and you're not watching Bravo."

“This is your way of helping me?” I asked from my porch as she clicked up my front walkway.

“Shit, girl, you can do all those things, but I’m doing them with you.”

“No, Jillian, its really okay. I’m fine, and I’m just tired and ___”

She was on the porch by then, and she pointed to the front door. “I’m not just your friend, or the godmother to those babies in there. I’m your goddamned boss, and I am telling you, you’re not getting rid of me the way you did Mimi and Sophia.”

“They called you, didn’t they?” I sighed.

“Of course they did. Now I’ve got chicken salad here from the deli down the street, or I’ve got fried chicken from the restaurant down by the marina, or I’ve got chicken noodle soup from my freezer.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, which one?”

“Okay to all,” I said, and I let her swoosh me back inside. I’d eat, and then I could get her to go and get back to pacing.

But she had other plans.

She painted my nails, then my toes, and then insisted on taking me upstairs to the nursery to show me the new nightlights she got.

It took me a thousand years to get up the stairs, but she gave me a little push along the way, and I made it. My hips felt mildly better today, but my back that was *really* killing me. It always hurt these days—that’s just what happened when you lashed three bowling balls to your abdomen—but today it was plain awful. I just wanted to sit in my rocker.

“Isn’t this so beautiful? I know it might seem a little strange for a nursery at first, but I thought, what a wonderful way to add a little touch of magic after dark.” Jillian fussed and putzed, moving this here and that there, always designing, always looking for a new way to make it just so.

I sat and rocked, the tension in my back not easing as it normally did when I finally got off my feet. The room seemed darker. Oh, she'd drawn the shades.

"Okay, that should just about do it...and, voila!" She'd plugged in the lamp, which at first glance just looked like a sphere, but it was actually...what's the word?

"It's the moon! How cool is this?" she exclaimed.

It was indeed the moon, shining softly and glowing from within. "It is very cool, Jillian. Very cool."

"You like it? You don't think it's too weird for a nursery?"

Goddamn, my back hurt. "No, it's not weird. It's cool. Very cool. Very, very cool."

She looked at me. "You okay, kiddo?"

"Sure, why? It's very cool—not weird at all." My head felt like bursting, tiny needles seemed like they were pressing into my eyeballs, and my forehead was beaded with sweat. *Dammit, I haven't had morning sickness in months.* "I haven't had morning sickness in months."

"Do you feel sick, Caroline?" she asked, coming over and kneeling in front of me.

My head was going to split in two, which wasn't the biggest problem. My back was on fire. "My back is on fire," I said, my voice sounding thick. "Can you ask Neil to get me my Saltines? They're in my purse." I tried to focus on her. Where'd she go? This wasn't weird, this was cool, everything was cool. "Everything is cool, not weird at all," I reminded her, and then she came into focus. Jillian was looking down at my lap, in horror. So I looked too.

Blood bloomed through my dress, and all over the rocking chair she'd gotten me for my perfect nursery. That's too bad... It was so pretty. Maybe people will see the lamp, and not this mess. The lamp with the moon.

"Not weird at all," I heard myself say, before someone screamed.

CHAPTER 8

Time is elastic, did you know that? It's liquid. It's free fall. It can be short and stunted and static. It can be long and drawn out and extended beyond a horizon you can't even see but might be able to trick your mind into thinking it sees—just the *hint* of a horizon.

It's a rubber band. It snaps. It lengthens.

Sometimes, when I'm inside her, it's like a spiral. Time stops at the exact same time as it speeds up.

It's elastic.

I look over at Benjamin, driving. I'm riding shotgun from the airport, on the way to the hospital to get my family. He's driving without talking, which I appreciate, but not because he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't need to say anything, because the words don't matter. In this car, in this moment in time, words can't change shit. And I know this, and he knows this, because when I was eighteen years old, we did this exact same thing.

We've literally gone down this road before, just on the opposite end of this country. He called the house, late. I'd come home from soccer practice, and no one was there. Nothing out of the ordinary, though—my parents had dinner at the club at least once a week. Irma had left chicken parm in the fridge, still warm, in fact.

