Diary of a Mad Fat Girl

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All of my bags are packed and I’m ready to go. If I had some white shoe polish, I’d do it like we did it in the 80’s and scribble “Panama City Beach or BUST” on my back windshield.

Spring Break is finally here and for the next week, I’m a free woman. No students to teach, no projects to grade, no paintbrushes to wash, and, best of all, no bitchy Catherine Hilliard riding my ass like a fat lady on a Rascal.

I’m sick of her and I’m tired of my job and I need a vacation worse than Nancy Grace needs a chill pill. I wish we were leaving tonight. I squeeze a lime into my beer and head out the back door with Señor Buster Loo Bluefeather hot on my heels. While Buster Loo does speedy-dog crazy eights around my flower beds, I flip on the multi-colored Christmas lights, settle into my overstuffed lounger, and start daydreaming about white sandy beaches, piña coladas, and hot men in their 20’s.

My phone dings and in the two seconds it takes me to look at the caller ID, I wish a thousand times it would be a text from Mason McKenzie.

I wouldn’t give Mason McKenzie the time of day and he knows I wouldn’t give him the time of day so it’s ridiculous for me to wish that he would text me, but I still do. Every day.

Of course, it’s not a text from him, it’s from my best bud Lilly Lane.

Call me. I will never understand the logic of sending a text message that says call me. Lilly Lane is one of those cellular addicts who could carry on a full-fledged, six hour conversation via text message. Sometimes her messages are so encrypted with abbreviations that I just pick up the phone and call her and that pisses her off. She’s like, “I’m texting you, why are you calling me? If I wanted to talk then I would’ve texted you and told you to call me.”

Oh, so I’m the idiot? Right.

Then I’ll say something like, “Hey heifer, save it for someone who cares and tell me what the hell that last message was supposed to mean. I’m not Robert Langdon. I can’t decode symbols and if you don’t want me to call you, then send me some crap I can read.”

But I can read this, so I call her.

“Ace,” she says and sounds like she’s been running, but she’s not a runner, “I’m not gonna be able to go to Florida.”

“What are you talking about?” I’m confused because we have gone to Panama City Beach every Spring Break since we were freshman in high school.

“I can’t go,” she pauses, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I yell into the phone. “Are you freakin’ kidding me right now? We’re supposed to leave in the morning, Lilly! Like nine hours from right now! What the hell do you mean you can’t go?”
Silence. And in the silence, it dawns on me.

For the past five months, Lilly Lane has been seeing someone on the sly that she will only call the Gentleman and she’s more tightlipped about him than she was about that time she got a hot dog stuck in her cooter. I think he might be a gross old man with tons of money and I thought about making a list of all the gross old men with money around here and doing some investigating, but I’m not much of a list maker so I probably won’t do that.

Lilly, however, is a habitual list maker and I don’t mean the kind you take to the grocery store. She can on a date with some dude and by the time they get to wherever they’re going, she’s got a list a mile long of everything she thinks is wrong with him.

I know this because she keeps me updated with a continuous stream of text messages. Not because I ask for them. I don’t. She just takes it upon herself to keep me posted.

After the date is over, she documents the potential suitor’s fault list on a piece or twelve of loose leaf paper which, upon completion, she files in an alphabetized four inch binder. I mean, God forbid she forget one small thing about a guy nice enough to take her goofy ass out to dinner and a movie.

Some poor fellows hang around long enough to have their list read to them and the truly unfortunate get shown the actual notebook. Imagine a man looking at a hot pink polka-dot binder stuffed with twenty years worth of documentation on Mr. Wrong.

The Gentleman, however, does not have a list. As far as I can tell, he only has an itinerary. Since the commencement of her super secret affair, Lilly has been to New York City, Los Angeles, Steamboat Springs, Key West, and on a cruise to the Cayman Islands. In the past five months. Five months. And she returns from these escapades with truck loads of fancy shopping bags stuffed with extravagant gifts.

I guess she may have finally found her Mr. Right, although I have serious doubts about how right a man can be that requires such secrecy concerning his identity.

Further adding to the mystery of this surreptitious affair is that new BMW convertible she started driving about two months ago. I mean, she has some serious cash stacked up from her days as a lingerie model, but I don’t think she’d blow every last dime of it on an automobile. Maybe the Gentleman is a rich man in a mid life crisis. The car is red.

Whoever he is, I hate his guts because I’m pretty sure he’s the reason my vacation plans are now in ruins.

“Oh,” I say, “I get it. The Gentleman got bigger plans for you, Lilly? A little trip down to the Redneck Rivera doesn’t quite measure up to your new travel standards? I can’t buy you six pair of Manolos and three Gucci purses so I’m out now?”

“Ace, please don’t do this to me. Just get someone else to go.”

“Don’t do this to you?” I yell and feel my face getting hot. “How about you don’t do this to me? And who the hell am I gonna get to go that can pack up and be ready on such short notice? I’m the only person I know who is that spontaneous.”

“You could ask Chloe,” she peeps.

“Oh yeah, that’s a great idea, Lil, why didn’t I think of that? Hey, do you think her husband will beat the hell out of her before we leave or when we get back? Or if she’s really lucky, maybe both?”

Our friend Chloe is married to Richard Stacks the Fourth, a prominent Bugtussle, Mississippi, citizen who abuses her physically and emotionally, but she won’t leave him and she won’t let me kill him. I’ve offered to do so on several occasions and even came up with some good places to hide the body, but she is determined to make her marriage work because she thinks he can change. I think the only thing that can change a man like that is a bullet to the skull. Just like that Dixie Chicks song about Earl.

Silence on the line.

“Well,” I say.

“Well, she says, “I think you should go down there and patch things up with Mason. You could drive over to Destin and have lunch or something and maybe y’all could work things out, once and for all. Ethan told me the other day that he isn’t seeing anybody and, honestly Ace, I think he’s just waiting on you to come back”

“Is that what you think?” I ask, heavy on the sarcasm. “You think I should revisit the single most disastrous moment of my life? How could you even bring that up right now? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Well, it’s how I feel and Ethan and Chloe feel the same way, but they don’t bring it up because they know you’ll go ape shit crazy. Everybody knows that you two are meant to be together,” she pauses a beat, “everybody, it seems, except you.”

“Just stop right there,” I say and my face is on fire, “you have got to be out of your damn mind. I mean, first you text me and tell me to call you, which is stupid as shit by the way; then you tell me you’re ditching our trip, a trip we take every year and you know how much I look forward to it; then you suggest I take along our poor little friend who can’t go to the grocery story without being interrogated, and after all of that, all of that, you have the
balls to start babbling about how I need to patch things up with Mason. Seriously, Lilly? Are you for real right now?

Silence.

“Are you serious?” I try to sound calm. “You’re gonna ditch me the night before we leave? Really?”

“I’m sorry. It’s not what you think. I have to be somewhere.”

“You have to be somewhere?” The sarcasm oozes like lava. “Where exactly do you have to be, Lilly?”

“Paris.” She sounds like a baby frog trying to find its first croak.

“Really, I thought you quit modeling.”

“You know I’m not modeling.”

“Spring Break in Paris,” I say with the sarcasm full throttle, “well don’t that just take the cake? I’m so happy for you and your Gentleman friend. Or should I say your Gentleman financier.” I put a little French twist on the last syllable. For effect.

“You are so cruel,” she whispers.

“Oh yeah, I’m definitely the bitch in this relationship.” I could bend an iron skillet at this point. “Who is it, Lilly?” I ask. “Who is this Gentleman whose plans for you are so much more important than the plans you made with me?”

“You know I can’t tell you who he is.”

“Why not? I really wanna know.”

“Ace, stop, please. I can’t.”

“Right. Of course you can’t. I mean, why would you? It’s not like you can trust me. It’s not like we’re friends, right?”

“Ace,” she says and I can tell she’s about to start her stupid squalling like she always does.

“Okay, well. Hey! Thanks for waiting until Friday afternoon to let me know. Have a great trip and I’ll talk to you later,” I pause, “or maybe not.”

She starts mumbling a string of apologies and I push the red button on my phone with enough pressure to drive a nail through wood. Sorry means as much to me as that dog turd Buster Loo just dropped in that dwarf yaupon holly.

All I can see when I open my eyes is a wet, black nose and dog whiskers because Buster Loo is standing on my pillow resting his snout on my face. I pat him on the head and reach for my cell phone while the sun pours through the blinds like a giant laser designed to obliterate my eyeballs.

Lilly and I should be well on our way to the Emerald Coast by now. I think for a second about throwing my bags in the car and setting out on a solo run to Panama City Beach, but how pathetic would that be? What kind of idiot goes to Florida alone during Spring Break? I think for one miserable second about how nice it would be to hang out with Mason McKenzie, but I wouldn’t try to get in touch with him if my life depended on it. He’s probably got a lap full of college girls right now and its only 11:30 in the morning.

I get out of bed and make my way to the kitchen where I take four ibuprofen and fix myself a lemon-lime soda on the rocks. With six cherries. I grab some saltines, wobble into the living room, and ease down on the sofa. Buster Loo appears from what he thinks is his secret hiding place behind the love seat and curls up in the bend of my legs.

I flip the television on just in time to catch a commercial for the gym that docks my checking account $40 a month and that makes me feel worse than I already do.

What the hell was I thinking when I gave a voided check to that Ken doll looking man with no hair on his arms? Was I thinking that I’d pack up and go to the gym five times a week and love every minute of it? Was I thinking I’d lose sixty pounds and be able to wear those Lucky jeans I haven’t been able to squeeze my ass into for three years? I don’t know what I was thinking and I’m not in the mood to try and remember.

I don’t want to think about the damned gym. I don’t want to think about Lilly sitting pretty in her first class seat en route to the Charles de Gaulle. I don’t want to think about all the beer I drank last night. I don’t want to think about the beach or ocean or all the raw oysters I had planned to eat this week. And I don’t need to think about Mason McKenzie.

The only problem is that I like thinking about Mason McKenzie and I can’t help it. It’s one of many bad habits that I have no desire to break.

I met J. Mason McKenzie at the First Methodist Church shortly after my family moved to Bugtussle when I was eleven years old. My parents made me go to a youth fellowship meeting on a Sunday afternoon and that’s where we spoke for the first time. Our short conversation was stilted and awkward, but it was one of the happiest moments of my life and I remember it like it was yesterday.
My mom had dropped me off at church thirty minutes early because she always got everywhere thirty minutes early. I distinctly remember sitting in the far corner of that rectangular room in a cold metal folding chair all alone and completely terrified. The youth leader wasn’t even there yet.

After fifteen minutes of pure agony, other kids finally started showing up and I stared at the floor because I was embarrassed for being there so early. I could sense the room was filling up, but the chair beside mine remained unoccupied. I was entertaining the thought of bolting to the bathroom where I could hide until the evening services when Mason McKenzie made his dramatic entrance.

I looked up when I heard his voice and the moment I saw him, I fell madly and deeply in love. My young heart was beating like a jungle drum as I watched him survey the room, looking for a place to sit.

All the angels in heaven started to sing when he choose the seat next to mine.

I started staring at the floor again because I felt like I might die if I didn’t and he tapped me on the arm and said, “Hey! Who are you? I’m Mason.”

I could barely utter my own name.

We became good friends and then best friends and I fell more in love with him every day. In high school, we hooked up a few times in between his steady girlfriends and the losers I ran around with, then we married and divorced other people and lost touch for a few years.

I ran into him again one chilly Saturday afternoon at an Ole Miss football game and he begged me to move to Florida and marry him and I quickly agreed. We were both thoroughly intoxicated at the time, but seven months later, I moved into his three story house two blocks from the ocean in Destin, Florida.

I was so happy I couldn’t stand myself. I laughed more in the six weeks I spent with him than I had my whole life up until then. We walked on the beach and drank beer out of plastic wine glasses. We told each other our wildest dreams and darkest fears. We shopped at the local farmers’ markets and ate boiled shrimp and raw oysters whenever we liked. He bought me a sweet little chiweenie puppy and it took us two weeks to come up with the name Señor Buster Loo Bluefeather. I went to bed every night with the man of my dreams and woke up every morning to the smell of salt water and gourmet coffee.

Shortly after I moved back to Bugtussle, Lilly told me he had a ring in his pocket the night I left. Then Ethan let it slip that he had purchased a building on Back Beach Road and was going to give it to me for my birthday. Ethan asked me what I would’ve done with the building and I couldn’t bring myself to tell him about my dream of owning an art studio.

I take a long, slow sip of the lemon-lime tonic, flip off the television, and snuggle down into the couch with Buster Loo. He moans like a dying cow as I hug him up next to me and close my eyes.

I skip church Sunday because I don’t feel like answering ten thousand questions about why I’m still in Bugtussle, Mississippi, when I’m supposed to be at the beach in Florida and everyone will be asking where Lilly is and I don’t feel like lying to church people on the Lord’s day.

So I decide to spend the morning at the gym instead. I pull into the parking lot hoping against hope that a good endorphin rush might lift my spirits or, at the very least, make me feel better about those monthly payments. As soon as I’m in the front door, I pick up on something peculiar that somehow escaped my notice during my two previous visits to this voluntary torture chamber.

I am, without a doubt, the fattest girl in this place.

I look around to see if anyone else notices that I’m the only person in the building who has to shop in the big and not so tall department, but no one seems to be paying attention. So I try to forget about it.

But I can’t forget about it.

I am keenly aware of my fatness as I feign invisibility on a walk of shame past a never ending line of big fancy treadmills with micro LCD screens and more USB ports that my home computer.

“Who needs all that crap?” I mumble under my breath. “It’s a freakin’ treadmill, not a Boeing 747.”

Even if I had sense enough to work one of those monsters, I wouldn’t step foot on the thing if my life depended on it. I would literally die before I hopped up there with that Bratz pack of little jogger ladies with their shiny, straight pony tails and their tight little gym shorts stretched over their tight little rumps.

I make my way back to the old clunker treadmills and it only takes a second for me to spot the one I’m looking for. It’s parked between two dusty machines with “out of order” signs taped to the monitors. No Bratz dolls piling up next to me. Ha. Those little fitness freaks wouldn’t dream of abandoning their front and center Boeing 747 treadmills and I don’t give a rat’s ass anyway because I happen to prefer the guaranteed privacy.

I don’t need some hairy-ass bald man coming up, sweating all over the place, trying to talk to me about the economy or the weather or some stupid crap like that. I mean, how does a man loose every spring of hair on his head, but look like a wooly mammoth from the ears down? How does that happen? I honestly feel sorry for those
dudes, just not sorry enough to listen to their slobbering opinions regarding the state of affairs in the world today.

I push the start button and tell myself not to look down at the timer, but I do. I look down at it every three or four seconds. I try to stop, but dammit! I can’t. It makes me dizzy staring at that stupid monitor, but the only other place to rest my eyes is on that floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall mirror, and goodness knows I don’t want to feast my eyes that. Mirrors that size are not natural or normal and they insult my intelligence because they cannot reveal to me a single thing about me that I don’t already know.

I know my pie-shaped face is red as a beet and my frizzy hair is soaking wet with sweat after ten minutes of warm up. Talk about a gorilla in the midst. Ha. I know my black yoga pants are spotted with bleach specks from the knees down, but it’s the only pair I have that aren’t worn out in the thighs. I know my socks don’t match each other or my faded Lane Bryant tee shirt and I didn’t think much of it until I realized that every female in this place is dressed like an Under Armor mannequin at sporting good store.

What the hell am I doing here?
And why doesn’t this gym have a separate area for fat girls? Girls who need to lose a little more than that last five pounds.

That last five pounds. Is that supposed to be some kind of a joke? If I got that close to my ideal weight, I’d throw myself a three-keg pizza party. And that’s why I’ll never have to worry about that last five pounds because I’ll always be battling that first thirty. Or forty.

At any rate, these gym owners need to take a hint from department stores and designate a plus size or a women’s area. We need a place of our own so we don’t offend the Under Armor wearing Bratz packs of the workout world with our fatassness. I take a moment to fantasize about stretching out on the floor without anyone thinking I look like the Michelin Man on a Twister mat. Or doing sit-ups without worrying about a roll of fat slipping out somewhere and being mistaken for a renegade boob.

I think I’ll send an email to the gym manager and suggest he designate a separate room for big girls and while I’m at it, I’ll tell him to take down those billboard-sized mirrors and put up some posters of Justin Timberlake and Marky Mark. Then all the chubby girls could have their very own private room in the gym and maybe I wouldn’t be the only one here.

A Fat Girls Only Work-Out Room.

Throw in a big screen TV and every season of the Biggest Loser and we’re talking about fitness center perfection. Who knows, if I could exercise with other big girls while watching Bob and Jillian work their sadistic magic, I might come to the gym more than once a month. I might turn my flabby body into a Bratz doll, go buy a flat iron, and take a class on how to work those big fancy treadmills.

Hell no I won’t.

My left knee hurts and my hands are numb and I’ve only been on this bastard for 31 minutes and 42 seconds. I’m going home. And I’m not leaving for the rest of the week.

Monday morning arrives too soon and it’s back to school.

Another day, another dollar, another anti-depressant.

I get there fifteen minutes late and wish it would’ve been thirty. Coach Logan Hatter is standing in his usual spot between our classrooms with a smug look on his face.

Coach Hatter has been on several of our Spring Break trips. Once as my boyfriend, once as Lilly’s, and the rest of the time just for fun. He said “I do” a few weeks before I married my first husband and his divorce was final a few days after I said “I don’t” to my second.

“Still hung-over?” he asks, smiling. “You didn’t get much of a tan. Don’t tell me you’ve started using sunscreen.”

“Not hardly, Hatt,” I mumble, “we didn’t go.”

“What? Didn’t go? What are you talking about?”

“Lilly couldn’t make it, so I stayed home and cleaned out my closets.”

That got a laugh out of him. “Cleaned out your closets? Why didn’t you call me?” And there is a shining example of why guy friends are easier to get along with than girl friends. They don’t want a bunch of details; they just want a little action if they can get it.

“You had baseball games, Coach Hatter, remember?”

“Yeah, but I like knowing I could’ve gone,” he grins and his navy blue eyes sparkle. “Good times, Ace, good times.”

“Are you about to slap me on the ass?” He looks guilty. “Please don’t because here comes the Lard Lady.”

I’d rather be shot in the face than to listen to anything Principal Catherine Hilliard has to say to me this morning.
“Miss Jones, I’d like to see you in my office during your planning period this afternoon,” she hisses through crusty, chapped lips, “and try to be on time if it wouldn’t misput you too much.”

“I’ll check my planner and see what I can do, Mrs. Hilliard,” I retort with all the smartassness I can muster up.

“Your plan,” she says and snorts like a pig, “is to be in my office at 1:35, sharp.”

Coach Hatter fidgets with his keys and looks like he’s squeezing back a surge of diarrhea.

“I’ll see what I can do, Cathy.” I swear if I had a gun I would stop talking about it and shoot myself. Or her.

“What’s this concerning?”

“A private matter. I’m sure you don’t want to discuss it here.”

“I don’t mind at all discussing it here.” Some people worry about write-ups and getting fired, but I don’t because I hate my job.

I love art. I love teaching art. I just don’t love where I do it at. I work my ass off to give my students the best learning experience I can, but never get any credit or recognition because the only way to get credit in this school is to have your head stuck shoulder-deep up Catherine Hilliard’s barn sized ass.

I’m too much of a chicken shit to quit a steady job with half-way decent insurance so I spend a considerable amount of time daydreaming about getting shit-canned. If I could just get myself fired, then I would have no choice but to start my own art studio like I’ve dreamed of doing my entire life.

But that won’t happen. I’ll retire from Bugtussle School District with a comfortable retirement and twenty years worth of discontentment under my belt.

“Be there, Miss Jones,” she smirks. “On time.”

She turns to Coach Hatter, who flashes her a big, shaky smile.

“Good Morning, Mrs. Hilliard, good to see you. How was your break?”

Catherine Hilliard glares at him like she’s about to cram her fist down his throat, rip his heart out, and eat it with a side of fries.

She says nothing.

His smile falters and he looks at the floor.

She turns and clicks down the hallway, maroon pumps bulging.

“At lunch, my friend Chloe is a nervous wreck. Chloe Stacks takes her job, her life, and her self very seriously. Too seriously in my opinion, but that’s just me. She’s the best school counselor in the state of Mississippi and has the plaques in her office prove it.

“What’s wrong, Chloe-sweets, have to counsel some nut cases this morning?” I ask as she gracefully takes a seat across from me and places her lavender monogrammed lunch bag on the table.

“You don’t know?” she asks, like I’m stupid.

“You really do not know?” She’s staring me down with those big, brown, saucer-shaped eyes.

“Well, obviously I don’t, Chloe. What’s up? We gonna have a state test in Art this year and you just found out?” I snort at my own joke and open a ketchup packet with my teeth.

She stares at me like I’m an insolent child misbehaving in church. During prayer.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“How do you not know what just happened to your best friend?”

“Lilly?” My mind starts spinning the crazy what-if scenarios. What if she got kidnapped in Paris? What if her plane crashed? What if it got hijacked? What if she tried to screw one of the hijackers? What if she had a wreck on the way home from the airport? What if she got car jacked in Memphis? What if she tried to screw the carjacker? What if the Gentleman’s wife found out about her and hacked her to death with a pick ax? It’s amazing how many ludicrous thoughts can dart though your mind in a millisecond.

“She was fired this morning,” Chloe whispers.

“What?” I spray the table with tater tots and get the insolent child stare again. “What for? Are you serious? What?” Jealousy sweeps over me as I imagine being free from the stifling chains of public education. But not Lilly. She loves everything about her job and quit a gravy train modeling career to do it.

“I overheard it this morning while I was in the conference room,” she whispers. “Cheap walls, very thin.”
She eyeballs the other teachers filing into the cafeteria. “If you don’t know, then probably no one does. I guess they’re not going to make it public.”

“Make what public?”
She cups her hands around her mouth and whispers, “She was fired after Catherine Hilliard accused her of having an affair with one of her students.”
I choke on my chocolate milk and it takes me a second to recover.
Not jealous of that. No, buddy.
“Would you please stop eating for a second?” Chloe asks, wiping milk and tater tots off of her side of the table. “Please?”
“She’s banging one of her kids. No shit? Which one?”
“Watch your language! Does it matter which one?”
“Hell yeah it matters.”
“No, it does not matter because she would not do that.” A thoughtful pause. “What are we going to do, Ace?”
“Hell, nothing. Watch her on the news tonight, I guess.” I’m not feeling the pity party vibe for the promiscuous Lilly Lane. Not even a little bit.
“So you think she’s guilty? You think she did this?” Chloe is giving me her saucer-eyed stare again, “Because I do not think that she would do such a thing and I think we need to help her.”
“Help her what? Clean out her desk and find a pedophile lawyer?”
When we were 13-years-old, Lilly and I took a six pack of root beer to Chloe’s house and acted like we got drunk on it. She almost stroked out before we finally convinced her that it was a just a joke. She doesn’t know about the Gentleman.
“You think she would do something like that?” Now she’s boring a hole through me with those eyes. Perfectly arched eyebrows drawn; perfectly lined lips quivering. “How could you say that? She is our best friend. What is wrong with you today?”
“I don’t know, Chloe.” I can see she’s about to burst into tears so I paddle backwards like I usually do when having a conversation her. “No. You know what, Chloe? No. I do not think that Lilly did anything wrong. There is absolutely no way she would do something like that.”
“So we’re going to help her then?” Her brown eyes light up and she smiles like little girl looking at lollipop balloons.
“Yes. Absolutely. We are absolutely going to help her.” I look down at the tater tot shrapnel floating in a pool of chocolate milk on my plastic lunch tray. “Forget lunch. Let’s go check out her classroom. See what we can find out.”
“Yes, let’s do that!” She jumps up and runs right into Logan Hatter.
Coach Hatter eats lunch with us every day but Chloe can’t tell her husband that.
“Hey ladies, where y’all off to?” He takes a look at Chloe, then eyeballs me. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?”
“We gotta run, Hatt. I’ll fill you in later, I promise.”
“So I’m eatin’ by myself? That’s no fun. Where’s Lilly?”
Awkward silence.
“Here comes Coach Wills. He’ll keep you company.” I give him a quick wink and he rolls his eyes. He can’t stand Coach Wills.

The hallway is empty so I imagine for one disillusioned second that this might go off without a hitch. The door to Lilly’s classroom is slightly ajar, so we scurry down there like field mice sneaking past a sleeping cat. I stop short and Chloe bumps into to me from behind and I spin around and put a finger over my mouth.
Someone is in Lilly’s classroom.
We freeze.
And wait.
Then, a voice.
It’s Principal Catherine Hilliard.
I can’t tell if she’s talking on a cell phone or just mumbling to herself, but either way, she’s stupid and I want to knock her ass over with a tire tool. I can’t make out what she’s saying; I can only hear papers rattling and stuff hitting the floor.
Suddenly, she articulates a sentence that comes through loud and clear.
“Who? Oh, of course. Right now? Out in the hallway?”
“Shit!” I whisper and Chloe takes off running in a dead sprint to the girls’ bathroom. “What are you doing? Get back here!” I scream-whisper, but she’s gone.

I smell moth balls and old lady muff powder and turn around like a girl in a horror movie about to get axed in the skull. I’m eye level with a giant gold cross hanging on a thin rope chain. There is a tiny little Jesus on the cross.

“Just what do you think you’re doing, Miss Jones? And where did Mrs. Stacks run off to?” she hiss-snorts and I wonder for a second how she can breath out that fat ass pig nose and speak at the same time.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Probably not the best response I’ve ever come up with.

She stares at me like I’m a dog turd in the lima beans on the Sunday dinner table. I look back down at Jesus.

“You should’ve taken Miss Lane to Florida like you always do.”

That caught me off guard.

“Okay, seriously, Mrs. Hilliard, now I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You will. Now why don’t you be a nice girl and get in there and clean out Miss Lane’s personal effects?”

“Why? Is she getting a new classroom?”

She snarls and points like I’m going to trot right in there and do exactly what she says.

“What’s that you have in your hand there, Mrs. Hilliard?”

“School property.”

“Picture frames and post cards are school property?” I wonder when the pictures were taken and where the post cards are from. I wonder why I can’t just keep my mouth shut and live a normal life. I think about grabbing that stuff out of her hand and slinging it down the hallway just for fun.

“Don’t stand there and act like you don’t know what’s going on, Graciela Jones. I haven’t decided yet what your role is in all of this,” she whisper snorts.

This bitch is driving me crazy. Crazier, that is. I think about grabbing her by the hair and bashing her head against cinder block wall. Repeatedly.

“All of what, Mrs. Hilliard?” I’m not sure I want The-Whole-Truth-So-Help-Me-God when it comes to what’s going on with Lilly, but I press on anyway. “What exactly is ‘all of this’ and who do you think you are, some kind of educational casting director?” I decide to skate backwards with a tactical conversational maneuver. “I come down here to check on Lilly because she wasn’t at lunch and find you going through her personal stuff, so why don’t you tell me what you mean when you say, ‘all of this’ and please, for the love of God, tell me how I might have a part in it.”

“Don’t play stupid with me, Miss Jones, even though we both know how good you are at that,” she smirks and I fight off the urge to gouge her eyes out with the dry erase marker in my back pocket. She continues, “So tell me, why were you standing at the door eavesdropping? And where is your prim little side kick?”

“Well, she ran to the bathroom, so common sense would dictate that she had to pee and I was standing outside the door here because you don’t look or sound anything like Lilly Lane because, you know, she used to be an underwear model and all,” I make a show of looking at her from head to toe, “so I heard you in there tearing down the place.”

“You are on thin ice, Miss Jones, and you better tread lightly.”

“I think you mean skate. And is that a threat? Do I need to call the Mississippi Association of Educators and report that?” I can feel my face burning.

“Like that would make any difference,” she snorts. “By the way, your presence is no longer required in my office this afternoon because, as it turns out, something far more important has come up.”

“Oh really? Like what?” I can’t wait to hear this.

“I’ll be at the district office,” she says and smiles at me with those gigantic yellow horse teeth, “filing the papers to have Miss Lane’s teaching license revoked.” And with that little victory under her 64-inch belt, she puts her super-cankles in action and stomps off down the hallway. She stops at the girls’ bathroom and calls, “Yoo hoo, Mrs. Stacks, you can come out now. Coast is clear.”

I stare at the back of Catherine Hilliard’s man-suite that is masculine in every way except for the fabric, which looks a floral tapestry circa 1989, and wonder what the hell is going on.

Could Lilly really be sleeping with one of her students? Why is Catherine Hilliard such a hateful bitch? Could I kill her and make it look like an accident? What the hell does she think I’ve done? What did Chloe accomplish by running to the bathroom and leaving me here by myself looking like an idiot? What if Lilly really is doing it with one of her students? Wonder which one it is? What was Catherine Hilliard looking for in her classroom? Why didn’t Lilly talk to Chloe before she left? Would she really do it with one of her kids and risk throwing her entire career away? Could Lilly possibly be that stupid?

I have always been jealous of Lilly’s passion for teaching, but the question pressing in my mind now is how
that passion fits into her getting fired. And if she ditched our trip to Florida so she could screw around with some
teen-aged boy, then this could be the end of our twenty year friendship.

It takes Chloe a full two minutes to creep out of the bathroom. I stare at the mini-sombreros stuck to Lilly’s
door and try to wrap my mind around what’s going on, but none of this crap makes any sense. Nothing lines up.

“Ace, how did she know we were out here?” Chloe asks. “That’s creepy.”

I nod my head toward the security camera mounted at the end of the hallway.

“Someone was watching us! Those monitors are in her office! Someone was watching us!”

“Chloe, someone was watching out for her and saw us.” I push open the door and motion her in. “Let’s get
Lilly’s stuff packed up before that sow pig comes back and throws it all in the trash.”

I turn to the security camera and throw up my middle finger, then mouth the phrase that goes along with the
gesture. I’d like to moon whoever has the birds-eye view up there, but I know I couldn’t get my pants back up
before Chloe saw what I doing.

When the last bell rings, I breathe an audible, “Thank you, Jesus,” and a get a few funny looks from my
students.

I grab the box with Lilly’s stuff in it and make my way to the parking lot while the buses are still loading.
McGruff the Crime Hag said she would be off campus this afternoon, so I’m not standing around here for fifteen
minutes with my thumb up my ass only to get behind thirteen buses that stop every ten yards for twenty-six miles.

I head home to check on Buster Loo and he’s layed out in the backyard with all four paws in the air, snoring
like a grown man. I run inside and throw on a tee shirt, shorts, and flip-flops then head right back out because I’m
anxious to get this done. I want some answers from Lilly Lane and I intend to get them as quickly as possible.

I swing by China Kitchen and pick up some Kung Pao chicken and cream cheese wontons. She’ll think I’m
trying to be nice by bringing over a tasty peace offering, but the truth is that I need a snack to calm my nerves.

I pull up at the pink and white dollhouse that is the home of Lilly Lucille Lane. I park my dirty Maxima
behind her bad-ass BMW and wonder for the hundredth time what the hell is going on with her.

I grab the Chinese food and go around to the back door, which is unlocked as always. I go in and put the
food on the table, then hear a commotion in the living room so I walk in there to see what’s going on. Much to my
surprise and dismay, I see Drake Driskall - All-American, All-Star, All-State, Mr. Bugtussle High School himself -
sitting on Lilly’s sofa wearing only a colorful pair of swim trunks.

Lilly is perched on the love seat like the cat who swallowed the canary and all I can do is stare.

“It never is, is it, Lilly?” I absolutely do not know what to do at this point, so I say, “This is too much. Too
much. Gotta get outta here.”

“Miss Jones, I promise-” Drake Driskall begins.

I cut him off quick, fast, and in a hurry. “You,” I point at him, “you shut your mouth, go put on a shirt, and
get the hell out of here. Don’t say another word to me. Got it?”

“Ace,” Lilly stands up, but doesn’t take a step forward.

“You’re on your own with this one, sister,” I turn to leave. “I cannot believe this.”

“Ace! Wait!” she calls as I’m walking out the door, but I don’t look back.

I pop the trunk and grab her junk and sling it out into the yard like a woman who just found out her husband
likes men. I hear a heated exchange going on inside, but I could not care less what’s being said. I get in my car and
get the hell out of there.

I tell myself that I’m wrong. That she’s right and that it isn’t what it looks like but, dammit! I’ve never been
good at lying to myself. She dropped our annual trip to the beach to screw around with Drake Driskall.

The Gentleman is an 18-year-old kid.

That pisses me off so bad that I think I might pass out.

I stop by the Hill Top Country Store and buy two packs of cigarettes and a 40-ounce Corona then hit the
back roads. I haven’t smoked in fifteen years, but today is like a good day to fall back on some bad habits. My
phone is buzzing like a pack of bees at a garden festival, but I don’t give a rat’s ass. I need some time to think.

When it gets dark, I take a paved road back to town and head to Ethan Allen’s. The bar, not the furniture
store. People in Bugtussle don’t get the two confused because the only Ethan Allen they’ve ever heard of besides the
one who owns the bar is the Revolutionary War hero who founded the state of Vermont.
I walk in at 8:55 and Ethan smiles and switches off the neon signs. Everything in Bugtussle closes at 9:00 p.m. and his bar is no exception. He fills a frosty mug with Killian’s Red and puts it down on a beverage nap.

“Hey baby!” he says affectionately. “You look like you could use a drink!”

Ethan Allen Harwood spends his days on a tractor, his nights at the bar, and his Sunday mornings at the Methodist Church sitting next to his grandparents. He drives a spotless Chevrolet pick-up with gigantic mud tires and only listens to country music. He’s got on his usual get-up which consists of Wrangler jeans, a plaid shirt with metal buttons, worn-out cowboy boots, and one of his four state championship rings. His dusty Stetson hangs on a hook next to the liquor shelf.

“What’s goin’ on, gal?” He fixes himself a frosty mug of Mountain Dew and sniffs the air. “You been smokin’?”

“You might as well sit down, Ethan,” I say, “cause this is gonna take a while.”

He walks around the bar and parks his long, lean body on the stool next to mine and listens with great interest as I tell him everything that’s transpired. He asks a bunch of questions like he always does and when his antique cuckoo clock strikes ten, I get up to go to the bathroom and realize I’m too drunk to walk.

“I’m hammered, Ethan,” I slur.

“You might have noticed,” he laughs and pats me on the butt as I teeter past him.

I feel my way back to the restroom and when I get back out to the bar, he has his cowboy hat on his head and my keys in his hand.

“I’m takin’ you home, Ace,” he says with a warm smile. “I know you gotta go to work in the morning. You know the drill.”

He holds my hand while we walk across the parking lot, then helps me up into his huge truck.

“Is this a monster truck, Ethan? Is that what you’re going for here?”

He laughs, pops in a Toby Keith CD, and serenades me all the way to my house. After helping me out of his huge truck, he walks me around to the back door like he’s done a million times before and I know that my car will magically appear in my driveway before morning.

“Ace, your backyard out here is unbelievable,” he says as he squints into the dark. “Is that okra stalks comin’ up over there?”

“I’m putting it in the black-eyed peas I’m cookin’ tomorrow. Okay, not really. I’m havin’ it for breakfast in an omelet. Oh no, wait, that’s not it. I’m savin’ it for a midnight BLT. You got any lettuce I can borrow?” I turn around and look at him, snorting and laughing. “Seriously, Ethan, what are you talking about?”

“I got any bacon here?” Ethan hollers, watching the note fly through the air. “Somebody stuck a pile of bacon on top of a note on your out-a-doors table? Now that beats all I ever saw.”

I make a move to catch the note, trip over Buster Loo, and go down face first onto the porch. I land close to my Christmas lights, so I reach over and plug those in like that was my plan all along. Buster Loo is clucking like a chicken and looking like his feelings are hurt, so I pull him over and apologize for booting him in his little chiweenie ribs. He shows his forgiveness by speed licking my right eyeball and pawing me on the head.

Ethan is laughing his ass off and when he gets his breath back, he says, “Oh, so I guess that’s how you always get them lights on? I’m gonna go get you a football helmet to wear around here.” Still chuckling, he asks, “That little Mexican wiener dog okay?”

“He’s fine. Did you see where that note went?”

“Landed in your marijuana grove over here.” He waves the rectangular shaped paper back and forth. “Pink polka-dot paper. Wonder who that’s from?”
That's an herb garden, you geek.” I squint at the note, “And I know who it from and so do you. You gonna read it?”
“ Ain’t my note. Ain’t my business.”
“ Oh good word, Ethan Allen Harwood! I just spent over an hour giving you the juiciest news in town and now you’re gonna stand over there and act like you’re a mind-your-own-business kind of guy? Puh-leeese. I don’t even care what it says! Throw it away then.”
“Okay, jus’ calm down and I’ll see what it says.” He unfolds the paper, reads the note, then gives me an odd look.
 “What?” I ask, feeling a killer headache coming on.
He looks down at the paper, out toward the yard, then back at me.
“You look like you saw a ghost, Ethan. What is it?”
“You better look at it. I don’t think I was meant to read this.”
“Lilly Lane and her stupid pink-polka-dot-stationary-using-ass ditched me nine hours before we were supposed to go the beach so she could screw around with a stupid kid and I spend my Spring Break cleaning out my stupid closets, then she gets her stupid self fired and Catherine Hilliard’s fat stupid ass wants to see me go down with her and now she’s stuck a stupid note out here and used stupid fake bacon as a stupid paper weight so my dog would be going crazy and you think I give a stupid flyin’ shit what it says?”
“No really, you better read it.”
“I don’t give a stupid flyin’ rat’s ass what she has to say, Ethan!”
“No really, Ace. Get up and read it yourself. It’s about Chloe.” He walks over and holds his out both hands.
“Here. C’mon, now.”
He pulls me up and I’m thankful he’s a big strong country boy because I don’t think a little fellow would be able to get that job done.
I squint down at the note and sobriety comes fast and hard.
“I’ve gotta get to the hospital, Ethan. Can you take me?” He looks at me, uncertainly evident in his eyes.
“Will you take me? Please?”
“I don’t know if you should-”
“I have to go. You know I have to go.”
“Alrighty then. Whatever you need.”
I run inside with Buster Loo hot on my heels, splash water all over my face, and grab a Diet Mountain Dew out of the fridge.
“You want a drink?”
“I don’t think now’s the time-”
“Not a drink! Some water or a Coke or something.”
“Naw, I got a dip, but grab me an empty bottle if you got one handy.”
I grab an empty water bottle, blow Buster Loo a kiss, and run out the door.
Ethan helps me climb back into his massive truck and he leaves rubber on the road at the end of my driveway.
9
Lilly is sitting alone in the lobby of Bugtussle Memorial Hospital. She doesn’t see us come in and we startle her out of a haze.
“Did you know she was pregnant?” she asks quietly, looking at the floor.
“I had no idea.” I focus on trying not to hurl. When my nerves are shot, my stomach gets really upset and that’s without nine beers and a pack of Virginia Slims. I look around for a drink machine.
“I didn’t either,” she says, still looking at the floor.
“Have you seen her, Lilly?” Ethan asks.
“No,” she mumbles, “Richard had security escort me down here and said he’d call if anything changed.”
“Security? Are you kidding me?” I yell and then a little quieter, “You know, Lilly, maybe they just don’t allow pedophiles in the ICU.”
“Ace!” Ethan barks.
“What? Sorry,” I’m really not sorry at all, so I continue, “but I mean, you never know when Chris Hansen and his Pedophile Prevention Van might roll up and I’m just sayin’ that maybe the doctors and nurses don’t wanna be featured on an episode of To Catch a Predator.”
“Ace,” Ethan says and shakes his head back and forth.
“Uh uh,” I say, looking down at Lilly, “not buying it.”
I walk to the elevator and punch the button and stand there for what seems like twelve hours. I look back at
them and see that Ethan has his arm around Lilly and her head is on his shoulder. I put my finger on the little silver button and punch it and punch it and punch it till the doors finally open. There is nary a soul in sight, yet the elevator takes seventy hours to get to the lobby. And then it’s empty. Go figure.

When I arrive on the ICU floor, I see Richard Stacks the Fourth standing with his pastor and a bunch of random Bugtussle assholes. He comes over and makes a move to hug me and I shove him away like he just climbed out of a manure pile.

“Don’t make a scene, Graciela,” he whispers sharply.
“I’m going to see her, so back up out of my face, Richard.”
The waiting room gets a little quieter and people are trying to look like they aren’t looking. My stomach is churning and I need a Sprite.

“You look sick, Ace,” he snarls, “you been drinking?”
I try to push past him, but he grabs my arm and I turn on him like a pit bull.
“You get your hands off of me!” I say a little too loud and people stop pretending not to look. I see Brother Berkin distracting people with head nods and hand gestures.

“I’m going to see Chloe,” I say, not quite as loud.

“No, I don’t think you will, Graciela.” He takes a step closer to me and, in a low voice, says, “You don’t run over me like you do everybody else in this town, Ace Jones, I’m a man and you need to learn your place.”

“I need to learn my place, Richard?” I practically shout. “Why don’t you tell me what my place is, Richard? Because I have so much respect for your opinion.”

He grabs my elbow and tries to force me to move, but I don’t budge.

“Do something, Richard Stacks. Do it right here, right now, in front your audience.” I wave my arm at the onlookers. “I dare you, you big pussy.”
He looks at our audience, smiles, and says, “Sorry folks, she’s just really upset about all this.”
I get up in his face and say, “Do it. Do something, Richard.”
He turns to me and whispers, “You can bet your fat ass I’m going to. Just not here.”
The air is thick with tension as Richard Stacks steps away from me and flips open his cell phone. Brother Berkin comes over and pats me on the shoulder.

“Have you seen her, Brother Berkin?” I’m antsy and ready to make a move because I’m feeling sicker by the second and I’m mad as hell on top of that.

“No, Ace,” he says quietly, “Mr. Stacks thinks it’s best if we don’t disturb her, so I think we should honor his wishes.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about him,” I nod toward Richard and cross and uncross and re-cross my arms. “Did you know she was pregnant?”
Brother Berkin looks at me like I’m speaking ancient Hebrew.

“He beats the hell out of her all the time, but no one ever says anything about it because he’s Mister Richard Robert Stacks the Fourth.” I’m wringing my hands and still looking at Richard trying to decide if I want to grab his cell phone and beat his eyes shut or make a run to see Chloe before security gets here. “He’s always got some lame story about some ridiculous accident she had and to be perfectly honest, Brother Berkin, Chloe is not that clumsy of a woman.” I can’t stop fidgeting. “She does yoga for Christ’s sake.”

“Graciela,” Brother Berkin begins, “now is not the time for such talk and-”

“Yeah, I know,” I pat him on the shoulder, “never is, is it?”
I take off like a prison escapee and bolt through the double doors and into the ICU hallway. Nurses are calling out for me to stop but I keep moving, scanning the name plates until I find Chloe’s. I duck inside her room, stop short, and try not to scream.

“I’ve never seen her so soon after it happened.

“Oh my God, Chloe,” I whisper and I can’t move my feet. I bend over and throw up in the floor.
I raise my head and look at her swollen, purple face and start feeling like I might pass out for real. I struggle to catch my breath, but I can’t so I put my hands on my knees and throw up again. I raise up, wipe my face on my shirt, then put my arms around her legs and start to cry.

A herd of Bugtussle’s heaviest nurses bustle into the room and grab me, then the doctor bursts through the
door with a passel of security guards. I’m hugging Chloe’s legs and telling her it’s going to be alright, but she
doesn’t say anything because she’s unconscious.

“Miss Jones, you have to leave. Now,” Dr. Rain says in his usual condescending tone. “We have a strict
privacy policy and I expect you to honor that!”

“She was pregnant and he beat her up and killed her baby.” I can’t stop crying. “All she’s ever wanted her
whole life is to have a baby and you’re going to stand there and protect him.”

“I’m not protecting him, I’m protecting her,” he says dryly like he couldn’t care less.

“Well, it looks like you’ve started a little sooner, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know where you get your information from, young lady, but you need to verify your facts before
you start throwing around such serious accusations.”

Verify my facts?

My mind starts to reel. How did Lilly know Chloe was in the hospital? Obviously Chloe didn’t call her and
Richard Stacks damn sure didn’t. And where did Lilly get the idea that Chloe was pregnant? She just told me in the
lobby that she didn’t know about it until tonight.

I push past the bumfuzzled security guards and bolt down the hallway to the waiting room where Richard
Stacks is soothing the crowd in his best used car salesman tone. Brother Berkin is sitting apart from the crowd over
by the windows and I make a dash to where he is.

“Go look at her, Brother Berkin. That’s all I ask. Just go look at her face.”

“Graciela, I won’t go against Mr. Stacks’ wishes.”

“He beat her so bad she lost a child,” I whisper in a fanatic, hushed voice, “that is murder. You are a
preacher!”

He looks up nervously and I turn to see Richard Stacks coming our way, taking long strides with both fists
clenched. It dawns on me that no woman has ever stood up to the great coward Richard Stacks. Not his beautiful,
delicate wife and certainly not his bridge troll of a mother.

“The police are waiting on you downstairs, Miss Jones, scurry along now.”

The police need to be waiting on you, dick face, because I’m not the criminal here. You are.” I turn to the
pastor, “Sorry for the language, Brother Berkin.”

Richard Stacks takes a deep breath and I can tell that he is teetering between upholding his fine Bughtussle
image and choking me to death. He goes with his image.

“Miss Jones, would you please leave now?” His face is blood red.

“Oh, you can bet I will,” he whispers through clenched teeth.

“Bet you will what, Mr. Stacks, if you don’t mind my asking?” Brother Berkin asks, giving Richard a
curious look.

“I do mind you asking,” Richard Stacks the Fourth tells his spiritual leader, “now have a seat somewhere else
please, Brother Berkin.”

“Well, listen to Mr. Holy Roller talking to his preacher like a yard dog,” I say loud enough for everyone in
the waiting room to hear and since I have a captive audience, I decide to take full advantage. “Hey everybody,” I
yell to the increasingly nervous crowd, “would you like to know what really happened to Chloe?” I look at Richard
and he looks like he’s about to blow a gasket. “Richard Stacks the Fourth beats his wife! And this ain’t the first time,
people, so keep that in mind while you’re standing around praying here for him, okay?” The security guards are
coming my way, but I keep talking. “She was pregnant and he beat her up so bad she had a miscarriage. He killed
their baby. And now this scumbag has called the police on me? On me? What do y’all think about that?”

Gasps and covered mouths all around.

“Shut your fucking mouth, you stupid whore!” He comes at me with his right fist in the air and I jump on his
ass like a bitch dog that’s lost a pup. He tries to get his hands around my throat but I’m beating him so hard in the
face that all he can do is flail around and cuss.

The security guards grab me and pull me back and Richard Stacks opens his mouth to say something and I
spit in his face and scream, “I am going to kill you! I am going to fucking kill you if it’s the last fucking thing I do
on earth.”

Brother Berkin steps forward and holds out his arms, “Please, please in the name of God, please stop!”

I jerk and wiggle away from the security guards and grab Brother Berkin by the hand.

“Just go look at her!” I whisper and take off running toward the stairs. I get to the lobby and see two police
cars parked outside and Lilly and Ethan talking to Sheriff J.J. Jackson, who is looking down at the pavement and
shaking his head. I stop running, try to catch my breath, and walk slowly through the sliding doors.

Sheriff Jackson looks at me, makes an awful face and says, “Ace, what in the hell are you doing? Look at
I turn to check my reflection in the glass doors that just slid shut behind me and I am truly shocked by what I see. My hair is frizzy and wild and wet with sweat. My face is beet red and my cheeks are streaked with mascara. My Pineapple Willy’s tee shirt has vomit all over it and somewhere along the way I lost a flip flop. I turn to look at my friends and they are staring at me like I’m a wild animal. With rabies.