Irma. *Damn*. I haven't thought of our housekeeper in, Jesus, twelve years? Thirteen? But I could taste, could actually taste the crispy chicken, the tangy sauce, and see the gooey mozzarella stretching out from the fork as the knife cut through it. That salty hit of parmesan. Dad loved it too. Mom always told Irma she made too much, but there was never any left over on chicken parm night. I spent my entire childhood with Irma. How is it that I haven't thought of her in years, but

now that I'm on the way to the hospital, not knowing if my wife is alive or not, all I can think about is the sweet, old woman who used to clean our house and drive me to Little League and drink too much eggnog at our holiday party and then dance the tango with Dad up and down the center hallway while Mom laughed and I watched from the landing in my Speed Racer pajamas while I clapped and clapped and clapped.

My wife might be dead. But I'm thinking of chicken parm and a Christmas tango.

It makes sense, actually. When Benjamin called my house, my mouth full of chicken, and told me the news, I nearly choked to death. He pulled up not two minutes later to take me to the hospital and found me retching over the sink, my crammed-in dinner now emptied all over the counter. And my shoes.

I identified my mother with vomit on my shoes.

Benjamin had cleaned me up as quickly as he could, confirmed what I was hoping I'd heard wrong on the phone, and got me into the car and to the hospital—a twenty-minute drive that he made in eleven, and we didn't speak once. Eleven minutes.

Time, it's elastic.

I knew, logically, that he was driving incredibly fast. I knew, logically, that as he tore around corners and whipped through the dark, forested curves of my suburban town, that we were moving fast, so fucking fast. But I could *see* more than I should have. Going that fast, I should never have been able to see the trees, just the forest. But I could describe to you exactly the jagged edge of the pine cones on the church hill where I first went sledding, the first hint of green on the old sycamore on the Stevensons' front lawn on the corner, the way the last of the cold winter winds whipped the tops of the trees behind the old stone inn on Seventh Street, and the way the yellow was just barely coming on the forsythia bushes planted along the emergency bay at Presbyterian Mercy Hospital as we

screached to a halt and I had to get out of the car and walk in and see my mother and father.

Mom had thirty forsythia bushes planted the year I was born along the back edge of our property, so when she was looking out her kitchen window all winter long, when she saw the yellow start to pop out, she'd know spring was finally here. She loved yellow.

Benjamin hadn't talked then, and we weren't talking now. Because Benjamin knew, and still knows, that sometimes there just aren't words. And whether it's speeding up into chaos or slowing down into madness, words just can't compete with time.

It's elastic, you know.

There are moments, man, that are just frozen, that you never have to think about to recall because they're just there, painted across your brain, burned there like a negative, imprinted.

There was banging on my door—like actual banging. Now I *knew* the hands that had made the fists that had beat on my door, banging and beating enough to wake the dead, and I had stumbled towards those bangs and beats, wrapped in hot sheets with the scent of a beautiful, sexy, incredible woman layered all over me, but when I wrenched that door open to stop that maddening banging, and I saw that girl standing there... Damn.

Christ, my heart stopped. It stops now, when I see her—my imprint, my Caroline, wearing that pink nightie—oh God, she was something else. Legs, Jesus those legs—one hip popped out like it does when she's angry, like even her joints are mad at me.

Elastic. Elongated. Seconds were fucking *hours*, man, as I let myself really look at this insane creature outside my door, creating chaos without even knowing she was doing it. I looked at the legs, the hips—I could see them now the same way I did that night, just letting my eyes soak her in, not knowing at the time that it was one of those moments. But something in my brain, on a cellular level somehow, was

aware enough to snap it, capture it, file it away with perfect recall so I could reference it later.

My cells knew before I knew that she was the love of my life.

I looked, and I saw, those hips, those tits—oh my God, those tits.

Who cares that I saw them? *Of course I saw them!* Who cares that I saw those before her face? They were and are glorious. How could I not stare? How have I ever stopped staring? How have I gone days at a time without seeing them? How is that possible? How have I ever let her cover them up?

Am I a pig for thinking of this right now? Am I a pig for racing to my wife, at the most important moment of my life, and thinking of her tits? Damn, am I pig for thinking the word *tits* and not something more reverent?

Please, God, if you're out there and you're actually real, and you decide not to end my world tonight by ending hers, I will devote myself to finding another word for describing my wife's tits. But for tonight, let me just remember what they looked like, peeking out from the lace on that damned pink nightie that covered nothing and showed me everything.

But then her face. Those eyes were flashing fire—I mean, actual fire. I felt myself grin—then and now—I felt myself grin, and my skin hadn't moved since I nodded to Benjamin at the airport.