“You know you gotta come with me now, right?” Sheriff Jackson says in a quiet voice.

I nod my head and another cop, new to the area and apparently anxious for action, comes up and tries to cuff me, but Sheriff Jackson orders him back to his patrol car. The Sheriff opens the back door of his squad car and motions for me to get inside.

In a calm voice I say, “If you want to arrest someone, go arrest that fucking murderer, Richard Stacks.”

“Ace, aren’t you being just a little dramatic?” the Sheriff asks with obvious skepticism. James Jacob Jackson graduated three years ahead of me at Bugtussle High School. We were both on the basketball team, so between that and him being the Sheriff, he’s been exposed to more than a few of my crazy antics.

“Would somebody please just go look at her? Go look at her sweet little face that’s all bruised and swollen up. That’s all I ask. She’s fucking unconscious and her jaw is wired shut and she just lost a baby. A baby. And y’all are standing here and looking at me like I’m the criminal?”

The hospital doors slide open again and Richard Stacks comes running toward us screaming obscenities and I notice with great satisfaction that his nose is bleeding and his left eye is slightly swollen. I start to go after him but Sheriff Jackson grabs me and wrestles me into the back of his patrol car.

Richard keeps yelling and cussing and just before the Sheriff slams the door I hear Ethan say, “Hey buddy, why don’t you shut your mouth before I bust your other eye?”

Deputy Dumbass jumps out of his car and runs up to the fray with his hand on his pistol and all of a sudden the big bad Richard Stacks isn’t saying a word. Sheriff Jackson walks over to him and says something I can’t hear and Richard gets in the Sheriff’s face and they have what looks like a heated exchange. Then, in the blink of an eye, the Sheriff spins him around, slaps cuffs on him, and barks something at his deputy, who runs to his patrol car and opens the back door.

I say a silent prayer that we’ll be in same cell. My Mamaw Essie used to warn me about praying for things that weren’t what she called “issues of the Lord” but I think she would let this one slide.

As luck would have it, however, neither of us go any further than the holding area. Ethan is waiting for me and Richard’s swamp-thing mama is waiting for him and before that lard bucket leaves, she makes all kinds of threats that everyone within ten miles hears because she’s running around yelling like the idiot that she is. According to her, nobody in the Bugtussle County Jail would have a job when she finished the phone calls she was about to go home and make.

Ethan walks me out, helps me into his truck, and we ride in silence back to my house. His cell phone rings and when he hangs up, he tells me that Adriana Lane, Lilly’s cousin and head nurse of the ICU, was just quietly escorted out the back door of the Bugtussle Memorial with her all of her personal effects.

Dr. Sebastian Rain and Mr. Richard Stacks are big time golfing buddies and they had every intention of sweeping this incident under the rug just like they have every other time Chloe needed medical attention for wounds sustained while trying to make her marriage work.

I hope Adriana Lane sues the hell out of Bugtussle Memorial Hospital and gets filthy rich and never has to work again. Unless she just wants to.

Tuesday morning I call in sick to work for ten thousand different reasons, not the least of which is my pounding head and aching body. I sleep the entire day away in a pain pill induced stupor.

Wednesday morning when the alarm goes off for the fifth time, I roll over and tell Buster Loo that I’d rather be shot in the face as to go to work today. He snuggles down further into the covers as if to rub it in my face that he can spend all day in bed if he so desires. A dog’s life, indeed.

I get to school ten minutes late and wish it would’ve been twenty. Coach Hatter is in his usual spot between our classrooms and I can tell by the look on his face that he’s heard all about it.

“You alright?” he asks.

“Fine,” I mumble. I walk in my classroom and plop down in my chair. Coach Hatter leans against the door frame and raises his eyebrows at me.

“So what’d you hear?” I ask, not really wanting to know.

“Well,” he says, smiling a big mischievous smile, “I heard you had a tell-all session with Brother Berkin at the hospital, then beat one of Rich Stacks’ eyes shut.” He starts that ridiculous sniggering and I smile despite myself.

“Well, Hatt, I guess that’d be one way to put it,” I say and suddenly realize how lucky I am that Logan
Hatter’s classroom is right next door to mine. In this school, I could do a lot worse.

“Been a long time comin’,” he says, shaking his head, “just didn’t think you’d be the one dolin’ it out on him.”

“Fuck him,” I whisper and Coach Hatter cracks up again.

“How’s Chloe?” he asks, looking down at his shoes.

“Oh God, Logan,” I say and squeeze my eyes shut. “Oh, you don’t even want to know.”

“She should leave him and go out with the Sheriff,” he says.

“Yeah, she should. Right after she blows Richard’s worthless brains out.”

He continues to look at the floor and we don’t say anything for a few minutes.

“Let’s go to Ethan Allen’s tonight, Ace, I wanna be the man on your elbow when you walk in down there.”

He pauses and looks at me sideways, “You know Ethan is just dyin’ for you to come down there and tell everybody your side of the story. Says he can only say so much until you come in to verify the details. I swear, he’s worse than a woman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Hatt?” I ask with mock sarcasm just as the bell rings.

“Saved by the bell,” he chirps. “Pick you up at eight?”

“Maybe.”

Just before lunch, I check my email and, lo and behold, there’s a message from the Queen of Hate herself summoning me to her nasty little office. During lunch. Great. Hatter will just have to tough it out again today with Coach Wills. Ha.

When the time comes, I reluctantly make my way up the hallway and through the commons area to the office. When I walk into the lobby, I notice a hand-written note on Chloe’s door and go over to inspect it. Mrs. Stacks will be out of the office until further notice. Please see Mrs. Marshall for all counseling issues.

Until now, the most time Chloe has ever taken off work due to domestic violence was five consecutive days. I think about her swollen, bruised-up face and wonder if she’ll be back before the school year ends next month.

“Miss Jones,” Catherine Hilliard booms from behind me and I jump like somebody stuck a hot poker to my ass.

“Yes ma’am?” My stomach knots up as I turn around.

“In here, please, ma’am,” she piles on the sarcasm when she says ma’am and motions me into her office.

I sit down in a dusty, navy blue chair that looks like it had its hey-day back when Axl Rose could still sing. Mrs. Hilliard comes in and starts digging through a junky filing cabinet behind her desk and pulls out a yellow slip of paper and I realize with no small amount of apprehension what this meeting is about.

I thought I’d rejoice when this day came but, in all honesty, I’m not feeling too peppy about this.

“For you, Miss Jones,” she says in her most vindictive tone, “to reward you for your most inappropriate conduct which resulted in your arrest Monday night.” She looks at me with pure disgust. “Such unbecoming behavior for an educational professional and I’m using that term loosely in reference to you. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Why?” I ask sarcastically. “Did he have a miscarriage after I hit him?”

She doesn’t say a word. She just stares at me like I have an arm growing out of my forehead.

“It would be in your best interest to start keeping your mouth shut and minding your own business, Miss Jones,” she says curtly and slides the ominous yellow slip between her thumb and forefinger, revealing two slips instead of just one. She flashes her big yellow-toothed smile. “One more write-up and you will be suspended.” She slides the two pieces of paper across her desk and they leave a trail in the dust.

I feel the fury welling up in my gut and I am overcome with the urge to jump across her junky ass desk and beat the ugly off her face with that 1979 model calculator.

But I don’t because I can’t. She’s got me by my metaphorical balls.

I get up and snatch the papers off her filthy desk and turn to leave.

“Good luck, Miss Jones,” she calls as I walk out the door. “Have a great day!”

I resist the urge to give her the finger.

I am a celebrity. At least at Ethan Allen’s anyway.

I walk in to a standing ovation and Logan Hatter puts his arm around me and smiles like he’s Clint Eastwood and I’m Hillary Swank with a much wider ass. Ha.
Ethan pours up a Killian’s Red and puts it down on the bar with great theatrical flair and people form a line on either side of me like I’m the winning quarterback at the state championship football game. I get hugs and pats on the back and pats on the ass and high fives and smiles and winks from the working people of Bugtussle who love nothing more than a good story about a white collar asshole getting punched in the eyeball.

I polish off a few beers and, after much pomp and circumstance, I enthral them with the details of everything that happened from the moment I stepped off the elevator on the ICU floor until Sheriff Jackson stuffed me in the back of his patrol car. And I’m quite the storyteller, if I do say so myself.

The place erupts with laughter and cheers and a few guys from the feed store break out in an Irish Jig. I don’t mention that I puked my brains out when I saw Chloe. Instead, while I have the floor, I decide to tell them about Catherine Hilliard calling me into her dirty, stinking office and telling me to mind my own business and keep my mouth shut and that I was about to get fired because I wouldn’t get to work on time. Then I do what I believe is a fantastic impersonation of her and, judging from the laughs I get when I pretend to eat the barstool next to me, the crowd agrees it’s a good one.

It didn’t occur to me that everyone dining on the patio over at Pier 57 could hear every word I said. Obviously it didn’t occur to anyone else at Ethan Allen’s either because no one brought it to my attention.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn around to see Pete the Tire Man. He’s a cool little dude who has more money than the bank, but you can’t tell it by looking at his overalls and dusty mesh hat.

“Hey Ace,” he asks, “where’s ol’ Lilly Lane at tonight?”

“Aw, I don’t know, Pete,” I shrug, “I guess she’s at home.”

“Well, call her and tell her she’s missing the party!” I assume by this interchange that word isn’t out about the allegations against Lilly and, for some reason, I feel a wave of relief. I look to Ethan for help.

“Hey Petey,” he hollers, “I talked to her earlier and she’s watchin’ The Bachelorette tonight.” Ethan winks at me and pours four shots of Jack Daniels.

“The what?” Pete asks and makes a funny face.

“C’mon, Petey,” I grab him by the arm. “Let’s dance.”

Everyone drinks and laughs and has a good time and Ethan drives Logan and me home. On the way, we rehash the moment again and again when Ethan threatened to bust Rich Stack’s other eye.

“Tell me about it, Ethan,” I say, unlocking the door. “Tell Logan I’ll pick him up in the morning and take him to school and we’ll do our best to get there on time so he won’t get fired for riding with me.”

“Ill do, Ace,” he kisses me on the head and turns to go. “Good night, sweetheart.”

I hear his cowboy boots clomping off the porch and a second later, he peels out of my driveway like the true blue country boy that he is. I imagine him and Logan laughing their hillbilly asses off all the way down the road.

I pick up Coach Hatter Thursday morning and we arrive at school ten minutes early. He goes to the gym for what the rest of us call “Coach Coffee” and I go to my classroom where, much to my dismay, I find Catherine Hilliard and her large ass standing outside my door.

“In,” she hisses with through those thin, crusty lips.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hilliard,” I say and offer her a powdered donut as I walk past her into my classroom. She declines. “You sure? They’re real good.” I pop a whole one in my mouth.

“Sit,” she says, like I’m a dog.

“I’d rather stand. Or I could roll over, if you like.”

I can see that really pisses her off so I say, “Why don’t you have a seat? You look really tired and it’s just, what?” I look down at my watch. “Seven fifteen. I’m here ten minutes early! What?!?”

She glares at me and I decide sit on top of my desk.

“You,” she says and points to me, “you think you are so funny and so entertaining with your mindless stupidity telling everybody everything you know all the time. You think—”

“Whoa now, Cathy,” I cut her off, “I don’t like the direction this is going.”

“Are you talking about my mama?” I ask, getting offended, “because she was a good woman and it would be awful tacky of you to speak ill of the dead.”

“I am most certainly not talking about your mother, I am talking about you,” she snarls her chapped lips. “You run around and think you are so,” she pauses, “so entertaining with your mindless stupidity telling everybody everything you know all the time. You think—”

“Whoa now, Cathy,” I cut her off, “I don’t like the direction this is going.”

“You humiliate yourself, yet you think you’re so comical, well, let me tell you something—”
“When did I humiliate myself?” I ask with a mouthful of doughnut. “Because I don’t recollect.”

“You had the nerve, the audacity, to go out in public, a bar of all places, and shamelessly run your loud mouth about an incident that landed you in jail and then you decide to really get funny and start making fun of me and the fact that you are about to lose your job. Do you think you can make fun of me and get away with it? You respect me because I am your superior.”

It never fails. News travels at the speed of light in Bugtussle, Mississippi.

“Did it ever occur to you, Cathy, that I reserve my respect for people who earn it and, quite frankly,” I cock my head sideways and look at her, “that’s not you. Furthermore, I will say whatever I want to say wherever I want to say it and there is not one small thing that you can do about it because I do believe that freedom of speech is still in full effect in the Constitution.”

She glares at me and her porky face is blood red.

“What are you gonna do, Mrs. Hilliard?” I ask with all the sarcasm I can muster. “Write me up for drinking a beer and hanging out with my friends? I mean, while drinking beer is considered a mortal sin by you fine upstanding hypocrites over at the First Self-Righteous Church, people with a good dose of common sense know that we’re not going to hell for it, regardless of what your personal opinion is.”


“What?” I yell.

“And I will have you know that my grandchildren, my grandchildren were having dinner on the patio of Pier 57 and heard every word you said and you will not get away with making fun of me in public places. Especially in front of my grandchildren.”

“If I’d known they were listening, I would’ve given them a little shout out about overcoming childhood obesity because, you know, gluttony is right up there with drunkenness as a big ol’ no-no according to the Bible,” I say and smile and she presses her lips together and sucks a long breath of air through those pig nostrils, “and I will start recording all of our conversations from here on out and I’ll contact the Mississippi Association of Educators and let them know all about your big plans to fire me for personal reasons.”

“You call whoever you want. It’s not going to make any difference,” she says and leans toward me and I’m afraid for a second that she’s going to bite me. “You are an embarrassment to the teaching profession, Miss Jones.”

“And you are a scab on the ass of humanity, Mrs. Hilliard.” I smile at her.

“Be in my office at lunch time,” she says as she reaches for the doorknob, “have you ever heard the phrase Quit while you’re behind? You might want to consider that.”

She jerks the door open and nearly bulldozes Logan Hatter.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Hilliard,” he says politely and holds out his hand, “come on out.”

“Out of my way, Hatter!” she shouts and stomps toward the door.

“I’ll probably be on the phone with my attorney during lunch.”

“Really,” she says, spinning around to face me, “I thought things didn’t work out very well for you and your attorney. Terrible mess from what I heard. You moving to Florida and thinking he was going to marry you when he had another woman all along. Tragic.” She turns around and walks toward the door.

“That’s not exactly right,” I stammer, a little shell-shocked from the brutal honesty, “but what do you care about what’s right? Self-service is your only concern.”

“Miss Jones,” she says as she reaches for the doorknob, “have you ever heard the phrase Quit while you’re behind? You might want to consider that.”

“I’m really startin’ not to like her,” he says with boyish innocence. “I have never been anything but nice and respectful to that woman and she talks to me like I stole something out of her back yard.”

“You’re guilty by association, Hatter,” I tell him. “Find some friends that she likes and she will certainly shower you with approval. Heck, you might even get to knock off a piece.”

He makes a gagging sound and the bell rings and I decide right then and there to take Friday off. I’ve had all the fun I can stand for one week.

Thursday night, I hang out with Buster Loo, eat left over pizza and a bag of potato chips for supper, and watch everything I have recorded on the DVR.

It’s times like this, when I feel my life starting to crumble, that I miss my parents the most. I would give anything if I had somebody, hell, anybody here to tell me that it’s okay, that I’m okay, and that everything it going to be just fine. My Mamaw Essie was that person, but last summer I lost the luxury of her presence here on Earth. I have no brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles or cousins. I’m the only child of only children and that makes for an awful lonely existence sometimes. Especially when the old metaphorical train jumps off the tracks.

My only family is my friends and thanks to Lilly, I’m down one of those now. I’d like to think that Lilly
wouldn’t do me like it looks like she’s done me, but Drake Driskall sitting half naked in her house is fairly hard
evidence that she has. And I know Lilly Lane well enough to know that she is, in reality, an incredibly spoiled and
self-centered soul.

This whole mess makes me feel sick.

I hate living in Bugtussle, Mississippi. There are so many folks here that I can’t stand the sight of and every
time I leave the house, I see at least ten people that I want to punch in the face. Lilly is always telling me that people
are basically the same no matter where you go, but I don’t buy into that way of thinking. I’ve traveled around quite a
bit and I’m relatively certain that Bugtussle has a surplus of idiots and assholes, most of which are pious fanatics
who love to bash you over the head with their religion. They have their socially acceptable sins like gluttony,
fornication, and adultery to which they easily turn a blind eye to, but if you drink beer or happen to be gay, then the
wrath of the fat fornicators and judgmental adulterers will descend upon you like fire from the pits of a twisted hell.

These are the people that I want to punch in the face. Repeatedly. And almost all of them go to church with
Catherine Hilliard over at the First Self-Righteous Church of Bugtussle.

I’d like to pick up and move away from here, but the problem is that I don’t have anywhere to go and that
makes me miss my family even worse than already I do. And as bad as I hate to admit it, I miss Mason McKenzie
more and more with each passing day and even though I haven’t seen him in over three years, his absence weighs on
me like a Mack truck. In a way, it seems like only a few hours have passed since I packed up all my stuff and left
him standing in the garage of his three story house. In another way, it seems like an eternity has passed.

And the questions, they never go away. What if I was wrong about him? What if he was telling me the truth?
What if he does love me? Could I be so lucky? Does he really want to have babies and grow old with me? Did I
walk away from my only chance of ever being happy? Of ever being loved? Or ever having a family again?

I look over at my phone. No one has called or texted me all day long.

I pull Buster Loo up a little closer to me, snuggle down into the sofa, and pray for sleep to come quickly.

Friday morning, Chloe calls and I gladly accept her invitation to come over for a visit. After picking up a
nice bouquet, I head over to her place, nervous as a cat.

I get a dreadful feeling when I think about seeing her face to face and end up driving past her house twice
before parking on the street and getting out. I have knots in my stomach as I walk up the driveway and by the time I
ring the door bell, I feel like I’m going to hurl.

When she opens the door, she’s wearing a scarf around her head and a pair of gigantic sunshades. Even with
bruises showing through her make-up, she still somehow manages to look glamorous.

“Well, hello, Ace,” she says sweetly, but I can tell she’s nervous, “come on in.”

“For you, my love,” I say dramatically and present the flowers to her with such flourish that she starts to
giggle.

I take a seat in her lavish living room and she goes into the kitchen and brings me a glass of ginger ale.

“To help settle your tummy,” she says with a half-hearted smile.

“You know me too well, my friend,” I say as she arranges the flowers in an expensive looking crystal vase.

“Well, it’s the least I can do for someone nice enough to bring me such a lovely bouquet.”

I try to think of something to say, but nothing comes to mind, so I just sit there looking like I’ve lapsed into
some kind of idiotic stupor. The doorbell rings just as I’m starting to feel super awkward and I notice that Chloe
doesn’t look particularly surprised. She hops up and scurries into the foyer and I hear her whispering with whoever
is at the door. She returns to the living room, followed by Lilly Lane and at that very moment, I realize I’ve been
ambushed.

“I wanted to speak with both of you so I hope it’s alright that I invited Lilly over,” Chloe says sweetly and
looks at me with those big round puppy dog eyes.

“That’s fine, Chloe,” I say and give Lilly the evil eye. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m pretty sure Richard is cheating on me,” she begins slowly and I want to roll my eyes and snort, but I
don’t, “and I think it’s with more than one person and I think it’s been going on for a while.” She holds up both
hands like she’s surrendering to something, “I know y’all have suspected such for a long time, but I’m asking you to
be patient with me as I try to work my way through this.” She looks down at the floor. “I’m ready to do something
and I can’t do it without y’all, but it has to be done on my terms.”

“Okay,” we say in unison.

“First of all, I want you guys to hug and make up.”

“What?!” I yell. “Chloe, seriously?”

“Very seriously,” she says, “I need you both to help me and I won’t tell you what I found until you hug Lilly
and tell her y’all are friends again.”
“Oh, good word,” I say and this time I do roll my eyes.

“Am I that bad, Ace?” Lilly snorts like a real smart ass.

“Don’t start with me,” I fire back.

“Please, y’all don’t do this,” Chloe says, “or I promise I won’t give you the passwords to Richard’s email accounts.”

That got my attention. “Where did you get those?” I ask.

“Hug Lilly and I’ll tell you.”

Lilly gets up, smiling like the kid who deserved the spanking but didn’t get it. I stand up and give her a quick hug. At least Chloe didn’t ask me to help her out the bind she’s screwed herself into. I guess Lilly warned her that I could only go so far.

“Lilly,” I say, drilling her with the evil eye, “we are officially friends again, but only because I am committed to helping Chloe do whatever she needs done.” I look at Chloe. “Is that good enough? I hope so because it’s really all I can manage right now.”

“I guess,” Chloe says, smiling. “Now let’s go to Richard’s office.”

I spend the next thirty minutes downloading all kinds of names and addresses and phone numbers and emails from Richard Stacks’ personal computer. The creep has six different email accounts and Chloe found the user names and passwords written on the bottom of his mouse pad. There is so much information and it’s so random that it’s impossible to link one woman to one phone number or physical address, but knowing their names and having their email addresses is a good starting point.

“I’m going to take this list and cross reference it with the little black book he keeps in his briefcase and try to put some names together with a phone number or an address or, if I’m lucky, both.”

“He doesn’t keep his brief case locked?” Lilly asks.

“No,” she says, “I guess he thinks I’m too dumb and/or scared to pilfer through his things, but I’m here to tell you girls,” she gets a faraway look in her eye, “those days are over.”

“Hell, yeah!” I say and give her a very gentle hug.

“Chloe,” Lilly says, “we will do anything and everything we can.”

“I know,” Chloe peeps, “and I know y’all love me enough to do this together.” She goes to the closet and brings out a box. “Here, use this. It’s a $1400 camera that I got for Christmas and I’ve never used it so y’all will have to figure it out,” she hands it to me. “Get me some proof. I know y’all are seasoned stalkers.”

“That we are,” I say, nodding my head in agreement, “that we are.”

“Okay, so do what you can with what you have there and I’ll email you the list of addresses in a day or two.”

Before either of us have time to respond, the doorbell rings and this time, Chloe looks surprised and becomes visibly nervous. So nervous, in fact, that she starts to shake.

“What is it, Chloe?” I ask. “Do you want me to get the door?”

“No,” she says, “I’ll get it. Just go through there and wait in the sun room if you don’t mind.”

Lilly and I hustle into the sun room like scalded dogs. After what seems like an eternity, Chloe comes back, smiling.

“It’s Brother Berkin,” she says, looking more than a little embarrassed, “sorry about that.”

“Not a problem,” I say.

“No problem at all,” Lilly chimes in.

“Okay,” she whispers, “do we have a plan?”

“Yes, we most certainly do,” I whisper back. “We’ll check out the local addresses tonight.”

“Tonight?” Chloe asks with palpable enthusiasm.

“Absolutely,” Lilly replies.

Brother Berkin greets us in the foyer and we exchange polite pleasantries before Lilly and I head out the door.

Once we’re outside, Lilly turns to me with a pleading look on her face.

“Ace, I need some help,” she says. “I’m asking you as a friend to help me. I can’t do it alone.”

“Lilly, I’ll do whatever I can to help Chloe, but your problem,” I shake my head, “I’m not going near that.”

“Ace, Catherine Hilliard has some stuff of mine that I desperately need to get back. It has nothing whatsoever to do with Drake Driskall, I swear to God, please.”

“Fine, Lilly,” I say, “but if you screw me on this, I just want you to know that I will whip your ass. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“I’ll pick you up at your place.”
Wicked is as wicked does. Or was that stupid?
“Lilly,” I say, as she settles into my passenger seat, “look at all this from my point of view and tell me what
I’m supposed to think about you right now.” I look at her, “Who is the Gentleman?”
“Ace,” she says with a heavy sigh, “you have been my best friend for over twenty years and you know I love
you like a sister, right?”
“Lilly, I’m not detecting an answer in that gibberish and if you want me to put this car in reverse, then you
better cease and desist with the sentimental bullshit and give me something legit.”
“Why can’t you just trust me?” she whines. “Just believe in me, like Chloe always does.”
“Chloe still believes in Santa Claus,” I say and wince at the reference and Lilly turns the evil eye on me.
“Okay, let me take that back. But this car isn’t moving from this driveway until you tell me what’s going on with
you.”
She takes a deep breath and looks out the passenger side window.
“Not moving.”
“I am accompanying a man on business trips who is having a secret affair with a married man and I’m just
there to make them look not so,” she pauses, “gay.”
“Uh, seriously-”
“There. I told you. Are you happy now?”
“Sounds like that could get confusing at bedtime,” I say, being very sarcastic.
“What?” she says with exaggerated exasperation. “You have hounded me to death about this for five months
and I have told you no less than a thousand times that I couldn’t talk about it and I have asked you no less than
ten thousand times to trust me and you never would, so there. Are you happy now?” She flips down the visor and starts
fiddling with her sleek blonde hair, “Can we get a move on? Please?”
“Okay, off we go,” I say and put the car in reverse. “So, are you like a lesbian or a fag hag or some kind of
weird sex freak or what?”
“Do not use the term ‘fag hag’ because that is derogatory and insulting to both gay men and their friends.”
“Sorry,” I say and mean it, “so what is the politically correct term for what you are then? An escort? A call
girl? What?”
“Not having this conversation, Ace, just drive, please.”
“Right,” I say, “because it’s not what it looks like, right?”
And we ride in silence from my house to the school.
“Pull up behind the cafeteria and let’s go in that side door next to the gym,” she says, pointing. “You got
your keys?”
“No, Lilly, I used a screwdriver to crank my car and left my keys at home.”
“You are such a smartass.” She whips out her school issued photo ID card that has a picture of her looking
like an advertisement for Crest White Strips and Pantene.
I whip out my school issued ID card, but my picture looks more like a startled primate at the zoo. I swear, the
woman taking the picture said “one” then paused for thirty seconds and said “two” then I popped my lips and the
bitch screamed “three!” and snapped the flash and now I have this jewel of a photograph that I am supposed to wear
around my neck every day.
I begged to have another photo made, but that vagina wart Catherine Hilliard refused. I waited a few weeks
and claimed I lost it thinking that would do the trick, but Mrs. Hilliard was kind enough to fish up the same old
photo to put on my new ID. Then she docked my check $35 for her trouble.
“C’mon,” Lilly says impatiently, “let’s do this.”
“What exactly?” I ask. “What are we going to do when we get into the school? You know the lobby is
locked and then Catherine Hilliard probably has dead bolts on her dungeon door.”
Lilly points to a crisscross of bobby pins in her hair.
“Are you freakin’ kidding me right now?”
“I can do it, trust me,” she says and I’m not feeling reassured. “Ace, I have to get in there, alright? I have to.
You don’t even understand how important it is for me to get in that building and get my stuff.”
“What stuff is it that you so desperately need?” I ask, stalling because I really don’t want to get arrested
again this week. “All the hog-head had in her hand that day was pictures and post cards.”
“It’s not the pictures and post cards that I need,” she looks at me. “It’s one of the frames.”
“The picture frames?”
“Yes, the thick black and brown frame. Did you notice if she had that one in her hand that day?” She gives
me a mean look, “Because it wasn’t in the stuff you threw out in my yard.”
“Yeah, she did because I remember thinking to myself what a big ass picture frame that was and, uh,” I look
at her, “kinda dwarfs the photo, don’t you think?”
“Kinda have a chip in it.”
“It didn’t have a cord.”
“Not one of those chips, stupid. It’s taped in where the inner and outer frames snap together.”
“Oh, so it’s one of those deals that could be two smaller frames or one big one.”
“Yes, glad you’re up to speed on that. Can we go now?” she looks around nervously.
“I’m not sure I really want to know, but I have to ask,” I look at her, “what’s on the chip?”
“Everything.”
“Oh. Okay. That’s clear as mud. Like pretty much everything else you’ve said so far today.” I sigh and think
 to myself that we go to jail then her sassy ass can bail us both out. “Why would you keep that at school and not at
 home?”
She just stares at me.
“Well, in that case, I guess I’m ready,” I say and don’t move.
“Great. Let’s go.” She unbuckles her seatbelt and nods for me to get out.
“Wait,” I put my hand on her arm, “what about the security cameras?”
“On the weekends, they only activate if there is an intrusion at the school.”
“Like breaking into the main office?”
“No, like a broken window or a kicked down door or something like that.”
“How do you know this?”
“Sheriff Jackson told me.”
“How very thoughtful of him.”
“Ace, shut up and get out of the car!”

We waltz up to the school trying not to look like the criminals that we are about to become. I unlock the door
 and we walk through the commons area to the office lobby.
It’s unlocked.
“It’s a trap!” I whisper. “Let’s get the hell outta here!”
“They don’t always lock it, you idiot, and I think you know that!” she whispers and walks into the lobby like
she owns the place. I walk behind her looking around like a bleeding man in a shark tank.
We get to Chloe’s office and she pauses, then looks back at me.
“I don’t think she’ll be back this year,” I whisper and she shakes her head and moves on down the hallway.
My stomach knots up when we get to Catherine Hilliard’s office because I can’t stop thinking about all the
ways this could go wrong. I’m so damn nervous and it’s so unbearably hot that I think I might pass out right there in
the hallway. Lilly is on her knees working the lock with her bobby pins and I start to wonder if her new gay friends
are some sort of criminals.
Then I hear it.
Click.
Lilly gets up and walks into Principal Catherine Hilliard’s office and I trail behind like Shy Ronnie in a
Saturday Night Live skit.
“C’mon and help me look!” she says and starts rifling through the piles on Mrs. Hilliard’s junky ass desk.
I walk around and pull open the top drawer on the left side. In there, I find a mixed mess of office supplies
 and a Cover Girl compact that looks like it was purchased sometime around 1986. The second drawer is full of
hanging file folders so I thumb through those, not looking for anything in particular when, at the very back, I see an
unusually wide file with “L.L.” written on the tab in thick black letters.
I pull it out and lay it on the desk and all kinds of pictures spill out the sides and it doesn’t take me but a
second to discern a common theme.
The same three people are in every photo. Two very distinguished looking gentlemen and one Lilly Lane.
Maybe she’s not screwing Drake Driskall after all.
“Got it!” Lilly yelps. “Let’s get out of here!”
She turns around and sees the pictures and gets this look on her face like she just got flashed by Larry King.
“Is this?” I take a gulp of air. “Are they-”
“Oh holy shit!” she screams. “Where did those come from? Where the hell did those come from?”
“Back there,” I point to the drawer. “Lilly, what the hell?”
“Oh my God! This is so much worse than I thought. Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! What am I going
to do?”
I have no idea how to answer that so I scoop up the file, grab her by the arm, and hustle her out of the office.
“Lock it back!” I order and we haul ass out to the car.
Lilly trips over her high heeled flip-flops in the parking lot and I pull her up and turn around just in time to see a patrol car turning into the drive.

“Oh God! Please let that be the Sheriff,” she whispers as we pile into my car. I cram the file folder under my seat and turn the air conditioner on full blast.

The patrol car parks sideways behind me, effectively blocking any exit I might have planned. In my rearview mirror, I see Deputy Dumbass get out of his patrol car and unsnap his billy club and I can’t stop thinking about Rodney King.

“Give me your school ID!” I whisper. “Now!”

“Oh God! Please let that be the Sheriff,” she whispers as we pile into my car. I cram the file folder under my seat and turn the air conditioner on full blast.

I roll down the window and decide that now is not the time to be bitchy.

“Good evening, Deputy,” I say and try to smile.

“What’re you ladies doin’ parked around here?”

“We were just working out in the gym,” I say, hoping that will stave off any questions about why I’m sweating like a whore in church.

“We both teach here and sometimes we come in on the weekends to work out, but not very often because it’s so unbearably hot in there.” I mop my forehead with one hand and offer him our school ID’s with the other. He looks at Lilly’s, raises his eyebrows, and smiles like men do when they feast their eyes upon her image. He flips mine over, jumps a little, and hands them both back to me.

“I ain’t never seen ya’ll back here before and I patrol this parking lot every night ‘cept Sundays.”

“Who patrols it on Sundays?” I ask and Lilly punches me in the arm.

“Officer,” Lilly says sweetly and leans over so her tank top falls at just the right angle to expose her pink polka dot bra. “It seems like we run into you every time we turn around and, you know what? I don’t even know your name.”

“Lilly Lane,” she says sweetly and holds out a delicate hand, “and you are?”

“Dax, ma’am,” he says with goofy-looking smile. He takes her hand and I think for a second that he might drop to one knee and kiss it. “Dax Dorsett. I’m from the Delta and don’t know many folks around here or where they work and what not, but I’m trying to get it all together.” Dax taps himself on the head and is unsuccessful in keeping his eyes off her boobs.

“Well, Dax Dorsett from the Delta, have you had supper?” Lilly asks and I’m shaking my head no, but have apparently ceased to exist.

“Why, no ma’am, I haven’t,” Dax says, and relaxes his stance. “I always ride by the school here, then take a break for supper.”

How convenient.

“We’ll follow you there,” she pauses, “unless you were going to arrest me for being a bad girl.” She bats her eyelashes like a 14-year-old girl feeling the first sting of Cupid’s arrow.

“Oh, no ma’am,” he says and his cheeks turn red. “No, ma’am, I wouldn’t do that.”

She blows him an air kiss and Deputy Dax Dorsett hustles back to his patrol car like he’s been called to the scene of a triple homicide.

“Lilly,” I say when she gets in, “what the hell was that about?”

“Making friends, Ace,” she smiles at me. “You should try it sometime.”

After a remarkably pleasant dinner at Pier 57 Pizza with the surprisingly funny Deputy Dax Dorsett, Lilly and I set out to stalk that rat bastard Richard Stacks.

“Ol’ Deyt is a real a sweetie,” Lilly muses after we get in the car and buckle up.

“Yeah, and who knew he served in Iraq and Afghanistan?” I say. “You know I have this image in my head of veterans being sweet little old men with mesh back caps or long haired fellows on motorcycles, but now there’s like this new wave of veterans and it’s all these hot young fellows that don’t look old enough to drive, let alone walk
around a war zone in a Kevlar vest with an M-16."

“I knew you thought he was hot,” Lilly teases as she reaches in the backseat for the camera. “I saw you checking him out.”

“Me? You were the one looking at the poor guy like you wanted to tie him to your bedpost and make him your private sex slave.”

“I thought about,” she says and laughs and I decide not to comment on her gay love triangle or Drake Driskall.

“He really is pretty hot,” I say, “and funny as hell.”

“And so charismatic,” she looks at me, “and all this time you’ve been running around here calling him Deputy Dumbass. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I am very ashamed of myself and from here on out, I’ll be calling him Deputy Hotass!” I exclaim and we both crack up.

“I really do like him and he seems so lonely up here without any friends or family- Hey!” she exclaims, “I’m going to invite him to the next get-together we have at your place.”

“Sounds good to me. Now let’s get down to business,” I say and start digging around in my console for the list of addresses that we put together at Chloe’s. “Fire up that GPS and let’s get a plan together because I wanna bust Richard Stacks’ balls and make him eat ‘em with a spoon.”

“Whoa now, sister. Keep in mind that we promised to do this on her terms, not ours,” Lilly says as she punches the addresses into the GPS.

“I just wanna beat his face in,” I say and fantasize for a minute about torturing him to death.

“You already beat his face in and you’re lucky he didn’t press charges,” Lilly says, still looking down at the GPS. “Alrighty, the closest one is on Elmhurst Street, so take a left at the light.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The first address is a bust, along with the next three, but the fifth house turns out to be a peach. As soon as we turn into the subdivision, I see that glistening white Lexus shining like a polished diamond in the moonlight. I slow down as Lilly fiddles with the high-dollar camera and I ask her if she knows what she’s doing and she says she doesn’t but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t. At any rate, she leans over and snaps a picture and the flash is so bright that it blinds us both and I almost run up into a landscaping ensemble that looks like it cost more than my car.

“Good word, Lilly!” I say. “We’re gonna look like Tiger Woods out here running over fire hydrants and shrubbery! Turn that flash off!”

“I don’t know how.”

“Is that even his car?”

“Well, it has ‘Stacks 1’ on the tag so I think it’s safe to say that it is.”

“Who lives there?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “Go check the mailbox.”

“That’s a federal crime!” I pause for a second. “You go check the mailbox.”

“Pull the car back around there and I will.”

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Hell yeah!” she exclaims and gives me a serious look. “Think about Chloe. How pitiful she was today. Think about what she’s lost.”

“I don’t want to vomit right now,” I say and bust a u-turn on the quiet street.

“Stop right here!”

I turn off my headlights and Lilly hops out, hijacks the contents of the mailbox, and is back in the car before I can say shit.

“Catalog, junk mail, graduation invitation, oh yeah! Credit card statement!” she looks over at me. “Bingo!”

“Who still gets their credit card bills in the mail? Don’t these folks know that there are small time criminals like us out and about in their ‘hoods? Raiding mailboxes,” I say and crack up at my own joke.

Lilly examines the billing statement and doesn’t even give me a courtesy laugh so I decide to follow the GPS directions to last two houses just to see what they look like.

“So it’s broken down into his and hers charges and it appears that Mr. Tate Dannan does a lot of international travel and Mrs. Dana Dannan has an affinity for spas and liquor stores.”

“Nice,” I say, “so what now?”

“Well, it appears he was dropping loads of cash in Europe during the first two weeks of this billing cycle and then the last two weeks, he must’ve been around here because it looks like local charges,” she flips the paper over, “regular stuff like the Dodge Store and the Tobacco Shop,” she pauses. “Oh hold on a second! Here it is!” She waves the billing statement in the air. “Last purchase on this statement is a plane ticket!” She squints at the paper,
“Twenty-eight hundred dollars. Damn!”
“So I’m gonna venture a guess and say that.”
“He could very well be back in Europe or some other faraway place,” Lilly finishes my sentence. “It’s a long shot, Ace, but it’s all we’ve got right now. Turn around.”
“We going back to the house?” I ask, feeling a rush of adrenaline worthy of a hunter eyeballing a sixteen point deer.
“Hell yeah, but let’s park somewhere else.”
“Oh my goodness, this reminds me of when you thought that beaver-toothed boy was cheating on you, but the poor bastard was really just playing cards with his friends at that awful hunting cabin that we almost died trying to find.”
“Why you gotta bring that up?”
“Well, it’s the last time we did some down-and-dirty-out-in-the-bushes kind of stalking,” I say, turning into an upscale apartment complex two blocks from our target.
“Hey, we should go get Buster Loo and pretend we’re out walking the dog.”
“If we had a dog,” I say, sarcastically, “why would we pretend to be walking a dog?”
“You know what I mean, smartass!”
“Now, you wanna talk about getting our cover blown?” I say. “We’d get arrested for disturbing the peace! You know he barks his fool head off every time the wind blows!”
“Right, okay. No Buster Loo. Let’s go then.” She crams the camera down in her bag.
“Wait! Let’s get that flash turned off.”
“I did that already.”
“Are you sure?” I ask and she nods her head and doesn’t look sure at all.
“C’mon let’s go!” she says and hops out of the car like a rabbit on Red Bull.
We maneuver though the landscaping at the edge of the parking lot, climb into and out of a deep gully, then walk along the short concrete fencing that outlines the more affluent neighborhoods on the west side of town.
Something moves in the darkness ahead of us and I don’t know if it’s a possum or the devil coming to get us and I get scared. I yelp like a dog and grab a tree trunk to hold on to while I scan the area for a varmint or a pitch fork. Lilly laughs so hard I’m afraid she’s going to piss her pants. Then a bat swoops down, she screams like a banshee and we both hit the grass and let the chiggers have their way with us for a few minutes.
“We are going to jail!” Lilly whispers.
“No,” I assure her, “we are not going to jail because we are way too slick for that.”
“Yeah, we look slick,” she whispers back, “slick as the working side of duct tape.”
“I was talking about the dew,” I whisper back.
We get up, shake off like wet dogs, and make our way down to the house where Richard Stacks’ Lexus is still parked in the drive. The backyard of the four story estate is completely dark. I hop the short stone fence and land in some prickly holly bushes and Lilly sniggers as I whisper-cuss like a sailor.
She hops the fence a few feet down and we tip toe across the pristine lawn onto a sprawling concrete patio. I ease up to the French doors while she creeps up to a large window.
“There’s a man and a woman on the sofa, but all I can see is the back of their heads,” I whisper.
“I can see the woman’s profile,” she whispers back, “but I just barely see the dude.”
“You think it’s him? I ask.
“Don’t know,” she answers, shaking her head, “but it’d just about have to be wouldn’t it?”
I decide to change positions and step back into a large wrought iron pottery shelf with about six hundred flower pots on it. I turn around to grab it and think I’ve got it steadied when I see one little pot teetering on the top shelf. I watch in terrified silence as the pot falls, flowers first, straight down onto Lilly’s head. She squeals like a pig and stumbles back into a patio chair and I watch in horror as the pot bounces off her head, onto the table, and down to the concrete patio where it shatters into sixty million pieces. Lilly jumps up, looks inside the house and, in a rush of movement, pulls out the camera, steps up to the window, and flash!
Yet again, I am blind, but that doesn’t stop me from trying to get the hell out of there. In my sightless haste, I stumble over a yard gnome and fall face first into a bed of monkey grass.
“Get your ass up and let’s go!” Lilly scream-whispers. “Here they come!”
I jump up and run through the yard like a rat on acid, hurl myself over the fence, and roll like Rambo down into the ditch.
I look around and Lilly is nowhere to be seen.
I hear a woman screaming for someone to call the police because there are burglars everywhere and in fifteen seconds flat, every back yard on the block is saturated with light and people are buzzing around like bees trying to
figure out what all the fuss is about.

A spotlight sweeps the air a few feet above my head and I hear sirens and dogs barking and I know I have to
get back to my car. Fast. I strain my eyes against the darkness in the ditch and don’t see Lilly anywhere, so I hunker
down and scurry away like a lizard on crack.

I stay low to the ground as I crawl out of the gully and make my way back to the apartment complex. I am
peeking around the brick dumpster box trying to make sure the coast is clear when my cell phone buzzes in the back
pocket of my shorts. I scream like a toddler at the dentist and take off in a dead sprint toward my car. I drop my keys
three times and my cell phone once before I finally get in, and when I do, I spin out of there like Ricky Bobby when
he had that cougar in his car.

19

I don’t recognize the number of the missed call, so I dial it back and, lo and behold, it’s Sheriff J.J. Jackson.

“Ace,” he barks, “where are you?”

“Oh, in my car,” I answer in a small voice.

“Would you happen to be close to the west side Wal-Mart?”

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact—”

“Get over here and get Lilly before I change my mind and take both of y’all to jail!” he yells.

“Lilly,” I say, trying to be coy, “where’d you find her?”

“In the damned field between Wal-Mart and Mrs. Dana Dannan’s house where some burglars made a mess
of the porch and since Tate is out of the country, Dana was quite alarmed by the intrusion. Now get over here right
now!”

“On my way,” I peep like a baby chicken.

“Behind Dollar General!” he yells and hangs up on me.

I’m nervous as a tick on a bald dog as I pull up behind Dollar General, but much to my relief, the Sheriff is
gone. Lilly is sitting on the curb covered from head to toe in dirt. She gets up and walks around to the passenger side
of the car and taps on the window.

“Can I get in or do you want me to walk home because I’m so ridiculously filthy?” she asks with a dejected
look.

“Nah, that’s what leather seats are for,” I say and motion for her to get in.

“Shit,” she says, closing the car door, “I haven’t ran that fast since,” she pauses for a second, “hell, ever.”

“How did you get so dirty?” I ask, trying not to laugh. “Did you fall down?”

“How did you get so dirty?” she mocks. “Well this,” she points to the black streaks in her yellow hair, “is
potting soil, my friend, from where you hit me in the head with a damned flower pot.”

“Accident,” I say quickly.

“And this,” she waves her arm across her body, “is from where I fell down in an irrigation ditch trying to get
away from the scene of the crime.”

She looks at me and I look at the road and she reaches over and plucks a cluster of twigs out of my hair. I can
feel her looking at me so I look back at her and have to hold my breath to keep from laughing. She raises her
eyebrows and eyeballs my equally dirty clothes and we both bust out laughing like the two dirt bags that we are.

“But all is not lost, my friend,” she says triumphantly and pulls the camera out of her bag, “because this
picture is worth more than a thousand words.”

She pushes a button and the camera comes to life and I cannot believe what I see on the tiny little screen.

20

I pass off another Monday through Thursday at school having lunch with Coach Hatter and Coach Wills,
dodging nosy questions about Chloe and Lilly, and getting my ass chewed out at least twice a day by that crotch
creature Catherine Hilliard.

I take off work Friday because I need more of a break than a two day weekend can provide.

I don’t want to stay home all day, but I don’t feel like getting ready or going anywhere. I drag myself to the
kitchen, make a pot of super stout coffee, and join Buster Loo in the backyard. I’m not in the mood to be sociable, so
I decide to spend the morning in fat girl isolation at the gym.

I forgo the walk of shame past the Bratz pack on the Boeing 747 treadmills and head over to the left side of
the gym where I get on an elliptical machine. After answering fifty questions on the nosy ass monitor, I see 30:00
minutes pop up on the timer and wonder which one of my answers indicated that I wanted to spend that much time
on this thing.

I’m huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf when my right foot slips, the left pedal goes crazy, and next
thing I know, I’m sitting astraddle of the big round plastic wheel cover with a raging pain in my cooter.

The only time my cooter has ever hurt this bad was back when I was a kid riding my cousin’s bike on a
gravel road and hit a rock that caused me to land cooter-first on that metal bar that girl bikes don’t have. I thought for sure I would die from the pain that day, but I somehow managed to pull through.

At least nobody was around when that happened. Everyone in the gym is staring at me now and I see that fellow with no hair on his arms heading my way. I’d like to move, maybe get down on my belly and crawl away like a snake, but I’m paralyzed by the pain in my nether region. I assure the muscle bound slickster that I’m not injured and get the feeling that he’s more concerned about a lawsuit than my well being, but at least he’s considerate enough to offer me an ice pack.

An ice pack for my aching cooter.
I politely decline.

After several minutes, I limp back to the locker room to get my bag so I can leave with what dignity I have left. Which is none. I stop by the Red Rooster Drive-In on the way home to get some breakfast and end up ordering fried pickles and a bacon cheeseburger because I think I’ve earned a little comfort food.

Two and a half hours later, I’m sitting on the couch watching a Biggest Loser rerun with a pack of lima beans between my legs when my doorbell rings.

“It’s unlocked!” I yell. “Come on in!”

I turn around expecting to see Lilly because she’s supposed to be coming over to discuss our stalking plans for the weekend, but it’s not her.

It’s Mason McKenzie.
As in, Mason McKenzie, the love of my life that I haven’t seen or spoken to in three years.
I have on an AC/DC shirt that’s a decade old and cut off sweat pants with holes in the butt. My hair looks like a pack of rats just moved out and I have a bag of frozen beans between my thighs. To make matters worse, Buster Loo is having an all-out balls-to-the-wall little doggie melt down.

I cram the lima beans in between the couch cushions and flip around so the holes in my shorts are looking the other way.

“Hey there, Buster Loo!” Mason McKenzie says affectionately. “How you doin’ little buddy?”
Buster Loo is speed licking him all over his face and wagging his tail so fast I’m afraid he’s going to sling it off his little chiweenie ass.

I blink a few times and rub my eyes, but apparently I’m not hallucinating. Mason McKenzie is standing in my kitchen wearing a sky blue polo shirt, khaki cargo shorts, and brown flip flops. His skin is nicely tanned and it appears his trips to the gym are a bit more frequent and productive than mine.
He’s looking at me now, smiling like we’re old friends.
“Hey, Ace,” he says, “how’ve you been?”

Well, my nerves are shot, my cooter’s frozen, and I’m on the verge of cardiac arrest because I’m still crazy in love with you.