Those eyes. They put me in check. And they pissed me off, because it was like she knew something I didn't know, or she might know. Did she know that moment was epic? Did she feel it then? Or was she like me—pissed at being interrupted, sure, but also suddenly fascinated? How can someone make you that mad and at the same time make you that *mad*? But she did. From the beginning.

No, not even from the beginning. *Before* the beginning. Those hands on my door, those same hands on my dick months later. Christ, I was a goner.

My front door knew before I did that I was about to meet the love of my life.

I could feel a low-level hum starting to threaten the silence in this car. Fuck, we were still nowhere near the hospital. The hum was me, the hum was a panic that had been squashed down and shoved kicking and screaming into a place I never go, the place I created when I was eighteen and have almost entirely left well enough alone. I needed something to keep me from that place, I needed to see, to feel, to focus on...

Her apple pie.

Christ, she baked for me. She couldn't have known what that did to me. Of course, it tasted great. Of course, I was going to eat anything she gave me. Yes, sugar and butter and flour baked in an oven and given to someone to put in their mouth was always going to be good, and anything *she* baked was especially good. But did she know? Did she know how much it meant? And how epically, insanely, *over the moon and walking for days with my dick hard* sexy she looked when she bent over to roll out that damned dough?

Oh yeah, she knew.

And then she walked around my apartment with my afghan on her head!

A maniacal laugh escapes me, fills up the silent car. Benjamin reaches a hand across the seat and grasps my shoulder. Squeezes.

She walked around with the afghan on her head, refusing to watch that scary movie without some protection. Protection! She stood outside the bathroom door when I had to take a piss because she was so freaked out, and while I was in there, I looked at my face in the mirror, and I was grinning like I've almost never seen, and fuck me, but I was head-over-heels in love with her already.

My mirror knew before I did that the woman in the hallway hiding under an afghan and peeking through the peepholes was the love of my life.

And then later that night, when she made me come over, every light blazing, and she let me into her bed and came into my nook and her hair was somehow softer than I'd thought it would be, and her body was exactly as perfect as I'd known it would be, and her scent—that secret scent that is one-hundred-percent Caroline and *mine*—and in my mind and making me crazy, and she breathed me in like she was understanding this too, and it wasn't just me that was on the edge of something new and... *How can I exist on this planet if she isn't here too?*

People have always judged me for the women in my life, the women in my bed, the way I chose to keep sex as something special but also something that was never a part of my heart. They saw it as calculated, as a way of having my cake and diving in face first to eat it too. And why wouldn't I? It was survival. I loved women. They're beautiful, they're round and soft and tiny or tall and angled and strong and they're every color in a Crayola box, and I craved them.

I loved women, but I could only ever *love* one woman.

And now I think everything I did, everyone I'd been with, was crafted specifically for this one woman to change everything. I was waiting for her. Because she was the one.

And she was the one who didn't judge me. She understood, somehow, that I always cared for the women I chose to share my bed with, that I set up my life and my sex life in a very calculated but very careful way. How could I possibly do anything else?

I could never, ever, ever let someone inside. Did that make me a dick? Did the act of pure self preservation make me selfish? Was it selfish to make sure you took care of your own heart first? To make sure you never allowed someone to break it? Should I have spent more time searching for love instead of travel, adventure, and incredible sex with incredible women all over the world?

Fuck that. Fuck. That. I did what I did, and I said what I said, and I was careful to never get involved with women I didn't think could handle my shit. My scared-to-death, petrified, clear-as-day-to-anyone-who-cared-to-notice shit.

When you love, you lose. So you better fucking make sure when you love, it's the love of your life.

I waited for her, not even knowing I was doing it. I cleared a path straight to my heart without even knowing I had done it. I made sure when a girl got there, it was *the* girl, *the* woman, *the one* that I was put on this earth to covet.

And she was batshit crazy too. And she was funny, and an asshole, and kind, and she took up way too much of the bed, but who fucking cares because I get to share a bed with imperfect perfection.

I made love to her in Spain. It is impossible to describe how she has ruined me for any other woman—for this life and any other lifetime, if that's what happens to us after we die. Which I'm now forced to consider.

No.

Focus. Breathe.

Sliding into her body for the first time is burned across my brain, and that's where I am staying. Time. It's elastic. It took an eon to push into her, and it still wasn't enough. To feel her, feel her wrapped around me in the most epic way, to feel her under me and around me, and she was so fucking warm, and I could feel her heart, where it was supposed to be with my skin pressed against her glorious tits, but also to feel her pulse beating *everywhere*...it nearly drove me mad.