“Great, Mason.” I put on a warm smile. “You?”
“I’m good,” he says and walks to the fridge.
“You hungry?” I ask as he digs through my refrigerator like he buys the groceries.
“Little bit.” He turns around with a soda and a Pier 57 pizza box. “Oh wow, this is great!”

If I were ten years younger, I’d tell him to get his damned hands off my leftovers and get the hell out of my house. I’m not sure if I’ve matured or just gotten lazy or what, but I just sit and stare.
“Can I join you?” he asks.
“Sure.” I wave to the love seat. “Have a seat.” And he does.
“So what have you been up to, Ace Jones?” he asks with a dazzling smile.
“Not much, Mason McKenzie.” I still can’t believe he is sitting in my living room drinking one of my sodas and eating my leftover pizza. “You come up to see your folks?”

“Nope,” he says and takes a bite of pizza.

“So?”

“So I heard what happened to Chloe and I heard what happened to Lilly and I heard you’ve been arrested once,” he raises his eyebrows at me, “almost twice, so since I’m the best lawyer I know, I decided I’d better come up for a few days.”

“And do what?” I say with a deliberate lack of enthusiasm.

“Get Lilly her job back, for one,” he says decisively. “Two, help Chloe get a divorce if she that’s what she wants. And three,” he looks me right in the eye, “talk you into marrying me.”

“Well,” I start, trying not to stutter, “well, that’s certainly an ambitious plan.” I try to breathe. “How long are you up for?”

“As long as it takes, baby,” he smiles at me and I almost faint, “as long as it takes.”

“Got a young fellow that’s been with me a while and I just made him partner. He’s the real deal,” he says between bites, “so he’s handling the foot work and I’m right here if he needs me.” He holds up a cellular gadget that I haven’t even seen on commercials yet.

“How long you been in town?” I ask and immediately feel like a dumbass.

“Are you trying to pick me up?” he laughs. “Was that a pick up line?”

“No,” I say and start laughing despite myself.

“Actually, I just got here, Ace, and was on my way to Ethan’s when I saw your car was here and just— I don’t know,” he pauses, “I just wanted to see you.” He looks down at my crotch. “Have you peed in your pants? Are you that happy to see me?”

I bust out laughing and tell him about the incident at the gym and he laughs till he almost chokes and, for one brief second, I allow the happiness to wash over me because, like Calgon, Mason McKenzie takes me away.

The doorbell rings again and I don’t have time to say “It’s open” before Lilly comes running in screaming, “Mason! Oh my goodness! Mason McKenzie, oh my God!”

He grabs her and hugs her and they are just so happy to see each other and Lilly has a light bulb moment and gets quiet.

“What are you,” she points at Mason, “doing here?” She points at me.

“Just visiting,” he says, smiling at me and I’m dying for one of those big hugs he just lavished on Lilly.

She nods her head and narrows her eyes at me.

“He’s been here five minutes, Lilly, calm down,” I say and she looks down at my shorts.

“Have you peed yourself?”

“No, just shut up and let’s go outside on the porch.” I wave toward the kitchen. “Lilly, grab whatever you want to drink and come on.” I reach down to pick up Buster Loo, but he scampers straight to Mason, who promptly scoops him up and I swear the dog is smiling from ear to floppy ear.

Lust is the great thief of common sense, therefore I must keep that demon in restraints. That is, however, easier said than done when a charismatic, six foot tall, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, sun-tanned, well-toned sex-machine-that-I-want-to-make babies-with is literally within my reach.

“You got the camera?” Mason asks as we settle into the overstuffed loungers on my patio. “I can’t wait to see that picture.”

“How do you know about the picture?” I ask, eyeballing Lilly, who takes a sudden and intense interest in my herb garden.

“Baby,” he says, smiling like we’re already sleeping together again, “I know everything. I thought you knew.”

“I know you’re corny as hell, I know that,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Lilly, did you get a print made?”

“Oh boy, did I!?” Lilly exclaims and pulls a large padded envelope out of her shiny ruffled purse that’s twice the size of Texas. She plops it down on the table and slowly withdraws a glossy 8 x 10 that we all gawk at in silence. The photograph offers a full frontal view of Mrs. Dana Dannan, who is sporting an ensemble made of black leather and red lace with gold chains framing her bare boobs. Much to our collective delight, the picture also offers a side view of Richard Stacks the Fourth, who is butt naked and appears to be looking at the ceiling. His well groomed and short, but freakishly fat penis is staring in the same direction.

“Oh, my God,” I whisper, “I couldn’t see on the camera screen that he was wearing a studded dog collar.”

“You should’ve left one in the photo kiosk,” I say. “That would’ve been hilarious.”

“Look at his dick!” Mason practically shouts. “It looks like a sea creature out of its shell!”

“Or made 200 copies and stuck ‘em on the windshield of every car in the parking lot.” Mason adds with an obnoxious snort then looks down at his watch. “Well, ladies,” he says, getting up and stretching, “I hate to break up the party, but I gotta run. I’ll see you both at Ethan’s tonight?”

“Sure!” Lilly says quickly. She stands up and he gives her another big hug and I want to jump up and pounce on him like a fat kid on some cake.

But I don’t.

I sit in my chair like a statue. A really sad statue sentenced by her creator to pine for a lover all throughout
“Ace,” he says, looking me in the eye, “I meant what I said earlier.”

“What’d you say earlier?” Lilly pipes and looks at me. “What’d he say earlier?”

“Nothing important,” I say. “Bye, Mason.”

“See you ladies tonight,” he calls over his shoulder, “let’s try not to get arrested in between now and then.”

“What did he say earlier?” Lilly asks again.

“He said you were going to tell us all about your top secret homo-weirdo love triangle and what Drake Driskall was doing at your house last week sitting on your sofa without a shirt on,” I stare at her. “That’s what he said earlier.”

“Oh,” she says, “Well, uh, okay, then. So, uh, you wanna run to China Kitchen before the lunch buffet ends?”

“Sure,” I say, smiling at my sly conversational maneuver, “just let me change shorts.”

“Okay,” Lilly says. “Hey! I’ll call and check on Chloe.”

“Good idea,” I say opening the back door, “I haven’t heard from her in a day or two.”

When I walk back out on the porch, Lilly is perched on the edge of the lounger with a gloomy look on her face.

“What?” I ask. “What is it?”

“Her number’s been changed,” she pauses, “to an unlisted number.” She tilts her head sideways and gives me a hard look, “When’s the last time you talked to her?”

“She called me on, let me think, what day was it?” I get my phone and go to recent calls, “Wednesday. She called Wednesday and asked if we’d found out anything about Richard.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“Hell, I told her no. Didn’t we agree not to tell her anything until we could sit down and talk to her face to face?”

“Yeah,” Lilly sighs and shakes her head. “She’s staying. She is staying with him. She is cutting us off and she is staying with that bastard.”

“I scroll down to Chloe’s name, punch the green button, and get the same results.”

“Forget China Kitchen,” I say, feeling my face getting red. “Let’s get on with the stalking. I want enough dirt on Richard Stacks to bury him ten times over. And I wanna put everything we get on him in a big fat binder and take it to Chloe so she can finally see for herself that Richard Stacks really is the piece of shit human being that we always told her he was.”

“Let’s do it!” Lilly says. “Oh, and I took that email she sent us Monday, you know the one with the list of potential mistresses she cross-referenced with the little black book? That was pretty ballys of her, by the way, and I have to say I’m pretty proud of her for that,” I nod in agreement and she continues, “anyway, I googled every tramp on there and I’ve got info,” she looks at me and raises her eyebrows, “good info, on all of them except for one. LeJay Cummer. There was absolutely nothing on her anywhere. It was weird.”

“It’s probably a fake name. Like a stripper or a prostitute or some other random brand of human trash. Hey,” I give her a suspicious look, “when did you get so computer savvy?”

“Well it wasn’t very difficult, I mean, most of them are strippers or call girls so they were pretty easy to pin point and I don’t have a job anymore and haven’t had anywhere,” she pauses and sighs, “I haven’t had anywhere to go lately, so I had to do something.”

“Alrighty then,” I say, letting the reference pass, “let’s take my car. We better leave that Hey-Look-at-Me-Here-I-Come-Down-the-Road-in-my-Pussy-Wagon thing you drive parked here.”

“Ha ha, Ace, very funny,” she says flatly. “Now take me to Red Rooster.”

While awaiting the arrival of brown bags of drive-in goodness, I peruse the list of Richard Stacks the Fourth’s potential side dishes and I can’t stop thinking about his weird looking penis and wondering how all of his whores react to it when they see it for the first time. Or anytime.

I run a finger down the list and count seventeen women in all. According to Lilly’s pink ink notes, seven of the women work the poles at various clubs in Memphis and four are call girls from the same area. Two are marked down as employees of a titty bar about fifteen miles from here known far and wide for its trashy, low class women. One is Mrs. Dana Dannan of leather and lace fame. Two are locals and then there is LeJay Cummer.

“You know none of those women are going to talk,” I mumble.

“Yeah, I know,” Lilly agrees. “Our only hope there is catching him red-handed.”
I look down at the last name on the list and get a sneaking suspicion that LeJay Cummer is indeed a fake name. Like Allota Vagina or Dixie Normus.

“So we have two women here that we can track,” I say, tapping the paper. “Who do we start with? The hair cutting lady or the real estate agent?”

“Why do you think he spends so much time on the phone with a real estate agent?”
“T...
“Fah sho,” she says and gets out of the car.
I watch as she trots past the end of the building, then dips into the thicket separating the rear parking lot of the accounting firm from the back side of the strip mall.

Two seconds after she disappears into the brush, Richard Stacks the Fourth walks out the back door of his office and makes a bee line for his car. I think for a second about jumping out and chasing Lilly into the shrubbery, but he would be able to see me every step of the way. I pick up my cell phone to call her, but hesitate because she never puts her phone on silent and wouldn’t hear it if she did.

Just as he reaches the front of his car, Lilly pops back out of the bushes and gives me a big thumbs up. I start waving frantically with one hand and pointing with the other. She whirls around and sees him and jumps back into the trees just as he glances down to where she was standing. Only after the white Lexus is well out of sight does she creep out of the brush.

She smiles triumphantly and starts taking long, confident strides back toward the car when, all of a sudden, she stops short, looks to her left, and freezes. I follow her line of vision and my eyes come to rest on a petite, silver haired lady holding a giant lady bug purse.

I know that little old lady. Everyone in Bugtussle knows that little old lady.

It’s Gloria Peacock.

Gloria Peacock is a spunky little senior citizen rumored to be one of the richest women in the South. Word is she knows everything about everybody in town and has known everything about everybody in town for the past fifty years. Maybe longer.

I look at Lilly then at Gloria Peacock and take a deep breath.
They both just stand there like cowboys at a shoot-out about to draw.
Lilly looks at her then back at me then back at her and Gloria Peacock looks at her then at me then back at Lilly and I’m looking back and forth between them wondering how long Mrs. Gloria Peacock has been standing there with her big ol’ lady bug purse.

Nobody moves.

All of a sudden, Lilly gets this look on her face like she just remembered where she was and starts walking toward Gloria Peacock, who steps into the shade as she approaches.
They have a brief interchange that ends with Lilly and Gloria Peacock both tossing their heads back and laughing like they just heard the best joke ever. Then Mrs. Peacock waves one of her frail, diamond laden hands at me and smiles the biggest, most genuine smile I have ever seen.

Lilly comes and gets in the car.

“What was that?” I ask. “What was so funny?”

“Well, Mrs. Gloria Peacock saw the whole thing.” Lilly glances back at the elderly lady who has just gone inside Merle Norman. “She was very brief and told me, in a nutshell, that she knows everything that’s been going on for the past week and would really like to sit down and speak with us.”

“Sit down and speak with us? So are we, like, in trouble with her?”

“Oh, no,” Lilly laughs, “not by a long shot!” She looks at me, “She says she has just what we need to get what we want.”

“How does she know what we need and what we want?”

“I asked her the same thing and do you know what she said?”

“Why, hell no. How would I know that?”

“She said, and I quote, ‘Sweetheart, I’m Gloria Peacock and when I tell you that I have what you need, you don’t ask questions, honey, you just show up.’”


“No doubt,” Lilly says and then squeals, “and she’s expecting us at her house tomorrow afternoon at 2 p.m.”

“Oh! You are lying!” I say, getting really excited. “You are freakin’ lying to me! We, me and you, have a date with Gloria Peacock at The Waverly Estate? No shit? Are you serious?”

“I am dead serious and I cannot wait,” Lilly screeches.

“Me either! What are we going to wear?”

“Sundresses,” Lilly says definitively, “sundresses and heels.”

“I am not wearing heels,” I retort, “but I will wear some nice sandals.”

“Then you should wear a strapless dress,” she says and swings her hair around like she’s posing for a photo shoot. “I’ll wear heels.”

“That sounds good.” I take a deep breath. “Maybe this is a good sign. Maybe this means that this whole damned mess is going to work out somehow and everything is going to be okay.” I nod my head. “I think it’s a good
Uh, yeah,” Lilly agrees, “when the richest woman in six states joins your team, it’s hard to imagine you’re gonna lose!” She looks at me and smiles, “Now let’s go stalk some whores!”

“Hell yeah!”

She grabs her little netbook out of her gigantic hobo bag and flips it open.

“Okay,” she mumbles as she pecks at the keyboard, “it appears that Dick Richard is heading toward Tupelo.”

“Well, let’s go,” I say and we’re off.

We spend the afternoon following Richard Stacks the Fourth all over Tupelo and, all in all, it was a pretty dull run. After stopping by three different businesses and two banks, he went to the mall where he emerged with bags from Ann Taylor Loft and Barnes & Noble.

“Books and clothes,” I say flatly, “wonder who those are for?”

“The new John Grisham book came out this week,” Lilly says, clearly as bummed as me, “and you know Chloe has the entire collection in hardback.”

“Great,” I say and we follow him to a liquor store and then to a flower shop from which he emerges with an arm load of yellow roses.

“Do you think he could possibly be going to meet some whore tonight?” Lilly asks, but I can tell by her tone she knows that’s not the case.

“Anne Taylor clothes, books, yellow roses, and a liquor store bag that most certainly contains a bottle of that really expensive wine she likes,” I mumble and shake my head, “you know he’s going home.”

We watch in total disappointment as the black dot on the netbook screen inches up Highway 45, veers off to the left, and then stops. The address pops up as 309 Parker Drive. Home of Richard and Chloe Stacks.

“Shit,” Lilly says and closes the computer. “What do you wanna do now?”

“Let’s go see a movie,” I say. “What time is it?”

“Three o’clock,” Lilly answers, “just in time for the early show.”

When we leave the movies, the black dot hasn’t moved.

“What the hell is she doing?” I ask Lilly. “Why does she stay with him? I mean, what’s it gonna take? What is it going to take to get her away from that shit bag?”

“She’s gonna have to make up her mind herself, Ace,” Lilly says, “simple as that.”

“That’s why we have got to have more than just that one picture,” I say and tap on the steering wheel to emphasize my point, “to help her make up her mind.”

“Honestly, Ace,” Lilly says quietly, “I don’t know if a hundred pictures just like that would make any difference to her because, in her mind, she’s doing the right thing by staying true to her vows.”

“Wasn’t that the story she gave us last time? The last ten times?”

“Yes,” Lilly answers, “but last time she didn’t lose a child.”

“What the hell else would you need after that? Jeez,” I can feel my face getting red, “I mean, are we wasting our time out here running around like idiots trying to catch Dick Richard in the act? I mean, he beat her so bad she had a miscarriage. Seriously, what do you need after that kind of devastation? Yet she is still, still after eleven years of getting the hell beat out of her, still with him,” I look at Lilly. “Are we wasting our time? Should we just drop it and try to forget about it?”

“What kind of friends would we be if we did that?” Lilly replies. “We’re just doing all we can with what we have to work with and that’s all we can do right now.”

“I can’t believe she changed her number and hasn’t even bothered to call either one of us,” I muse, “especially after her being so determined to bust his balls and get rid of him. What’s with that?”

“I wish I knew,” Lilly says, “I wish I could ask her that myself.”

We ride in silence for a few miles.

“You going to Ethan Allen’s tonight?” I ask Lilly with a mischievous look in her eye.

“No,” she grins, “and I can’t wait.”

I wonder if her homosexual triangle pals approve of her seeing a young stud ten years her junior, but I decide
not to ask. I turn into my driveway and she starts stuffing all of her junk, Red Rooster trash and all, into her luggage-sized purse.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say. “Hey, let’s go in your car. They might not let us in the gate in the dirty ol’ Maxima.”

She laughs and says, “No problem! Pussy Wagon it is! I’ll be here around 1:30 and, in case you didn’t know, I’m excited!”

“Me too!” I say and wonder what Gloria Peacock could possibly have that we need.

Maybe it’s a million dollars.

Ha.

I put my cut off sweat pants and AC/DC shirt back on, plop down onto the sofa, and feel a cold, damp lump under my ass.

Lima beans.

Great.

I order a pizza from Pier 57 and flip thru my DVR in search of something funny to watch because I desperately need to be cheered up.

I think about getting all dolled up and rolling into Ethan Allen’s looking like a fox. Then I could sweep Mason McKenzie off his feet and bring him home to love and hold on to for the rest of my life. Or at least have some red hot sex with. Ha.

My mind spins a million “what if” fantasies and after ten minutes, I snap back to reality and remind myself that I am too old to be so pathetic.

The doorbell rings and I jump up and run to the kitchen door, but no one is there so I run to the front door only to be greeted by the smiling face of a nice young fellow in my 3rd period Art class who is, of course, wearing a Pier 57 Pizza tee shirt and matching visor.

“Hello, Ms. Jones,” he says politely and I get the feeling he is trying real hard not to stare at my shorts.

“How you doin’ tonight?”

“Oh, I’m great Davis,” I say, “hold on a second.” I run to the kitchen, grab a twenty, run back to the door, and give him the money. He starts digging in his pocket for change and I tell him to keep it for a tip.

“But, Ms. Jones,” he protests, “the pizza was only $12.95.”

“Yeah, Davis,” I say, smiling, “that’s for not telling everyone at school about these atrocious cut off sweat pants.”

“Can I tell ‘em about your AC/DC shirt?” he asks. “Cause that rocks!”

“Sure,” I tell him, taking the pizza box and stepping back into the house. “Just make me sound way cooler than I actually am.”

He pockets the money and smiles. “No problem, Ms. Jones. Thank you and have a good night.”

As he walks off the porch, I suffer a wave of disappointment that my evening caller was not Mason McKenzie. Then I suffer a wave of being pissed-off at myself for being disappointed and remind myself, yet again, that I am not and cannot be so pathetic.

So what if he said he wants to marry me?

Who cares?

I’m not falling for that one again.

I eat half the pizza, drink three beers, and fall asleep on the couch with Buster Loo in the bend of my knees. I get up at 3 a.m., put the leftovers in the fridge, and stumble back to my bedroom. My cell phone is laying face down on my night stand and I tell myself not to pick it up.

But I reach right over and I pick it up. When I do, I see that I have seven missed calls from J. Mason McKenzie. All received after midnight.

“I am too old for 2 a.m. booty calls, Buster Loo,” I say to my little dog as he nestles into the covers. “Too freakin’ old.”

On Saturday, I change dresses and shoes and hair-dos and earrings and bracelets and necklaces and scarves about forty times each. It’s a rare occasion when I worry about what someone might think of how I look, but this is Gloria Peacock we’re going to see today.

The most stressful part of getting ready is finding something to wear that doesn’t piss me off because it makes me look like a balloon-butt old biddy getting dressed to go to Mardi Gras or an overdone reject from a Men in Black casting call.

After I pile enough clothes on the floor to put a Lane Bryant store out of business, I go to the closet and dig
out a dress that I snagged off a sale rack last year and haven’t even tried on yet. It’s high-waisted white sundress that has a turquoise sash with a big, fluffy flower sewn onto the left side. I put it on and, much to my surprise, it looks pretty decent. After checking all the angles, I decide to call it my magic dress because it covers everything that needs to be covered in the area of jelly rolls, cleavage, and thighs and has the added bonus of matching a pair fabulous sandals I bought on clearance last year. Hell yeah. Problem solved.

Having beat my hair to death with a hundred different styling attempts, I have no choice but to roll it up in a bun, but at least I have a nice white ribbon to tie around it. I twirl around like a school girl in front of the mirror and smile at myself because I like what I see. And that almost never happens.

The doorbell rings and I strut down the hall to the living room and find Mason McKenzie standing in my kitchen looking like a hot mess on humid day.

“You look great, Ace,” he says, giving me a shy smile.
“Where’d you get the weed eater?” I ask snidely.
“What?” he asks, squinting at me like I’m talking way too loud. “Weed eater?”
“Yeah,” I shout, “the one you fixed your hair with.”
“Oh, that’s really funny,” he says without laughing. “Where you headed?”
“To The Waverly Estate,” I answer, thinking that will really impress him.
It doesn’t.
“Oh,” he says, “Mrs. Peacock and my grandmother are really good friends. Nice place.” He pauses. “Why are you going out there, if you don’t mind my asking?”
“Because Gloria Peacock invited me,” I say with no small amount of pride, “and Lilly.”
“Well, how nice,” he says flatly. “Where were you last night?”
“What are you,” I ask sarcastically, “my parole officer?”
“Why are you always such a smart ass?”
“Why do you think you can keep showing up at my house unannounced and uninvited?”
“You are impossible,” he says and turns to leave, “and you said you would be there. That’s why I asked.”
“Lilly said she would be there if I remember correctly.”
“So we’re back to this already?” he says as he pushes open the door.
“Back to what?” I fire back.
“Not speaking.” He slams the door shut and Buster Loo rocket launches himself out the doggie door and I can hear him outside barking his fool head off.

I run back to the bathroom and start fanning myself so the tears won’t run down my face and ruin my make-up. I look out the window and see Mason petting Buster Loo and scold myself out of the mood to cry.

I watch in complete agony as he puts down the little dog and disappears around the corner of the house. Buster Loo starts running speedy-dog crazy eights, stopping at every turn to throw his little chiweenie body against the fence and my heart breaks for my poor daddy-less dog.

Time slows to a snail’s pace and I sit on the edge of the tub fanning myself like Scarlett O’Hara. After what seems like hours, I hear a horn blow so I get up, do a quick mirror check, and run out the front door where Lilly is smiling and waving. I stuff my heartache back in that place I’ve kept it for the past three years and I’m all smiles as I climb into her red BMW.

“Damn,” she says, “we look good!”
“I concur,” I say smartly. “Love that dress!” I lean over to get a look at her shoes. “Oh good word, those are beyond fabulous. And probably cost more than that set of tires I put on my car last week.”
“Thanks!” she beams at me. “Ready?”
“Am I?!” I exclaim. “Am I! You bet your sparkly little purse I am!”
I ask her how it went with Dax and she talks about him all the way to the gates of The Waverly Estate and that’s fine with me because I am more than in the mood to sit with my mouth shut and listen to her ramble about her handsomely lover.

The iron gates of The Waverly Estate look like they were hand crafted by Michelangelo himself. We sit in the shade of this gigantic work of art and wait for the gate guard, sleek and sporty in starched white shorts and a blue polo, to make his way from the guard house to the car. He asks to see our identification, scribbles something on his clip board, pushes a button on a device attached to his belt, and the glorious gates begin to move.

“Welcome to Waverly, my pretty ladies,” he says with a deep southern drawl. “Miss Lane, you can park right over there in any one of those spots and a gentleman will pick y’all up and take you around to the pool where Mrs. Peacock is waitin’.”

“Thank you so much, sir,” Lilly says. “Have a nice day, sir.” She rolls up her window and looks at me in a
panic. “Are we supposed to tip these people?”

“Oh my word, Lilly, you are such a dumb ass! We are at a private residence, not the freakin’ Peabody Hotel!”

“Well, you’re supposed to tip anyone who provides you with a service.” For all her many travels, she obviously only carried her passport. I guess beautiful women don’t get much experience tipping because they’re always on the arm of a benevolent man.
“Well, take him twenty bucks if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Twenty dollars,” she yells, “are you crazy?”

“No,” I say quietly, “but you sure as hell are. Now shut up and let’s at least pretend like we have sense
ever enough to be here.”

We get out of the car just in time to see a shiny blue golf cart pull up to the curb. Instead of straps to secure clubs, it has a seat on the back emblazoned with a majestic blue peacock in all its feathered glory. The driver appears to be a clone of the gate man and I start having visions of Mr. Deeds in that mansion with that sneaky butler fellow.

“Ladies,” the gentleman says with a friendly smile, “it would please me greatly to give y’all a ride.”

“We’d love that,” I say and try to smile big enough for the two of us because Lilly has lapsed into some kind of idiotic stupor and is looking around at all the trees and flowers with her mouth half open and I worry for a second that she might start to slobber.

I elbow her and nod to the cart and she walks over and gets in, the whole time looking like a stupid ass robot with long, tan legs and expensive heels. When the gate-clone-servant man hits the gas, I lean over and whisper, “Hey globe trotter, what the hell is wrong with you? You’re acting like you’ve never seen an azalea in bloom.”

“There’s just something about this place,” she says dreamily, “I can’t explain it.” She looks at me, wide-eyed. “Don’t you feel it? It’s like an aura or something.”

“Have you been smokin’ weed?” I ask and I’m dead serious.

“No,” she looks at me like I’m the moron. “It’s magical. This place is absolutely magical!”

“You are a freakin’ fruit loop.” I whisper, but she isn’t listening.

“Look, there’s a peacock!” she squeals. “A real live peacock!”

I roll my eyes and wonder if she’s upped her daily dose of crazy meds.

After a winding tour through what could easily pass for a privatized Garden of Eden, we roll to a stop next to a clover shaped pool fit for a Hawaiian beach resort. Lilly is still thoroughly intoxicated with the loveliness of The Waverly Estate and has counted seven real live peacocks roaming the grounds. I bite my lip and tell myself now is not the time to call her a dip shit.

Lilly slides off the back seat of the shiny blue golf cart, walks over and hugs Gloria Peacock like the petite little lady just saved her from being eaten by piranhas. Gloria Peacock hugs her back and smiles that thousand watt smile and I wonder for a brief second if her teeth are real or if they’re dentures. Very expensive dentures. Like made of ivory or something.

“We haven’t officially met,” she says, offering a hand laden with jewels more valuable than my house. And probably my life. “Gloria Peacock.”

“Graciela Jones,” I say, shaking her hand and trying not to stare at her rings, “but everyone calls me Ace.”

“And why is that?” she asks quickly and I’m caught off guard by her question so I stand there like a deaf mute waiting on a phone call.

“Because she’s always been so great at sports,” Lilly gushes, “ever since she was a little girl, she could play any sport she wanted and never even needed to be coached. She’s a natural athlete. Very talented.”

My face is burning from embarrassment and it only gets worse when Lilly goes from gushing about what a prodigy I was fifteen years ago straight into gushing about how The Waverly Estate is more magical than Disneyland. We are standing directly in the hot summer sun and I think I might pass out from the painful combination of heat and humiliation.

Gloria Peacock is kind enough to notice that I’m having a near death experience so when Lilly stops to catch her breath, she invites us both to sit down. She waves her bejeweled hand toward a shaded little hut adorned with four oscillating fans.

Thank you, Jesus.

A female version of the gate-keeping-golf-cart-driving-servant-clone glides into the hut and places a glass pitcher of sweet tea in the center table. She disappears, but returns in a flash with a bowl of lemon wedges and some tiny silver tongs. Another servant clone appears and presents large, clear glasses filled with square chunks of ice and some kind of weird plates that look like they’re made out of bamboo. Yet another servant presents us with a platter loaded with tea cakes, candied pecans, cheese straws, chocolate dipped strawberries, and four more sets of those adorable little tongs.

I look at Gloria Peacock and smile.

I am starting to see the magic.

And I want a pair of those little tongs.

“Help yourself,” she says, smiling that big smile of hers and I realize that I don’t give a rat’s ass if she’s smiling at me with real teeth or elephant tusk dentures, I load my plate up like the black sheep cousin at a white trash family reunion. Lilly, however, gracefully places just enough food on her plate to feed a small bird. A very
When we finish the sweet tea, snacks, and polite chit chat, Gloria Peacock stands up and says, “Okay, girls, it’s time to get down to business. Follow me, please.”

We follow her around the pool and through a set of French doors flanked on both sides by about fifty more French doors. Or windows. I can’t tell. We step into a sun room that looks like a Pottery Barn ad and from there into a marble floored hallway topped with domed ceilings painted up like a cathedral. We follow her around a table topped with a flower arrangement the size of Rhode Island, down another glitzy hallway, and into a room that looks like a scene from Mission Impossible.

“Welcome to my media room,” Gloria Peacock says proudly, “make yourself comfortable.” She motions toward a gigantic sectional facing an electronic arrangement as impressive as it is intimidating. The brown leather sofa is soft and smooth and I feel like I’m floating on a cowhide cloud. Lilly perches on the edge of a cushion and has this look on her face like she’s not sure where she is or how she got here.

Meanwhile, Gloria Peacock is standing in the center of the room facing her electronic empire and appears to be conducting an invisible orchestra. She’s waving and pointing and I’m starting to wonder is she might be a little off her rockers when all of a sudden the wall comes to life and I’m looking at a picture of me and Lilly talking to Deputy Dax Dorsett outside the gym the night we broke into Catherine Hilliard’s office.

“Where did that come from?” I ask, stunned and secretly embarrassed for thinking she might be senile. Lilly’s mouth is hanging open again and I’m not sure if she’s shocked to see our sweaty faces splayed across Gloria Peacock’s larger-than-life magic computer monitor or if she’s lusting after Deputy Dax, whose biceps look damn sexy up on that big screen.

“Omega Security Systems,” Gloria Peacock says, “my first husband’s brain child and my oldest son’s life work.”

She smiles and Lilly and I stare at the screen like a pair of teenage boys seeing boobs for the first time. “My Will, General William Peacock, spent 22 years in the Army before he retired and went to work for the F.B.I.” She pauses and seems to be lost in thought, but only for second. “Surveillance was his specialty and this,” she waves a hand around the room, “is today’s version of the work he began back in the 50’s.”

“They had video surveillance in the 50’s?” I ask, trying to shake off the stupor and, at the very least, appear to have a grain of sense.

“Indeed they did and my William designed the specs that became the foundation of COINTELPRO,” she looks at me and my expression must convey my ignorance because she continues, “COINTELPRO is a surveillance system that the government put into action in 1956, but had to quit using in ‘71 because a bunch of idiots broke into a field office in Pennsylvania and,” she shakes her head and sighs, “what followed was nothing short of mayhem. Blown completely out of proportion.”

Coin…tell…pro?” I ask and now I’m wondering if Gloria Peacock might be a Russian spy or something. “What is that?”

“COINTELPRO is an acronym for Counter Intelligence Program.” She points at the screen and another image pops up and I’m looking at myself standing outside the emergency entrance to the hospital wearing only one flip flop. Sheriff Jackson has his back to the camera and is looking at the concrete, as are Lilly and Ethan, and Deputy Dorsett is in the process of getting out of his patrol car.

“Oh my God,” Lilly whispers. “What was that movie? With Will Smith and Gene Hackman—”

“So how do you—” I trail off as she brings up a shot of me and Logan Hatter in the parking lot of Ethan Allen’s and my mouth is wide open and Logan has his arm around me and his eyes are closed. “That is amazing detail!” I exclaim. “This is unbelievable,” I pause, shaking my head, “but how?”

“Enemy of the State,” Lilly whispers and I look at her and she has this weird look on her face and I start thinking that maybe she and Deputy Dax have been getting freak nasty on top of his patrol car and that’ll be the next picture we see up on the big screen.

“Mrs. Peacock,” I muster up all my courage, “is this legal?”

“Perhaps not,” she says like it’s no big deal. “My son had the cameras installed at various locations around town as a gift to the city to help cut down on crime. He’s given that gift to several little towns in the tri-state area, but ours is the only one to which I pay attention.”

“So who all has access to this information?” Lilly asks, with obvious apprehension.

“Me,” she says smartly, “and each town’s local authorities and the Feds, but they have to be granted permission and issued login information before they can use it. They can’t just hack into the system any time they’d like.”

“Do the police know you have access to the system?” I ask, using my best of course I don’t think you’re a
criminal voice.

“Why should they?” she asks, smiling. “Does it hurt to have an old lady like me surfing the databases from
time to time? I think not,” she says decisively, “especially since all of their equipment was a gift from the Peacock
family.”

“So you just sit in here and play God?” I ask and immediately wish I wouldn’t have because I’m heavy on
the I was wrong and you are a criminal voice.

“God,” Gloria Peacock says coolly, “is not a woman and I have too much reverence for Him to assert myself
in that way.”

“So what do you call what you do here?” I ask and Lilly scowls at me, but keeps her mouth shut.

“I call it my goodwill ambassadorship to people less fortunate than I,” she says and levels a look at me that
makes me look at the floor.

“Well, I guess that would cover everybody in the southeastern United States,” I mumble, “at least.”

“Mrs. Peacock,” Lilly begins with an apologetic tone, “please let me apolo-

Gloria Peacock cuts her off mid-word. “Lilly, it’s perfectly alright,” she says quietly, “I appreciate an honest
skeptic. Now, Ace,” she turns her eagle eyes and ivory smile back to me, “let me answer your question about what I
do here.”

She brings up a photo of Richard Stacks and a red-headed woman fondling each other next to a dumpster.

“Like most people, I know what goes on in and around this little town and when I hear something skewed, I do my
research then make a legitimate effort to help the people who deserve it. Some are aware of my intervention, others
aren’t. In all honesty, most people have no idea I play any role in the resolution of their issues. A certain degree of
secrecy makes it easy to continue getting things done.”

She pauses, points, and the magic screen produces another picture of Richard Stacks. In this one, he’s parked
next to what appears to be the same dumpster and there is a blonde head in his lap. “These are just a few examples
of the research I’ve done on Chloe’s husband, but we’ll get to that later.”

“Okay,” I say, not sure how to proceed.

Lilly just sits there and shakes her head.

“First of all,” Gloria Peacock announces like she’s speaking from a pulpit, “I know that Lilly was fired and I
know the real reason why.”

“What?” Lilly exclaims and jumps off the couch like her ass is on fire. She opens her mouth to speak but
Gloria Peacock holds up a bejeweled hand.

“Mr. Reece Hilliard and Dr. Ryland Lane are both dear friends of mine.”

“How do you know?” Lilly hisses like a cat and I try to figure out how Lilly’s psychotic mood swing factors
into this odd turn of conversation.

“I know all about Reece and your Uncle Ryland, my sweet girl,” Gloria says and Lilly looks like she’s about
to pass out. “I’ve worked closely with those two fine gentlemen over the years and I have known all along what you
and only a few others know now.”

I cover my mouth and gasp.

“Holy shit, Lilly,” I croak like a frog.

Lilly’s face is beet red and her eyes are wild. She is staring at Gloria Peacock like she wants to rip her face
off.

“Why are you doing this?” she demands. “Do you just sit in here waving your arms around, collecting
pictures of them as well? Do you know what would happen if people found out about them?”

I try to wrap my mind around the fact that Lilly’s uncle, an accomplished and well respected professor at the
University of Mississippi, and Reece Hilliard, a prominent banker who has the misfortune of being married to one
Catherine Hilliard, really are going stinger to stinger in the story of the bees and the bees. They were the two
gentlemen in the pictures I found in Catherine Hilliard’s desk. I wonder if perhaps I’ve been hearing Lilly wrong for
the past five months and she’s been saying “The Gentlemen” all along instead of “The Gentleman” and I just didn’t
pick up on it. She’s usually not that slick, so I make a mental note to ask her about that later.

She looks like she’s about to lose her ever-loving mind so I dismount the cowhide cloud and put my hand on
her arm, but she shrugs me off and continues to stare at Gloria Peacock like she wants to rip her face
off.

“Lilly,” I say, “you need to calm down.”

“Calm down!” she screams. “I lost my job because of this and Catherine Hilliard accused me of having sex
with an 18 year old kid to justify it! Do you know how humiliating that is?” She turns that crazy nutcase glare on
me, “Even you doubted me and you are my best friend! I ditched our trip to Panama City Beach for this and I
thought you’d never speak to me again, then when Drake ran over from the pool so we could discuss why Catherine
Hilliard was trying to frame us, here you come with some damned Chinese food and then you throw all of my shit out in the yard!” She has tears in her eyes. “I went through all of that to protect them because what they have is so special and so sweet and I thought nobody knew, but people know,” she looks at Gloria Peacock and the tears start rolling, taking heaps of mascara down with them, “you know. So what was the damn point? Why did I have to wreck my whole life being part of a cover up if people already know?”

“People don’t know, Lilly,” Gloria Peacock says softly. “Reece, Ryland, and I are part of an elite and very private circle of friends. We don’t have to be told things.”

“I know I’m about to call Uncle Rye right now and tell him he’s full of shit.”

“Lilly, please sit down,” Gloria Peacock takes a seat on the sectional and pats the cushion next to her. “Ace, could you please get her some water out of the cooler?”

“Uh, sure.” I look around for a cooler and see nothing that resembles an igloo or a fridge so I wander toward the wall and stand there like I’m expecting water to fall from the sky like manna from heaven.

“Third cabinet door from the left,” Gloria says, nodding. “Would you please bring me one also?”

“Sure.” I say and step over to a line of cabinets that look like they cost more than my car and count down to the third door. Sure enough, it’s some kind of little refrigerator stocked with imported beer, bottled water, and plastic bags stuffed with cut vegetables and fruit. I just after the beer for a second then grab three bottles of water and return to the sofa because I can’t wait to hear the rest of this story.

Lilly’s face is in her hands and she is sobbing uncontrollably. Gloria Peacock is rubbing her back and telling her everything is going to be just fine because we are going to set things straight and make things right and I don’t know about Lilly, but I believe her. I wouldn’t be any more convinced of victory if I were eavesdropping on Pat Summit in the Tennessee locker room.

Gloria Peacock looks up at me, holds up two fingers, then points back at the cabinets. I place my water on the marble top coffee table and go back to see what’s behind door number two.

Behind that door, I find all shapes and sizes of blue and white towels. I grab a small one, wet it in the sink, and take it to Lilly. She wraps it around her face and calms down to heaves and sniffles. I pick up my glass bottle of water and sit back down on the sofa.

“Okay girls,” Gloria Peacock begins, “back to the facts.”

“Okay,” Lilly and I say in unison and I can’t wait to hear the facts.

“My use of this surveillance equipment could be construed as unethical or even illegal, yes,” she looks from me to Lilly then back at me, “but so is speeding and I’ve never run over anyone with my little plastic mouse over there,” she pauses, smiling, “not literally anyway. And as far as ethics go, I can’t see a single thing on that screen that anyone standing on any street corner in the city couldn’t see at any given time.”

No! I don’t want to talk about surveillance ethics and legality! I want to hear about Reece Hilliard and Ryland Lane getting it on like pot of neck bone! Dammit! I take a sip of water and try to hide my disappointment.

“So you have constant access to what anyone walking down the street can see with their own two eyes?” Lilly asks and she sounds like she has marshmallows stuffed up her nose.

“Basically,” Gloria Peacock says. “I’m kind of like a high tech Robin Hood, if you will, watching out for people,” she pauses and does the ping pong glance again, “and when I saw Lilly put that tracking mechanism on Richard Stacks’ lovely white Lexus, I knew that you were the kind of girls that I could help. So I came home and did some research.”

Oh. Forgot she witnessed that little foray in small time criminal activity.

“So how does this thing work?” I ask, nodding toward the super computer system. “How did you get those pictures?”

“You’ve heard of auto face recognition?” she looks back and forth and back and forth again and we both nod yes, but I’ve never heard of it and I’m sure Lilly hasn’t either. I mean, if they don’t print it in Cosmo, she doesn’t know about it and if it’s not on basic cable, then I don’t. Gloria Peacock obviously senses that we have no idea what she’s talking about because she provides us with a brief explanation of the basics.

“So you just say a name and then you get a list of options like when you search for an image on Google?” I ask and my mind fills with names I’d like to holler at that computer.

“Yes,” she answers, “simple as that.”

“But how,” Lilly asks, “how does it know what we look like? I mean, how does it know what face goes with what name?”

“Do you have a driver’s license?” Gloria Peacock asks and the light of understanding begins to shine in Lilly’s eyes. “Would you like to see a demonstration?”

“I would love that!” I say with a bit too much enthusiasm.

Gloria Peacock returns to the center of the room and starts conducting her invisible orchestra again. When
she stops, she says, “Search Catherine Hilliard.”

Lilly and I look at each other then back at the screen where about six million thumbnail shots pop up.

“Let’s narrow it down,” Gloria Peacock says with a smile, then clearly articulates, “Search file for Ardie Griffith.”

“Why is she searching for the superintendent in Mrs. Hilliard’s file?” Lilly whispers and before I could think up a response, a photo flashes up on the screen and we both gasp and start laughing like two idiots fresh from the nut house.

“Ladies,” Gloria Peacock asks with a triumphant smile, “do you both understand that I have what it takes to set things right in this little town?” Gloria Peacock looks up at the image and indulges in a very dignified little giggle.

“Just remember,” Gloria Peacock says and smiles her big ivory toothed smile, “complete confidentiality.”

When Lilly drops me off, I feel like Oscar the Grouch and not because I’m grumpy or have a pet worm, but because compared to the majesty of The Waverly Estate, my humble abode looks like a garbage can.

I had suggested on the ride home that she track Richard Stacks from the comfort of her home and we would stalk him only if he left town because if he did anything local, Gloria Peacock had it covered.

I imagine there isn’t much that Gloria Peacock doesn’t have covered.

I can’t help but wonder how rich she really is. She said her first husband was a General in the Army so between his salary and that high tech spy machine he invented, he must’ve made some serious dough.

Maybe I should start looking for an Army man to marry. Lilly’s brother is a Master Sergeant stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, so I could call him up and ask him if he wanted to marry me. Ha. Who am I kidding? I know for a fact that he’s in a committed relationship with a snow board and collects ski bunnies like some folks collect unicorns. He wouldn’t have any use for my chubby ass. He’s an asshole anyway. A very beautiful asshole, but aren’t they all?

I throw my lovely dress onto the mountain of clothes I left in the floor then go dig through the dryer for a clean pair of cut off sweat pants and a tank top. I unpin the bun and slick my hair into a pony tail and throw myself onto my fluffy bed. I wiggle around and get really comfy, then realize that something is missing. I haven’t seen Buster Loo since I got home and that’s not normal. At all.

I call him a few times and when that doesn’t work, I go with my old reliable tricks, “Buster Loo wanna treat? Buster Loo wanna go for a walk?”

Silence.

Feeling a mild sense of panic, I jump up and check the doggie door to make sure it’s working right then search the backyard, but Señor Buster Loo Bluefeather is nowhere to be seen. I open the fridge and rattle some stuff around then go to the pantry and crinkle up a potato chip bag and shake a can of peanuts. No luck. I grab his leash and sling it around for a minute, but still no Buster Loo.

In a full state of panic, I run out the front door holding my breath as I scan the street then jog up and down the road checking the ditches and I’m relieved that I don’t see a little brown carcass. I run back to the house and check my car, my gardening shed, and search the full perimeter of my property. Having exhausted all of my immediate resources and my nerves, I slump down in a patio chair and start to cry.

As luck would have it, just when I’m getting super snotty, I hear a vehicle pull up in the driveway. I run inside to blow my nose and throw water on my face and just as I’m patting my eyes dry, Buster Loo bursts through the doggie door and starts running around like he’s being chased by an invisible vacuum cleaner. I pick him up and hug him like crazy and start crying again, all the while telling him how much how much I love him and how scared I was that he was gone forever. I wipe my face again and, still clutching Buster Loo, go outside to thank whoever was kind enough to bring my little chiweenie dog back home.

When I step out the door, I see Mason McKenzie standing in my yard. I decide to wait and get the facts before beating him to death for abducting my dog.

He’s all smiles as he walks toward the patio, but when he gets close enough to see my puffy eyes and red nose, he starts to look like he just ate some bad eggs.

“Ace,” he begins, holding out one of his big, beautiful hands, “I’m sorry. I just miss him so bad so I just borrowed him for a little while. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Have you ever heard of a note?” I demand. “Or a phone call? Maybe a text message or any form of communication that might let someone know their little dog is not grave yard dead or gone forever?”


“Go get your own dog!” I yell.
“He is my dog!” Mason yells back. “You really don’t get it do you?”

“Get the hell away from me,” I say a little quieter. “Get the hell out of here. Get away from me and don’t you ever, ever steal my dog again.”

“He’s our dog,” he says quietly. “I bought him for us.”

“Oh, my God! Are you serious?” I yell. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Ace, I want you back. I never wanted you to leave. Please, can you just calm down and talk to me?”

“What the hell is wrong with you, Mason?” I ask in my super-smart-assed sarcastic voice. “It’s over between us. It’s been over for three years if you haven’t noticed. I wasn’t good enough for you, remember?”

“Could you try to calm down, please?”

“What happened to make you come back?” I ask with a smirk. “Some little Hawaiian Tropic girl dump you cause you’re closer to 40 than 25? Start losing your hair so you come running back to your old reliable chubby-lover?”

“I’m not losing my hair,” he mumbles, rubbing his head.

“Well, why now? Huh? Why now?” I stare at him and he stares at the ground. “You stole my dog! You stole my fucking dog! I don’t need this! Your sense of self-entitlement makes me sick!”

“What?” he looks at me like I’m speaking Hebrew. “Why can’t you just settle down? Could you please, for once in your life, settle down and stop being so mad? You’re mad all the time. Have you ever noticed that?”

“How in the hell do you know I’m mad all the time?” I ask then I start lying for real. “For your information, I’m very happy with my life right now.”

“Right, right,” he says quietly and nods his head, “of course. Well, I’m sorry for coming here and trying to wreck your happy home. I won’t bother you anymore.”

And with that he turns and walks out the gate. I want to run after him and tell him how much I’ve missed him and how much I love him and that I want to have little Mason babies with him. Instead, I just stand there and watch him go.

I hear my cell phone and know by the ring tone that it’s Lilly and I’m as thankful for the distraction as I am that she didn’t send me a stupid text instructing me to call her because that would’ve pushed me over the edge.

“Hey,” I say trying to sound normal. “What’s up?”

“Richard Stacks left home thirty minutes ago and he’s on Highway 72 headed west.”

“He’s going to Memphis, isn’t he?”

“Yep. And so are we.”

“Alright then, I’ll be there directly.”

“Ready and waiting!” Lilly exclaims.

“Hey,” I ask before she hangs up, “would you mind if Buster Loo comes along?”

Before I back out of her driveway, I make it clear to Lilly that we will not be discussing Mason McKenzie unless she wants to start dishing about her Uncle Rye and Reece Hilliard. So we hate on Principal Catherine Hilliard all the way to Memphis.

“I can’t believe she called me a slut!” Lilly exclaims.

“Well, I started to agree with her,” I say, “but then I remembered I’m on ‘Team Slut Girlz’ and I’m a loyal fan.”

“You are such an idiot,” she shakes her head. “I’ll have you a shirt made.”

“Seriously, Lilly, I’m gonna beat the brakes off that heifer before all this is over.”

“We should follow her home one night and jump her in her driveway.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” I say. “Let’s turn around and do it tonight!”

“We’ll definitely put that on our to-do list,” Lilly says, “but tonight we’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“I’d like to fry his ass for real,” I say and glance over at Lilly. “You don’t think we’re wasting our time following him all the way to Memphis, do you?”

“Not if we hit up the Rum Boogie Café afterwards,” Lilly says.

“What a fantastic idea,” I reply, “do a little stalking then cut a little rug to some blues sounds.”