Does she know? Does she know that I knew right away she'd faked it because I could feel her heart beating and it was telling me something different than her hips?

I made love to her in Spain. But then she fucked me in San Francisco, on her floor, on her terms, covered in raisins and ridiculous, and how lucky am I that she came, and she came all over me, and she found her fucking orgasm. And I had the privilege of being inside her when it happened. And then she let me fuck her again and again and again, and that's when I knew again that time was just a goddamned rubber band, and it would never be enough with her.

We'd chase it together, and we'd chase it separately, and sometimes she'd chase it and let me watch, and fuck me, it's just too much sometimes.

How can I possibly contain how I feel about her when I am still awed by how deep it goes?

How can I revere something and hold someone so dear and feel tiny next to how enormous something like this love for her is, and then in the next moment want to throw her fucking thighs over my shoulders and make her shake and shimmy all over my mouth and feel like a giant because I get to be the one that does it, and it's only me and I can see in her eyes when my girl is close, and I can taste on my tongue when her heart beats all over me that she's close, and *I get to be the only one who gets her this way.*

And I don't deserve her, but good godammit, no one else does either, so *I am the one.* And *she is the one.*

And now I'm in a car, racing to beat time to get there before her heart maybe stops. Or has already stopped. Because she was carrying my family inside her, where everything lives for me, *because for some reason, she wouldn't, couldn't stop bleeding.* Which is crazy, because my girl is so strong, so fucking strong, so how could anything be too much for her?

The babies? They're okay. They're fine. Perfect, apparently. Perfect, according to Jillian who told Benjamin who then had to be the guy who not only told me my parents were dead, but now also had to be the one to tell me my wife is...maybe...possibly...dying?

The fuck is that? The fuck? Why in the world would someone have to be in that position once, and now twice?

The fuck?

That hum is back, and I realize again it's me. The panic is not just running like a current under my skin, but it's manifesting in a terrible high, keening sound.

"I can't do this again," I say. But it doesn't sound like me.

Christ, but it *does* sound like me, or what any man faced with losing everything might sound like.

Benjamin's hand grips tighter on my shoulder as we close in on the hospital. It's within a mile now. And during that mile I think of things that always are there, the little things, the things that fill in the gaps and blunt the edges and make it so fucking strong, the things that made *us*.

Her zucchini bread.

The way she holds my hand tighter when her high heels start to hurt.

The way she looks at me when I play her Glenn Miller.

The way I get to fuck her when I play her Glenn Miller.

Her skin that day in Ha Long Bay, when she pulled herself back into the boat, drenched in seawater and tanned the color of caramel.

Her left hand wearing my ring.

Her left hand on my dick wearing my ring. Jesus.

Her eyes when she married me the first time.

Her tears when she married me a second time.

The way she dusts her cookbooks, especially certain ones, as though they were ancient, priceless texts.

Listening to her argue with Clive about whether or not he is legally entitled to crab cakes because we live in a harbor town, which is highly debatable.

I laugh again out loud and realize my eyes are wet. Shit, so are my cheeks.

We're half a mile away.

How she pored over the photo album Mrs. White gave her, listening to my old neighbor tell her stories about my parents, because the most important person in my life has never met the other most important people in my life.

How she let me ravage her after my high school reunion, when her body and allowing me to be in control of it was the only thing that kept me grounded and stopped me from

coming apart at the seams. Instead, I came inside her so hard I roared.

How she made a house I bought for her a home for *us*.

How fucking talented she is, and how dedicated she is to her career, and how she would never even think about sacrificing something of hers for me, because that's how my girl rolls.

When she lets me push into her from behind, late at night, when the fog is thick across the bay and our room is so dark and the only way I know we're both even still in this world are her soft little cries as we rock slow and deep.

I know what the fear on my face must look like, because I saw it on hers when she came to me in a hospital in Saigon, broken and crushed. But when she saw the shots I got, she was still proud of me, proud of my work.

I know three beers make her funny but four beers make her sloppy and five beers means all she's going to want to do later is ride my dick until she's screaming, but six beers means she's going to pass out before either of us finish.

I also know she can drink five dirty martinis and somehow still be sober enough to dress up in her pink-lace, baby-doll nightie and tell me exactly how she wants me to get her off with my mouth and my fingers, which find that secret spot that makes her eyes cross but her legs fall wide.

I know she didn't know if she wanted kids, but once she realized it might not be an option for her, she was so in love with the idea of being a mother.

I know she is sure I'll be a good dad. And that means more than she will ever know.

I know she's fighting, and she'd never stop fighting because of those babies.

Caroline is the love of my life.

We're here, at the hospital. I'm out before the car even stops, and I jump over a planter, but my heel catches it and I'm

sprawling across the concrete and I hear my jeans shred at the knee and my skin is burning, and where the fuck is she?

And then I see Jillian, and she's pointing down the hall, and it looks familiar because it's the part of the hospital we've been coming to for her doctor visits, and there is pink and blue shit everywhere, and where the fuck is she? And then I'm still running. and I hear someone yelling *room two seventeen*, and if she's in a room and they didn't direct me downstairs then that means...then that means...

Time is elastic, did you know that?

I am underwater. Everything is foggy and hazy, and I can't hear much over the ringing in my ears, but there is a doctor, and she is telling me things like *hemorrhaging* and *couldn't stop bleeding* and *transfusions* and *babies* and all the things you hear in the middle of a medical procedural show that's on at 9pm with sappy music, and you know some poor guy is about to get the best or the worst news of his life.

Somewhere, between looking down at Caroline and seeing her chest rise and fall, I hear words like *okay* and *monitoring her vitals* and *wake up soon*, and I collapse into a chair, and I can't take my eyes off my wife, off my world.

I look at her; I can't stop. She's so fucking beautiful. She's pale, so pale, but she's incredible. And I'm holding her hand. I can't stop touching her. She smells like medicine and something sterile, but underneath that, she's mine.

And then Benjamin is here, and Jillian, and I hear something that makes me actually want to turn my head to see...

Oh.

Babies.

Benjamin, he's holding one, and Jillian, she's holding two, and they're all so fucking tiny. How can anything that tiny be here and be real, and oh my God, they're all three wearing little...blue...hats.

Dad always said real men cry.

I'm so real.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Love of my life.

CHAPTER 9

Colors, soft and muted, barely there. For so long, it just seemed the blackest black—no light, nothing penetrating. Warm and weighted, I couldn't move. But the colors were changing, just the barest hint of gray, maybe a little blue. Blue!

I focused on the blue, I concentrated on the blue. It was getting stronger. Oh, I knew that blue. I was in love with that blue. I made babies with that blue.

Babies!

I pushed toward the blue, the rest of the colors becoming stronger now. Orange and yellow, bright bright red—oh, and there was that blue. I struggled to open my mouth, to shout the name I needed.

“Simon!” I yelled, but what I heard was the faintest of whispers. Darkness seemed to be seeping in again, but I concentrated on the blue, and slowly but surely, the colors all came back and shapes began to form. “Simon,” I said again, and this time it sounded like me.

And there were my sapphires, perfect little worried sapphires close to me, and his hands were on my face, and his lips were on mine.

“Oh my God, Caroline, you sweet, sweet girl.”

“Simon, what happened? Are the babies okay? Are they —”

“Shhh, babe, they're okay. They're spectacular, actually. It was you we were worried about.”

“But they're so little. They're so early. They're—”

“They're perfect. They're very tiny, but they're in great shape, all things being equal. And you, you did so good.”

“What happened?”

His face went through a thousand emotions. Grief, rage, terror, sheer panic, resolution, and finally, joy. I'm sure there were words, so many words, and so much detail I'd eventually find out about, but for now he merely said, "It was bad. And then it wasn't. And you figured out we were all waiting here for you."

"Oh my God, we had a family while I was out of it."

He laughed. "We sure did. Wanna go meet them?"

"What did we have? Oh my God, you *know* and I *don't* know. How is that possible!"

He laughed again. "I'll let it be a surprise."

It took a while before I was able to get up to the NICU. After having an emergency cesarean, it turns out getting out of bed is a real bitch. I passed out trying. So much pain.

I'd always known women went through hell for their children, but this was pain like I had never imagined. I wanted desperately to see those babies. How could they be in the world and I hadn't met them yet? How weird was that?

And how worried Simon must have been. He couldn't stop touching me, and I got it. That's how I'd been when he was in the hospital after his accident in Vietnam. I don't have to imagine the panic he must have felt. I'd actually lived inside that headspace too.

I squeezed his hand, and I heard him make a noise—a strangled, back-of-the-throat kind of thing. But then it was gone as the doors opened and the orderly wheeled me into the elevator.