“Hell yeah,” Lilly says and we slap high five like some first class dorks.

“Where’s that dot?”

“Appears to be stopped at the Ladies4Gentleman Club,” she says, studying her net book. “You need to take the next exit and then it’s about three blocks west.”


“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about this being a wasted trip.”

When I pull into the parking lot of Ladies4Gentleman, it only takes a second to spot Richard Stacks’ shiny
white Lexus because it’s parked right next to the main entrance. I survey the area to make sure he’s not standing in the shadows somewhere getting his fat little weenie waxed by some random lady-for-hire. I take control of the camera because I don’t believe Lilly when she swears the flash is turned off this time for real. I get out and squat down behind his car so I can capture his personalized tag along with the neon sign above the entrance. I snap a few shots then see a gaggle of men walking toward the door so I run back to the car.

“You wanna go in?” Lilly asks.

“Hell no! Are you crazy?” I say and turn to snap a picture of Buster Loo standing in the back window with his face and ass both facing forward.

“You’ve never been in a strip club before, have you?” Lilly asks, like I’m some kind of sissy.

“No, and I don’t plan on going anytime soon,” I answer in my most puritanical tone.

“We could dress up,” she says, “like in a disguise.”

“With what?” I ask sarcastically. “Are you gonna tie Buster Loo up in your hair and go in as Lady GaGa’s long lost sister, Lady BuLoo?”

“No, you moron! According to this,” she taps the small screen of her net book, “there’s a place that rents costumes just around the block.”

“You want to go rent a costume in downtown Memphis at nine o’clock on a Saturday night?”

“Why not?” she says. “Then we could go inside and get some real pictures.” I stare straight ahead and I can feel her staring at me. “Ace, think about it. What are we going to accomplish sitting out here in the parking lot snapping pictures of his car?”

“What if he leaves?”

“Well, we’ll follow him, dumbass,” she says sarcastically. “Just like we followed him up here. Now c’mon, let’s go. According to this, the store is only a quarter mile from here.”

“I don’t know, Lilly.”

“Ace, would you consider for one second how Chloe’s mind works? Is a nice, glossy picture of his car gonna do it? Hell, no! He can deny that all day long, but if we get a picture of him getting a lap dance, well, now that’s a little harder to explain, don’t you think?”

“We’ve got that picture of him wearing that dog collar.”

“Not enough,” she says, “you said that yourself!”

“Is it worth risking our lives to try and rent a costume in this part of town?” I ask, “and what would we be? White pimps with boobs? Santa Claus and his pet clown?”

“What? Pet clown? Hell, no!” Lilly sighs with exasperation. “We could get wigs and stuff.”

“Oh my God, is there a drug store close by where I can pick up some lice shampoo and go ahead and massage it into my scalp?” I quip as I pull out into the traffic.

“Oh good word!” Lilly hollers. “You can sit in the car and I’ll do this myself!”

“Nah,” I say, like fickle child picking out a toy, “I don’t wanna sit in the car. I think I’ll try to find a Batman costume.”

“Oh, good word,” Lilly says again. “I am going to choke you. Turn in right here.”

“If you choke me, you don’t get to be Robin,” I say with a smirk as I pull into the parking lot of Downtown Diggs and Costume Rental. “Is this place even open this time of night?”

“Their website says they’re open till 10 p.m.,” she looks at me. “Now move your ass, please!”

“This place has a website?”

“Shut up and get out of the car!”

I get out of the car and do my best to ignore the whistles and caws wafting through the dark, humid air. Lilly struts to the door like she’s on a fashion runway and I scurry behind her like I’m on a runway, too. The runway of Memphis International Airport, that is, about to get run down by a FedEx plane.

“Act cool,” Lilly whispers, “they can smell fear.”

“They can smell this,” I say and pat my satchel.

“Oh my God, don’t tell me you brought your damn gun,” she whispers and pushes the door open.

“Hell yeah. Got her right here,” I whisper back, keeping my hand on the bulge in my bag. “Never go to Memphis without The Pink Lady.”

“Have you ever fired that at anything besides a watermelon?”

“Sure, I hit that fake deer in Ethan’s back yard once, why?”

“Let’s just find a good disguise and get out of here before you get in a shoot-out with a mannequin.”

The large lady behind the sales desk eyeballs us as we start to look around.

“Evenin’ ladies,” she drawls. “Can I help y’all find somethin’?”

The lady raises her eyebrows as we start browsing through a rack of black dresses. Several look like they might fit me, but even the smallest one looks twice the size of Lilly’s skinny ass.

Something is not right.

“Are you all sure I can’t help you?” the sales lady asks, making her way over to us. “My name is Mrs. Ella Mae,” she says and smiles a big, warm smile, “and I really think you girls could use a little assistance.” Her voice is smooth and beautiful and I start imagining her crooning old southern hymns on Beale Street.

“Are these all plus-sizes?” I ask, holding up a dress that looks like it might fit me.

“Sweetheart, those are men’s sizes,” she says and gives me a look of genuine sympathy. “What exactly are you looking for?”

I stand there like a statue staring at the dress dangling from the hanger and all I can think about is that blue dress that belonged to Monica Lewinsky.

“Well,” Lilly says, unaffected by the fact that she was just sifting through garments worn by drag queens, “we need to get in that titty bar down the road and get some pictures of our friend’s husband and we don’t want to be recognized but we don’t want to draw a lot of attention to ourselves either,” she pauses. “Do you have anything we could do that in?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Mrs. Ella Mae says, still smiling. She turns Lilly around in a circle, sizing her up. “Must be a good friend of yours to go to this kind of trouble.”

“It is and he’s a piece of dog shit,” I offer.

Mrs. Ella Mae laughs out loud and takes me by the hand. “Now let me see what you’re working with, sweetheart.” I turn for her and she nods her head and says, “Looks like I need a 2 long and a 16 short,” she looks back and forth between us, “that sound about right?”

“Sadly, yes,” I say and she laughs out loud again.

“I like you alright, sweetie,” she says, “and I’m gonna fix you two gals up. Just take me a minute.”

I give Lilly a smug look. “She likes me,” I say with a snort.

“She wouldn’t if she knew you were packin’ heat in her store.”

“She might like me even better,” I reply smartly.

“You girls try and find some shoes that fit you on that back wall over there and I’m going to roll out the wigs for you in just a minute,” Mrs. Ella Mae calls from behind a blue paneled wall.

“Shoes and wigs,” Lilly says. “This is fun!”

“Do you think catching cooties is fun, too?” I ask.

“Shut up and come on,” she snarls at me. “Ace, I swear, you’re not near as much fun as you used to be. Loosen up a little and let’s have some fun!”

“Oh,” I say, stung by the quasi-insult. “Pardon my ignorance.”

We try on all shapes, styles, and colors of stiletto heels because stiletto heels are the only shoes they have on the shelf at Downtown Diggs. I pick out a black pointy toe pair embellished with rhinestones and Lilly chooses a leopard print peep toe with red trim and black bead cat-eyes sewn onto the top. I remind her that we’re aiming for low key and she reminds me that we’re going to a strip club.

Lilly tries on every wig on Mrs. Ella Mae’s wig cart and, after several minutes of self-admiration, decides on a long, sleek black one with blunt-cut bangs. I don’t try on a single one and instruct Lilly to get me the short blond bob with tapered bangs and I don’t intend to put it on my head until I run in a drug store and get a shower cap. And lice shampoo.

“Alright, ladies,” Mrs. Ella Mae says as she emerges from the back of the store holding a dress in each hand. “Here we go.”

One dress is a slim tube of red silk and the other is a strapless black number shaped like a keg barrel and both garments look like they could stand straight up on the floor like garbage cans made of fabric.

“I think these will work just fine,” she says in her melodic tone. “I just had to make a few adjustments to the bust size on yours, honey,” she says, looking at me.

“Well, thank you so much,” I say and tell myself to take that as a compliment. “Why is it so thick and stiff?”

“Coverage, sweetheart, the men who wear these dresses don’t want their secrets given away by loose fabric.”

“Oh, perfect!” Lilly squeals. “It matches my shoes!”

I roll my eyes as we walk back to the curtained stalls to try on our man dresses.

“Let’s just keep them on,” Lilly hollers from behind her curtain, “so we can hurry up and get back over there.”

Reluctantly I slip on my big black dress over my head and, much to my surprise, it looks fabulous. The stiff fabric does wonders covering flabby rolls of flesh.

Mrs. Ella Mae brings our shoes and wigs and, thankfully, hair nets and a moment later, Lilly steps out of her
stall looking like a Hollywood A-lister and I wobble out of mine with my wig on crooked and stray waves of dark
hair flying everywhere. Mrs. Ella Mae takes the wig off my head and uses her fingers to comb my hair back.
“Lord, child,” she says and I start to wish she was my grandmother. “You ain’t cut out for this business, are
you?”
“No, ma’am,” I say as she strokes my hair and twists it up into a tight bun. “Not cut out for it at all.”
She eyeballs Lilly, who is admiring herself in the mirror. “You a good girl, ain’t you?” she asks as she
adjusts my hair net and wig.
“Well,” I say, “I try to be, but I miss the mark most of the time.”
She secures the ensemble with bobby pins, then steps back and says, “Look at you. You look good as a
blonde.”
“Thanks,” I say and have no trouble accepting that as a compliment.
Lilly foots the bill for the rental and Mrs. Ella Mae gives us some garment bags and a key to the drop box
outside.
“Just leave the key in the box with the clothes and stuff, girls, and, if you can, you need to let me know how
this little adventure turns out for you.” She hugs us both before sending us on our way. “Good luck! You all be
careful now.”
“Yes, ma’am,” Lilly says and pushes open the door. “Thank you so much!”
The whistles and caws erupt double time when we get out on the sidewalk and Mrs. Ella Mae walks out
behinds us and scolds the men for being so rude. Lilly smiles, waves, and winks at the pack of bellowers.
I stick my hand in my purse and wrap my fingers around The Pink Lady.

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The doorman at Ladies4Gentlemen looks down at my license, up at me, back down at my license, and then
back at me.
“It’s a wig,” I whisper and he glares at me like I’m not worthy of his presence.
“Cover’s twenty dollars,” he grunts and I fork over the money while giving him my best
Go F yourself in the
A
look. I push through the turnstile and quickly surmise that this could possibly be the worst mistake I have ever
made in my entire life.
And I’ve made some bad mistakes.
The bumping bass music rattles my skull and the smoke haze is so thick that I can literally feel cancer cells
forming in my lungs. I stare at the back of Lilly’s head until she stops and I bump into her from behind.
“Jeez, Ace,” she hisses, “ease up on it!”
We sit down in padded chairs next to a table that looks about as big as a Frisbee and twice as flimsy. I tell
myself to be calm as I cast my eyes upon the t-shaped stage where there are five topless Barbie doll-looking women
twisted into various positions of peccadillo. Two are bumping and grinding on the stage extension directly in front
of us, two are doing the same at the opposite end, and the one in the middle appears to be waxing that fire pole with
her twat.
A gorgeous young lady with the biggest fake tits I’ve ever seen in real life saunters over to our table and asks
in a sultry voice what she can do for us. Lilly smiles and bats her eye lashes and the girl takes a seat on Lilly’s lap
and starts writhing around like she’s possessed. Which she probably is.
“That’s free for you, beautiful,” she coos to Lilly and Lilly smiles and blows her an air kiss. Then she comes
over to my side of the rinky-dink table, straddles my lap, and starts shaking those gigantic melons in my face. I’m
afraid one of those rubbery-looking nipples is going to touch my nose so I squeeze my eyes shut, turn my head to the
side, and curse the day I was born.
She gets off my lap and asks if I’d like a drink help me loosen up. I want to scream at the top of my lungs
that there isn’t enough alcohol in the world to make me want her big, fake boobs crammed into my eye sockets, but
Lilly is giving me that I’m-gonna-kill-you-grave-yard-dead look so I smile and order a draft beer. Lilly orders a shot
of tequila and that makes me cringe for real because nothing good ever happens when Lilly shoots tequila.
The waitress and her boobs bobble away and return what seems like ten hours later with the smallest mug of
beer I have ever seen, a shot of tequila, a lime wedge, and a bottle of salt.
“That’ll be fifteen dollars, ladies,” she says with a smile and Lilly slides a twenty into her thong.
I pick up my tiny mug beer, take a big swig, and it’s all I can do not to spit it across the room. In the mean
time, our waitress is shaking salt in between her watermelon tits and just when I think I’ve got my gag reflex under
control, Lilly drags her tongue across that salt patch, tosses back the shot of tequila, and starts sucking on that lime
wedge like a runt pup on a fresh tet.
Now I’m seriously about to hurl.
A group of male patrons stare at Lilly like a pack starving dogs slobbering over a choice cut sirloin and I ask
myself how much lesbian action these perverts need. I mean, there’s a full blown orgy taking place up on the stage. I’m about to pass out from overexposure when our waitress finally leaves, but not before promising to bring Lilly another shot.

“What the hell are you doing?” I scream whisper. “That is the nastiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, calm down,” she says, with her eyes on the stage, “it’s just a body shot, you ignoramus.”

“How many other people do you think have been licking that part of her body tonight,” I ask and shiver with disgust, “and who knows where else.”

“Ace,” she turns to face me, “when did you get so uptight? She’s at the bar right now swabbing that area with an alcohol wipe.”

“Oh, that makes it so much less gross,” I say. “So sanitary.”

I’ve never been more desperate to escape a situation in my life. I’m seriously considering bolting when my eyes fall upon the face of Richard Stacks the Fourth who is sitting in what must be some kind of V.I.P section because the furnishings are much more accommodating to the purpose of the club. He has one topless girl on his lap and another behind him rubbing her tits on his neck while caressing the rubber nipples of the lap dancer. Multi-tasking at its finest. Oprah would be so proud.

“Lilly,” I scream whisper, nodding my head in his direction, “look!”

She discreetly scans the crowd and when she sees him, her expression turns to stone.

“Give me the camera,” she says, not moving her eyes.

“Lilly, you know your history with this camera and Richard Stacks. Why don’t you let me do it?”

“Give me the fucking camera,” her eyes do not move. I reach in my bag, grab Chloe’s camera, double check to make sure the flash is off, and hand it to her under the table. She throws the strap over her shoulder, tucks the camera under her arm, and makes her way to the other side of the club where she sinks into a crowd of people at the bar.

She pulls the camera up to her face then jerks it back down by her side. The entire motion is literally quick as a flash and no one appears to notice. She moves around and repeats the motion a few more times, completely unnoticed.

She makes her way out of the crowd, but instead of coming toward me, she starts walking toward Richard Stacks. She’s out in the open now, walking full stride, when she pulls the camera up to her face again and this time people notice. A clamor for security makes its way through the stinking, smoky air and I watch in shock and she continues to walk toward Richard Stacks holding the camera up to her face the whole time. Big bulging men that look like WWF rejects are moving her way when Richard Stacks notices her.

He looks a little confused at first, then starts smiling like some kind of celebrity pervert, like it’s all part of the game for him. When he finally recognizes Lilly, he jumps straight up out of his padded red chair, throwing his lap dancer to the floor, and the nipple masseuse wastes no time disappearing into the crowd.

Lilly slings the strap around her neck so the camera dangles down her back and continues walking toward Richard Stacks, who looks like a hunter about to destroy his prey. The bouncers are a few steps from Lilly when she draws back and punches Richard Stacks in the jaw with her right fist then hurls her left straight into his gut. When he bows over, she slams her bony knee into his face and sends his head flying back in the opposite direction. As the bouncers wrap their meaty fingers around her skinny arms, she raises her left foot and plants that leopard print stiletto into his right thigh. His scream pierces the air above and beyond the deafening music and everyone turns to observe the spectacle.

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry, but I know I’ve got to get the hell out of there as fast as I can. I get to an exit door just as the bouncers shove Lilly into the parking lot where she stumbles and falls onto the pavement. I run over to help her up and the bouncers scowl and shake their heads in disgust. Like we’re the white trash.

“Stupid cunts,” the uglier of the two yells. “Get the fuck out of here.”

I hear thunder and look up at the sky but don’t see any clouds then the thunder rolls behind me and I turn to see a flock of leather clad men on Harley-Davidsons pulling into the parking lot.

“It’s the 300,” I holler at Lilly and she squints at me like she’s blind. “They’ve come to save us.”


“Nothing!” I yell. “Let’s go!”

On the way to the car, we receive more than a few appreciative looks, head nods, and winks from the Men of the Motorcycle Mob. I bet they wouldn’t be so impressed if they knew we were wearing men’s dresses. Ha.

I press the unlock button on my keyless remote just as the door of Ladies4Gentlemen flies open and Richard Stacks comes running out into the parking lot, cussing like a mad man. Which clearly, he is.

“Get in the car,” I say and unlock and relock and unlock the doors but they refuse to open. We are standing next to a white Maxima, but it’s not my white Maxima because I don’t have a clothes rack and a brief case in the
back seat.

“Wrong car!” I scream and start looking around for mine. I don’t see it so I press the panic button and the
alarm goes off and I realize it’s on the other side of the parking lot. “Shit, you got thrown out a different door!
C’mon!”

I kick off my heels and start running like my ass is on fire. Richard Stacks catches me just as I reach my car
and he spins me around and slaps me in the face so hard I see stars. Lilly runs to my rescue only to be met with a
swift backhand that knocks her to the ground. Richard steps over her and tries in vain to jerk his wife’s camera off of
the strap while Lilly flops like a fish and screams at the top of her lungs. I’m about to jump on his back and lodge
the heel of my shoe in the base of his skull when a large tattooed arm reaches out and grabs Richard Stacks by the
hair.

The Biker Man pulls him off of Lilly, who, while getting back on her feet, screams a string of obscenities
that would make a sailor blush. She falls silent when she sees the Motorcycle Men circled around us with their
muscled up arms crossed, looking mean as hell.

“You like to slap women around, you fat little fucker?” the Biker Man roars at Richard and the sound of
knuckles reminds me of microwave popcorn.

“Put me down right now, you scumbag!” Richard Stacks yells at the Biker Man and I silently marvel at his
stupidity.

“What is this?” Biker Man asks, “a citizen’s arrest?” and the Mob roars with laughter once again. The biker
closest to Lester picks him up, raises him over his head, and passes him off to his buddy. I watch in silent awe as the
Biker Men toss Lester Finks around like a rag doll while the reluctant crowd surfer screams like a little girl.

“Lawyer man,” Biker Man asks, “you got a wife?”

“I- I’m not married,” Finks yells as he’s rolled over in the air again.

“Oh, yes he is married,” Lilly offers. “He’s got a sweet little wife and three little kids at home.”

“And a dog,” I say and, realizing my opportunity, add, “and that piece of shit over there,” I point to where
Richard Stacks is huddled behind my rear bumper, “beat his wife so bad she had a miscarriage.”

The Motorcycle Mob gets quiet and, for a second, the only sound in the air is the music thumbing its way out
of the club. The biker holding Lester drops him and turns his attention to Richard Stacks, who is attempting to crawl
underneath my car.

“You beat a pregnant woman?” Biker Man reaches down, grabs him by the foot, and pulls him out from
under the car.

“She don’t know what the hell she’s talking about,” Lester Finks crows, then flinches and takes a few steps
back as the Biker Men turn their attention to him. “He didn’t know she was pregnant.”

“Well,” Biker Man growls, “that just makes it all better doesn’t it, little lady?” He glares at Lester Finks. “Do
you want me to tell you how I feel about that?”

“Uh, no sir,” Lester Finks mumbles, apparently having lost all of his balls during his crowd surfing. “I think I
know. As a matter of fact, I’m sure I know.”

I hear sirens and Biker Man looks at Richard Stacks then back at Lester Finks and they cower together like
scared puppies.

“Saved by the sirens,” he growls, “but we’ll keep an eye out for you two little titty-babies and see that you
both get what’s coming to you.” Biker Man looks at me. “Hey, doll, what’s your name?”

“Ace,” I say, shaking with fear, excitement, and admiration. “Ace Jones.”

“Ace,” he smiles, “I like that.” He reaches into the pocket of his leather vest and pulls out, of all things, a
business card. “Give me a call sometime, sweetheart.”

“Okay,” I say, taking the card and smiling from ear to ear. Turns out he owns a construction company.
“Let’s go guys,” he says and our saviors hustle into the strip club.

Lilly stares after them with an agitated look on her face, no doubt wondering why no one gave her a business
card.

“C’mon, let’s get out of here, Lilly.”
I get in the car and hear Buster Loo growling like bear in the back seat. I look in my rear view mirror and see Finks and Stacks engaged in what appears to be a heated argument. I’m fantasizing about mowing them down when Richard Stacks steps around, jerks the passenger door open, and starts pulling at the camera again.

“I’ve had enough!” I scream. “I have had enough of this shit!”

I take the Pink Lady out of the console and get out of the car. When Lester sees the gun in my hand, he takes off running in a dead sprint toward the street. I know the police will be here any minute, but I stay the course. I walk up to Richard and press the barrel of the Pink Lady against his skull.

“I will blow your fucking brains out right here if you don’t get your fucking hands off of her.” He continues to wrestle with Lilly so I pull back the hammer and finger the trigger. I glance down and see that Buster Loo has joined the fray by snarling and snapping at Richard’s arm. When he slaps Buster Loo into the back seat, I spin the gun around and smash the butt of it against his temple three times. Pop. Pop. Pop. I slam Lilly’s door shut and turn around to see an officer approaching me with his weapon drawn and I imagine a red dot floating between my eyes.

“Hold it right there, ma’am,” the officer yells. “Drop your weapon.”

I drop the Pink Lady in the parking lot of Ladies4Gentlemen.

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“Jones and Lane,” the jailer booms and his deep voice bounces back and forth between the cinder block walls creating an ominous echo.

“Right here, sir,” Lilly calls, waving through the cell bars.

I look up and see Mason McKenzie and Ethan Allen Harwood staring at us, eyes as wide as saucers. Mason looks like he’s about to crack up and Ethan just looks shocked. Really shocked.

“What the hell?” Ethan says as he takes in the wigs, the dresses, the stilettos.

“Been tryin’ to hustle up a little extra cash?” Mason asks and starts giggling.

“Oh thank God y’all are here,” Lilly gushes and rushes out of the cell as soon as the jailer opens the door. “I was starting to feel like Paris Hilton and I think they were about to make us strip and put on some of those nasty orange scrubs!”

Mason and Ethan look me up and down as I exit the cell.

“Just don’t,” I mumble. “Don’t say a word and please tell me I can get my gun and the camera back tonight.”

“The gun and the camera,” Mason says with exaggerated bravado. “Yes, those items are waiting to be picked up, Miss Double-Oh-Seven.”

“We have to get back to the car. I’m sure Buster Loo’s little doggie nerves are completely shot by now.”

“It’s only been a couple of hours, Ace,” Lilly says, clearly trying to make me feel better, “and he’s got his furry little bed back there in the back floorboard so don’t worry, he’s fine.”

Lilly and I pick up our personal effects from a guard who looks like he’d offer us fifty dollars if he had it and the four of us walk out the front door of the Shelby County Jail.

“Y’all wanna stop at a truck stop and take a shower?” Mason asks after we climb into his Escalade. “Maybe turn a few tricks, make a few bucks.”

“Lot lizards,” Ethan drawls and shakes his head. “That’s exactly what y’all look like. Y’all look like two lot lizards.”

“Very high end lot lizards,” Mason adds.

“Take us to a hotel,” Lilly orders. “Did y’all come prepared to spend the night?”

“We came prepared to spend this night and the next one too ‘cause we are men,” Ethan says with much pomp and circumstance, “and men are always prepared to spend the night,” he turns around and eyeballs Lilly and me, “specially after we pick us up a few hookers at the jail house.”

“What club did y’all say you were stripping- I mean stalking tonight?” Mason asks.

“Ladies4Gentlemen,” Lilly says and laughs at Mason’s stupid joke. “Just off Airways on Winchester.”

“What in holy hell were y’all doing off in that part of town lookin’ like y’all do?” Ethan demands.