"You scared me to death," he said as soon as the doors closed.

I flinched, the pain in his voice was so great. The nurse and the doctor exchanged looks, then wisely stared straight ahead.

I didn't respond. He knew I had no control over what had happened. I also knew whatever he needed to say, he needed to

say, without my commentary. The fact that he was saying it front of strangers meant he needed urgently to get it out.

“You can’t ever, ever leave me like that again.” He leaned down, staring into my eyes as he held my hand in both of his, almost to the point of pain. “You’re about to meet three little peanuts that are the most wonderful peanuts ever put on this planet. But you. Are. Everything. To me.”

I nodded. I swept his hair back from his face with the one hand I was allowed.

“Never again,” I whispered, and it seemed to me that something changed in Simon in that second, something probably only I would ever be able to see.

Oh, he just...relaxed. And the grin that spread across his face could have been seen from space.

He was a man, and a husband, and a father, and he was so, so happy.

EPILOGUE

Turns out, three was really, really, really hard. But I wouldn't have changed it for the world. It was really hard, but it was really fun too. We had our own little team, the five us. Plus, since Clive had brought home his harem a few years ago and moved the kitty count up to four, in actuality, we were our own little baseball team.

And we could have been, because when word got out that we'd had three healthy, beautiful, wonderful, but still tiny babies, *boy* babies, Neil and Ryan went out and bought every kind of sports equipment in the Bay Area. Each boy had mitts and baseballs and bats, not to mention pucks and soccer balls and oh my God, I didn't even know they made cleats that were barely bigger than a Ritz cracker. But they did, and our sons would wear them proudly.

Our sons. It didn't even register sometimes. Simon loved to hum the theme song to that old show, *My Three Sons*. Mimi did him one better and had a print made of the graphic, and we hung it on the outside of the nursery door. Jillian approved. She made one addition to her design on the inside of the room though, once the babies were finally here and we'd settled on names. Now each bassinet had a little sign over it with the boys' names.

Dorsey. Shaw. Miller.

One night, maybe two weeks or so after we'd come home from the hospital, after all of our well-meaning and usually much-needed helpers had gone home for the night and it was just me and mine, I was in the nursery. Shaw and Dorsey were sleeping, finally, but Miller was a little fussy, so we rocked. I was nursing, but we usually did bottles as well. It was such a special time, so quiet and peaceful, and I didn't want Simon to miss out on feeding just because I had the boobs. So I pumped,

and when the boys woke up in the middle of the night, we both went in.

I knew Simon was there before he said anything.

“Hey,” he whispered, coming around and kneeling in front of us.

“Hey,” I answered, my eyes flickering from the blue of my son’s eyes, to the blue of my husband’s eyes. Sapphires, they were all sapphires. I knew they might change one day, but for now, I was bathing in blue and loving it immensely.

“Tired?”

“Am I breathing?” I asked, but smiled as I said it. I *was* tired, but I also felt a contentment I hadn’t even known was attainable. Everything and everyone was exactly where it was supposed to be. And Simon, there before me, in the moonlight, pressed the tiniest of kisses to Miller’s sweet head. It was just all so good. Better than I could have imagined.

Simon’s hand tangled with mine, and he pressed another kiss on the inside of my palm. I heard him say, so faintly, “Loves of my life.”



I had so many to take care of now, so many in my charge. The responsibilities, the worry, and the care that went into my day now, would they ever know? Would I ever be appreciated, in my own time?

The answer to that was *no*, of course not. My skills, my dedication, my all-encompassing duty to everyone that fell under my purview wouldn’t allow me to sit idly and simply bathe when there was a perimeter to walk.

And walk it I did. I made sure my ladies were tucked in well and good, and further made sure the spot just under my right shoulder, which seemed to ache more deeply these days, especially on days when it rained, was thoroughly and completely cleaned. My ladies kept me groomed—as well they should, given that I had saved them from a life of crime and

grime on the mean streets of Sossa Leeto. They would never, ever know the lengths I had gone to, liberating these three from the clutches of the Whiskey Sours, the toughest street gang in this grizzled old harbor town. They'd been dancing for tuna cans outside a restaurant, made to dance then bring it home for the members of the gang. Oh, it just hurt my ears to think of my ladies dancing for anyone.

Except for me. But that's a tail for another day.

I climbed the stairs after tucking them in, batting away something called a bin key and taking a moment to do a test curl in something called a bawp pee before making my way into the room of The Feeder and The Tall One.

They never slept through the night anymore, although truth be told, they'd always engaged in many midnight activities I would never speak about. I'd never betray their confidence. But now they were up for an entirely different reason.

Offspring. I'd heard tell over the years about something curious that could happen in a home. Tinier, louder, impossible-to-satisfy versions of the big ones would invade a home and take it over almost in an instant. Timelines were thrown off. They had napping schedules that somehow preempted mine—mine? They talked differently too. No discernable words like *toona* or *cheeken*, just crying, crying, crying, all the time crying.

And they made a mess. See the previous note about the bin key. And they took hours away from my need for back scratches.

Still, and I wouldn't admit this anywhere else but here, they were growing on me. Maybe. Possibly.

I padded into the room they seemed to be in the most, and I found The Tall One and The Feeder both in there as well. They seemed to gravitate here now. Didn't they miss the enormous bed I allowed them to share with me?

The Tall One was asleep, in his own rocker, with one of the tiny ones.

The Feeder was awake, but barely, rocking another tiny one.

I heard a cry coming from one of the comfortable raised beds, and without thinking about it ahead of time, I took off in flight, landing lightly exactly where I meant to, just three inches from the wee one's starboard bow.

I examined the situation. The tiny one had a red, screwed-up face, and his legs were kicking. I looked over my bum shoulder at The Feeder. She was trying to get up, knowing as I knew that we were only a few seconds away from a full-on scream.

I nodded at her, instructing her to stay where she was. *I got this.*

I nestled down, careful to not get too close, to offer some warmth to the tiny one. He turned his face just enough to see me, and I poured every ounce of wisdom I had into my beautiful eyes.

“Shush.” I said. I've been told to their ears, it sounded like *myrrow*. Tomato, tomahto.

It worked. He quieted down. I looked back over at The Feeder, and she smiled at me.

They're so simple, I thought, settling in for a long nap. Q-tips would have to hunt themselves tonight. The leaky faucet in the bathroom would have to drip alone.

The house would have to run itself. I was babysitting.

I'd make sure everything would always be okay.

The End

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I went on hiatus. I could tell you that my dog ate my book, or I suddenly forgot how to type, or Mr. Alice kept me too busy, ahem, for 4 years, but the truth is, I went on hiatus. 2015 brought me everything I could have ever wanted, a new home, the wedding of all weddings, the Bernese Mountain dog I have been dreaming of since I was nineteen, but by the time 2016 rolled around...I was running on fumes. And 2016 just shut me the hell down. I couldn't write, I couldn't laugh, I couldn't turn off the news, I was being eaten alive by my couch, Mountain Dew, and hoagies from Jersey Mike's. (That's a total plug btw, they're amazing, you want the #13 and get it Mike's way, but if you want it Alice's way then tell them no onions but add pickles please).

I digress. I circled the laptop for months, then a year, then year plus an S, and then good night nurse, the time was piling up. I had, and still have, new books and worlds and people and funny crazy sexy times outlined and zinging around in my brain, but the brain wasn't talking to the fingers and someone had removed all the keys from my keyboard (not true) and I couldn't find a chair (also not true) and yeah....stalling.

I couldn't write. And then I began to think about Simon and Caroline. And what they might be up to. And I talked to my agent, the ridiculously patient and waiting for sainthood Christina Hogrebe, and she suggested that perhaps a way for me to get off the bench (if I could find a chair and the keys on my keyboard) was to write some people I knew, and loved, and maybe do a novella only. And just maybe dip my toe back in the tiniest of ways,

I found a chair. I found my keys. And I wrote for one week solid during the lockdown this past March and here you go, One More Round.

This would not be here if it wasn't for Hoglebe. And I wouldn't be writing again, and working on something new for you as we speak, if it wasn't for Hoglebe. Because we all need someone to believe in us, especially when we don't believe in ourselves.

So thank you, Hoglebe. And thank you, readers who never say die. We're like the Goonies, you and I, sweet, sweet reader. And we're not going to end up like Chester Copperpot.

So stay tuned. And stay safe. And laugh and love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times bestselling author Alice Clayton worked in the cosmetics industry for over a decade before picking up a pen (read: laptop).

She enjoys gardening but not weeding, baking but not cleaning up, giant fluffy dogs and seriously wicked cats. She is addicted to Bloody Marys, pickles, and Mr. Alice, who finally made her an honest woman. Please enjoy the ridiculous.



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