“Stalking Richard Stacks,” I say.

“Well, was it worth it?” Mason asks.

“I guess we won’t know until we see how Chloe reacts to this,” I say and hand the camera to Ethan.

“Good word,” Ethan says, “that ain’t no way for a married man to act right there.”

“No,” I say, “and that’s the least of his transgressions.”

Ladies4Gentlemen is still rocking at 2 a.m. and Buster Loo is indeed curled up and napping in his little fluffy bed. Both guys hop out of the Escalade and Ethan walks around to the driver’s side.

“What are y’all doing?” I ask.

“I’m driving you,” Mason says, matter-of-factly, “and Lilly is riding with Ethan and we are going to the Peabody.”
“What, Mason, are you serious?” Lilly asks excitedly, turns on her stiletto heel, and hops in the front seat of the Escalade.

“Yes, you girls have been through a lot and I know you’re tired and I think you’re both very brave for what you did tonight, even if it was a tad bit stupid, so I got a room at the Peabody. Reserved it on the way up here.”

“How did you know we were planning to spend the night?”


I get in the passenger side of my car and immediately start sulking because I feel like a teenager who just got chastised by her parents in front of her friends. I silently pray for the ability to start keeping my smart mouth shut.

“Ace,” he says, after ten minutes of riding in silence, “can we just be friends? Can you just give me that, at least?”

“Of course,” I say, looking out the window.

“Thank you,” he says, “and can I tell you that you look smokin’ hot in that outfit?”

“Can I tell you that it’s a man’s dress?”

“Well,” he looks at me, wide-eyed and mischievous, then in his Forrest Gump voice says, “well, I just don’t know what to say about tha-at.”

While Mason checks into the Peabody Hotel, I walk around admiring the grandiose lobby and wondering if the ducks ever parade around at 3 a.m. Just as a security officer starts to give me the evil eye, Mason appears, takes my arm, and leads me to the elevator.

“She’s with me, sir,” he says with a wink, “half price after midnight.” This gets a nod and a chuckle from the guard who turns and goes on his way.

“You understand that I have to have a shower?” I say as soon as we walk in the room.

“Oh, please,” he says with a smile, “please, do you nasty girl.”

Two seconds after I get out of the shower, there is a knock on the door and Mason peeps through the hole and, in a very loud voice, says he didn’t order any prostitutes and if he did he would’ve asked for two women, not a hot chick and tall, ugly dude.

When Lilly and Ethan are finally permitted to enter the room, I’m pleased to see that they have picked up beer and pizza. We tear into that business like four pigs feasting on fresh slop.

“We’ve still got time to cut a little rug at the Rum Boogie before the sun comes up,” Lilly says and I moan in protest. Ethan walks out of the bathroom looking rather odd but very comfortable in basketball shorts and a tee shirt. He stretches out on the bed and asks Lilly if she’s crazy and she resigns herself to the shower in defeat.

I finish off another piece of pizza and give Buster Loo the crust then grab another beer and crawl into bed with Mason. The male reasoning in the bed assignments was that we would sleep with people we’ve slept with before no matter how long it had been. And Mason paid for the room, so how could I argue?

“Do not touch me,” I say and wiggle in between the covers.

“C’mon baby, put that blonde wig and that man dress back on and let me spoon you,” he says and Ethan starts laughing.

Lilly comes out of the bathroom and snuggles up in the bed beside Ethan, who smiles and pulls the covers over them both.

“Hey you two, don’t be getting frisky over there,” Mason says.

“Don’t worry,” Ethan replies, turning off the lamp. “I don’t like girls that wear man dresses.”

I wake up the next morning and Buster Loo is snoring on my shoulder and Mason McKenzie is spread over me like a human blanket. I slide out of bed, look across the room, and see that Lilly and Ethan are gone.

I get up and start the coffee maker, then decide to take another shower because I still feel dirty from wearing that drag queen dress and going into that filthy club. When I emerge from the bathroom, Mason is leaning back on the pillows, watching ESPN.

He looks at me and smiles, then pats the bed and raises his eyebrows a few times.

“Thank you,” I say, ignoring the invitation. “Thank you for everything.”

“Thank you for not being so mean,” he says.

“You want some coffee?” I ask.

“Love some,” he says. I pour him a cup and join him on the bed. He drapes his arm around me and we sit there drinking coffee and watching Sports Center and I hope he can’t feel the vibrations of my heart which feels like it’s trying to beat its way out of my chest.

He leans over, puts his empty cup on the night stand, then turns and looks me right in the eye. I sit there, petrified, hoping. He takes my head in his hand and pulls my face next to his and I’m sure that I am going to faint. Instead of kissing me, he buries his face in my wet hair and I swallow a sigh of disappointment.
“Oh, I love the way you smell,” he whispers then looks me in the eye again and I think I’m going to pass out this time for sure. He takes my face in his hand, then sniffs my hair on the other side, brushing my neck with his lips as he pulls back.

I start fantasizing about crawling on top of him when the door flies open, Buster Loo goes nuts, and Lilly and Ethan come in with coffee and doughnuts.

“Oh, did we interrupt something?” Lilly asks, smiling.

“Uh, Lilly, you wish,” Mason says and I wish my cheeks would stop burning.

“Hey,” Ethan says, “we got y’all a little snack and some good coffee. I can’t drink this crap in the room.”

An hour later, the four of us stroll down Beale Street, taking in the sights and the heavy scent of stale beer. Buster Loo puffs his chest out like a big dog, then tries to pee on a statue of Elvis.

We walk down by the river, then to back to the hotel to get our bags and check-out. Mason decides a trip to Tunica is in order, so we head down that way to partake in a little gambling and big breakfast buffet.

I’m chowing down on gravy and biscuits when I get a text message from Gloria Peacock inviting Lilly and Ethan. I accept for them as well and can’t help but wonder if she already knows about our little fiasco. Regardless, I can’t wait to tell her the whole story.

“Do you want to go to her house and talk to her face-to-face,” Lilly says, “then help her pack her bags and get away from that shit bag.”

“Don’t know if that’s gonna work out for you, Lil,” Ethan says, looking at his phone. “Gramma just texted and said she saw them going in the Baptist church across the street this morning.”

“Gramma Allen knows how to text?” I ask in genuine shock.

“I shave her number and won’t respond to my emails.”

“What?” Mason says and looks disgusted.

“She’s done it before, a few years back,” I say, “and when she finally gave us her new number, she apologized for her stupidity and said it wouldn’t happen again.”

“But it’s happened again,” Mason snaps, shaking his head. “That’s pretty sad.”

“I want to go to her house and talk to her face-to-face,” Lilly says, “then help her pack her bags and get away from that shit bag.”

“Hi-tech spy granny,” Lilly says and we all laugh.

Our two vehicle convoy rolls back into Bugtussle just after lunch and I wake up and realize I’ve slobbered all over my shirt sleeve. Mason has invited himself to my place for a nap so Ethan turns off on Lilly’s street and we continue driving down to mine.

Before I unlock the door, I make him swear there will be no funny business and, while showing him to the guest room, I find myself hoping he doesn’t honor that promise.

I close the door to my bedroom and scold myself for being so ridiculous. I swear to myself that I will not have sex with him and I will not be mean to him, although I must admit that it’s easier not to have sex with him when I am being mean to him. The sad truth is that I’m dying to do it, consequences be damned, but I’m too old to act like that. But I can’t stop thinking about it. Sleeping in the same bed with him was nearly more than I could stand, even if he did fart all night long and into the morning.

After napping in separate beds, we get dressed in separate rooms and I am proud of myself for not busting down the guest room door and jumping on his ass like a cheetah on an antelope. I wonder if he thought about making a move on me or if he was just in there snoozing and farting and being the perfect gentleman.

Ethan and Lilly pick us up in the Escalade and we arrive at the majestic gates of The Waverly Estate at a quarter till four. The gate guard nods and opens the gate and instead of the peacock blue golf cart with a single seat, the golf cart chauffer appears in a peacock blue six-seater.

“How many of these does she have?” I wonder aloud.

“Probably a whole fleet,” Lilly whispers.

The golf cart chauffer drops us off at a thatched roof patio that has a tile floor and a large teak wood table framed by six very comfortable looking chairs.

Gloria Peacock hugs everyone and squeezes Mason’s cheeks and asks about his grandmother and his parents and blah blah blah. After a round of sweet tea and peacock shaped sugar cookies that look and taste like they came straight from Paula Dean’s kitchen, Gloria Peacock takes us on a different route through her majestic estate to the Mission Impossible room.

“Before we tackle the Stacks’ issue, I have something for you girls.” Gloria Peacock says matter-of-factly. “I have prepared a slide show that I think you will find to be both informative and entertaining.” She smiles, “Are you ready?”
“Yes ma’am!” I exclaim and I can’t wait to see what she’s put together with her super spy computer. What follows is a series of photographs of Catherine Hilliard engaged in various positions of sexual endeavor with the Bugtussle School District Superintendent, Ardie Griffith. In most of the shots, they are in the back of Catherine Hilliard’s Cadillac station wagon on top of what appears to be a piece of memory foam with a blue polka dotted sheet haphazardly spread over it.

“Where are they parked?” I ask. “And why wouldn’t they pull that door closed?”

“I guess it might get too hot in there,” Mason says and he and Ethan snort and laugh.

“Just hold on and I’ll pan out so you can see.” She pans out and my jaw drops as I recognize the vo-tech building that’s right next to the high school. I quickly realize that it’s the perfect place to hide because the u-shaped building provides the ultimate privacy shield, plus the whole area is fenced and locked. And Ardie being the superintendent and all, I imagine it would be relatively easy for him to get a key.

Where they went wrong was not knowing that their meeting spot was clearly visible from the rooftop of the People’s Bank where Omega Systems just happens to have an eye in the sky. That and not pulling that back door closed.

For the record, Ardie Griffith is not a large man and Catherine Hilliard is a very large woman and together they make me think of a squirrel humping a sow pig. The disgusting slide show ends with a shot of them reclining in the back of the vehicle, smoking.

“Wow,” I exclaim, “that explains those yellow teeth.”

“I have copies for you Ace, in case things get hairy at school tomorrow,” she says and hands me a padded envelope. I get excited thinking about the damage I could do with just one of these pictures. “Now, I understand you have pictures from your wild night last night so let’s take a look at those.

I give Mrs. Peacock the memory stick from Chloe’s camera and, after some arm waving, the magic computer monitor comes to life.

The camera was set on continuous snap so there are several shots of the red carpet and the asphalt parking lot, but the most of the pictures captured the moment just as we’d hoped. The last one is a shot of Buster Loo with his eyeballs and his asshole both facing the lens.

“Nice,” Ethan says and laughs.

“Don’t make fun of my wiener, Ethan,” Mason whispers and punches him.

“Oh man, those are good,” Lilly says quietly, “but this is going to kill her soul.”

“She killed her soul when she married Richard Stacks,” I say. “This will be the beginning of the end of that.”

“How are y’all gonna get ‘em to her?” Ethan asks. “I mean, how do you go about something like that?”

“Don’t know,” Lilly says and I shrug.

“What if she doesn’t care?” Mason asks. “What if, after all of this, she just looks at these pictures and is just like, ‘People make mistakes and I forgive him’?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I say quietly.

“The Chloe we know and love is buried in there somewhere,” Lilly says, frowning. “I just hope it’s not too late to dig out that part of her that would never put up with crap like this.”

“I’ve made every effort to have her here as a guest,” Gloria Peacock says, “I sent a few emails, then a card, and of course I called several times, but was never able to speak with her personally. The only response I received was a blunt email that basically said ‘thanks but no thanks’.”

“She probably didn’t even get the card and the email was probably from Richard,” I say, feeling anger well up in my guts.

“So what’s the plan?” Mason asks, clearly wanting to move things along.

“Have you ever taken a needle and punched holes on either end of an egg and shook out all the yolk?” Gloria asks and Mason and Ethan exchange a what-the-hell-is-she-talking-about look.

“Oh yeah,” Lilly says. “My students do that every year for cinco de mayo. They’re called cascarones.”

“Did she say, ‘cajones’?” Mason whispers and Ethan shushes him.

“Yes, so you understand how delicate and fragile the shell is?” Gloria Peacock replies, not hearing or completely ignoring Mason.

“Of course, I have each student make five or six because a few are bound to break no matter how careful we are.”

“Exactly,” Gloria Peacock says. “Chloe is that shell and her soul has been brandished from her so she must be handled with utmost care.” She looks from me to Lilly and we nod our heads in agreement. “Go see her,” she says. “Go to her house and break it to her gently.”

“What a metaphor,” I whisper in awe.

“A what?” Ethan says.
Gloria Peacock waves and points and her magic computer starts printing pictures, which she puts in another padded envelope and hands to me without a word. I look up at her and smile. She is officially my new idol.

When Mason and I get back to my house, he asks to come inside. We have a few beers on the patio and he asks if he can spend the night. I want to take him to my bedroom, tie him to the bed post, and do unspeakable things to him, but I don’t. I tell him he’s welcome to sleep in the guestroom.

“Again,” he whines.
“Again,” I smile.

Monday morning I hop out of bed feeling like a million dollars earning twenty percent interest. I don’t know if it’s because Mason McKenzie is snoring away in my guestroom or because I somehow managed not to go in there and jump his bones or because I have an envelope full of glossy pictures of that hussy Catherine Hilliard getting boned by that twerp Ardie Griffith. Ha.

I get to school twenty minutes early and set out to find Coach Hatter. I walk through the gym and into the athletic office without even knocking.

“What are you doing in here?” Coach Wills asks with a look of pure disdain on his broad, oily face.

“Shut the hell up, Wills. If I want to hear your mouth, I’ll rattle your cage, okay?”

The other coaches hoot and holler and I look at Coach Lawson, the head football coach, and ask him where I might find Logan Hatter. I’m dying to jerk out those pictures and pass them around the room, but I know now’s not the time.

“He’s not here yet, Ace, anything I can help you with?”

“No sir, I’ll catch him later.”

“Y’all sleepin’ together again?” Wills yells, obviously trying to recover from the ego slap.

“Maybe,” I say and wink at him, “tell you what, Wills, why don’t you step outside, hold your breath, and count to infinity? Then come find me and I’ll tell you everything you’ve ever wanted to know.” I turn to go, pleased by the laughter I leave in my wake.

As I’m walking out of the gym, I meet Logan walking in and he can tell by the look on my face that something is up. We go to his office, he closes the door behind us, and I whip out the goods.

“Oh, holy shit,” he whispers and looks at me. “How about that?”

“How about that?” I say, grinning from ear to ear because I love perpetrating mischief.

“Ugh. I’m gonna lose my breakfast if I keep looking at these.” He looks up at me and then back down at the pictures. “You have to admit though, Ace, some of that’s pretty funny.” I nod in agreement. “Can I have one? Or two? I’d like one for the wall in here and maybe one to hang on the bulletin board in the main lounge.” He starts that idiotic sniggering and I start laughing.

“Maybe later and you can blame it on me, how about that?”

“Sounds good,” he says, then gets serious. “Where did you get those, Ace?”

“Can’t say just yet,” I say and he nods in understanding because he’s a man and men don’t freak out if they don’t have all the details all the time.

I go to my classroom, check my email, and surprise of all surprises, I have been summoned to Catherine Hilliard’s office during my lunch break for yet another ass chewing. While this would normally ruin my day, today I can’t wait to strut my stuff in that pig head’s office.

The morning creeps by and I fantasize about letting the pictures fall out onto the floor where my students could see them and then pretend it was an accident. The rumor mill would burn itself to the ground running with news like that. But my students have done nothing to deserve that kind of punishment, so I forget that and try not to stare at the clock.

When lunch time arrives, I slide the envelope into my purse and strike out to see the Principal. Her door is closed, of course, so I take a seat in one of the red plastic chairs in the narrow hallway.

My pulse is beating like a jungle drum and my stomach is churning like I indulged in some lunchroom leftovers. I strive to look unaffected as I lean back and take a long, deep breath. I am determined to remain calm. I am determined to keep my cool. I cross and uncross and re-cross my legs and wonder what she would think if I walked in there and slapped those big yellow horse teeth straight out of her mouth.

I try to think up something to think about but the only thing that comes to mind is Mason hanging out at my house and I am suddenly overcome with fear that he might find my vibrator. That makes me more nervous than I already am and I start laughing this crazy, ridiculous laugh and can’t stop so I start thinking about those peacock shaped sugar cookies and wishing I had about six dozen to eat right now to calm my nerves.

Catherine Hilliard opens her office door and stands there looking like an Amazon gorilla in a mauve two piece suit.
“Something funny?” she asks.
“Nope,” I say and stand up and look her square in the eye. I want to slap her jaws so hard it makes her nose bleed.
“I can see you now,” she says with a smirk.
“Why, thank you so much, Mrs. Hilliard.” Instead of slapping her right in the face, I pop my glossy lips and smile. “I’ve been looking forward to this meeting all morning.”
“Humph,” she mumbles and I get the feeling she thinks I’m being sarcastic.
But I’m not.
She thinks she’s about to get me good.
But she’s not.
Not today.
Today the ass chewing will not go as planned.

I take a seat and watch her cram that corpulent ass into the double wide office chair that creaks and moans under the pressure.
“So, Miss Jones,” she says quietly, “been to jail again I hear.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lie in an effort to amuse myself.
“I understand you had a gun in your possession and used it to assault a fine, upstanding member of our community.”
“I don’t recall seeing a fine, upstanding member of our community; but I did see that dirt bag Richard Stacks and his maggot lawyer at a strip club.”
“At a strip club,” she says with palpable disgust.
“Yes. Your fine, upstanding citizen was inside a strip club in downtown Memphis with two topless girls rubbing all over him and each other when we showed up with a camera.” Her expression tells me that she was not privy to this information.
“That has nothing to do with the fact that an employee of this school district was sent to jail on a weapons charge,” she curls her upper lip, “at a strip club.”
“It has everything to do with it.”
“Didn’t I tell you to mind your own business?”
“Didn’t I tell you that you are a scab on the ass of humanity?”
“So you want to do this the hard way?”
“I most certainly do.”
She places a yellow sheet of paper on her dusty desk and pushes it over to me.
“I verified with Shelby County that you were indeed incarcerated and that alone is grounds for suspension based on disorderly conduct and even though you haven’t been officially charged yet,” she glares at me, “what you’ve done already is grounds for termination regardless of what happens in court.”

So this is how it feels. This is the moment I’ve been dreaming about for three years. I am getting shit canned. It’s really happening and, for some odd reason, I’m not the nervous wreck I was last week when she threatened me with it. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’m so excited I can barely breathe and, while I’m anxious to get up and get out of there, I’m not leaving until I butcher that super-inflated ego of that pig-nosed heifer.

“Well, I have something for you as well, Mrs. Hilliard,” I say and reach for my bag. She rolls her eyes as I pull out the stack of photos. Smiling, I flip to the one I like best, which a shot of her with her legs spread eagle and Ardie’s lumpy little skull pressed into the gap. I turn it around so she can see it and the look on her face makes my heart flutter with joy and triumph.

“Miss Jones,” she says, reaching for the yellow slip, “perhaps termination can be avoided.”
“I snatch up the yellow piece of paper and stuff it deep inside my purse.
“I don’t think so Mrs. Hilliard,” I say and flip over a few more pictures for her to see, “because you are going to fucking fry for this.” I put the pictures back in my purse and get up to leave.

“Ace,” she says, lurching out of her chair and banging into the filing cabinet. “Graciela, uh, Miss Jones, please sit down and let’s talk about this. I need to know where those came from. Please,” she pleads. “I’m sure we can all work something out. We can come to some kind of agreement.”
“Really, Mrs. Hilliard,” I say, like I’m considering it.
“Yes,” she says, “Yes, of course, please sit down. There is something I need to show you.” She starts poking around in the back of her desk drawer, no doubt looking for the “L.L.” folder that Lilly and I stole last week, but she comes up empty handed and visibly frustrated. “I know it’s in here somewhere and it’s very important that I find it because it might clarify a few things for you.” She starts to look panicked and I stand in the doorway and bite my
tongue because, unless she’s planning to look in Lilly’s panty drawer, she won’t find that folder.

“Mrs. Hilliard, I really must get going. I need to clean out my room before the kids come back from lunch
and start asking questions.”

“No! No, please sit down, Graciela. Have you had coffee this morning? Can I get you some coffee?”

I smile because I own her now and, even though owning Catherine Hilliard is kind of like owning a sewer
rat, it’s gratifying to watch her squirm.

“I don’t drink coffee,” I say and turn to go.

“Please, Ace, please just have a seat. Please!”

“Oh, okay,” I say and step back toward the chair and she looks so relieved I almost laugh out loud. I turn on
my heel and say, “Did you think I was going to sit back down? Because I wasn’t going to.”

“Graciela, please, I beg you. Let’s talk about this woman to woman. I’m sure we can work out some kind of
a deal.”

“The only deal you could interest me in is your lips on my ass,” I say as I walk out the door.

“What do you plan to do with those, Ace Jones?” she yells, flipping back to bitch mode. “I will call the law
and have you arrested for stalking.”

“Do it,” I say and keep walking, “and they can mark these pictures Exhibit A.”

I hustle out of there because I know I’ve only got few minutes before the bell rings. I run into Coach Hatters’
room and tell him what happened and he follows me into my classroom and helps me pack up a few things.

“What about your classes?” he asks.

“They’re all working on independent projects for the art fair,” I reply, “and Mrs. Jennings, you know her? She’s a retired art teacher and that’s who they’ll get to replace me until the end of the year, so they’re in good
hands.” I look around my classroom and feel a pang of sadness. “Man, I’m gonna miss my kids, Hatt.”

“You have to come back for the art fair.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I say, “and if any of these guys need me, they know where to find me.”

“They’re going to be really upset when they find out you’re gone,” Hatter says, looking at his feet. “I’m
gonna miss you too, Ace,” he starts kicking a pencil around in the floor, “and with you and Lilly and Chloe all gone,
I’m gonna get lonely here.”

“Aw, Hatt, you’re so sweet,” I say and look around my classroom, wondering if this is the last time I’ll ever
be in here. It sucks a little bit, but then so does feeling like my career is a plastic bag wrapped around my face.

“I better run,” I say, giving him a quick hug. “Don’t worry. Chloe and Lilly will be back. It’s only a matter of
time.”

“But not you?”

“Not if I can help it, Hatter.”

He nods and I walk out the door to find Catherine Hilliard waiting for me in the hallway.

“Miss Jones, there has been a mistake on your paperwork, could you please come back to my office.”

“Mrs. Hilliard,” I say, “Go to hell!”

And I walk down the hallway and out the door.

I go home, put on some comfortable clothes, and call Lilly to see what she’s doing. Turns out it’s not Deputy
Dax. Maybe he wasn’t all that impressed with us going to jail after getting into a tussle in the parking lot of a strip
club. At any rate, we agree that today is the day to deal with our turncoat friend, so I go to her house and pick her up
and we head to the Stacks’ residence.

I park at the community playground and we scampers across the street to 309 Parker Drive. I peek in the
garage and see Chloe’s shiny white Lexus SUV parked in one bay. The other two are empty. I give Lilly a thumbs
up and we walk up the steps to the front door.

After seventeen rings and a full nine minutes, I finally hear the lock move. When Chloe opens the door, Lilly
steps back and nearly falls off the porch and I gasp and cover my mouth.

Chloe’s hair looks like she cut it herself with meat shears in a dimly lit room. There is no trace of make-up
on her face and her skin is pallid and pale as a ghost. She looks like she’s lost about 25 pounds which would put her
weighing in at around 85 and she’s wearing some kind of gray silk wrap that looks like a cross between a kimono
and a sarong.

“What are you doing here?” she demands and looks at us like we’re trying to sell her a set of encyclopedias
and that pisses me off because we have been through hell and high water for her.

“Why did you change your phone number again?” I fire back. “And why haven’t you called either of us?”

“Because you are both a bad influence on my marriage.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snap and Lilly steps forward to take control of the conversation.
"Chloe, we need to talk to you. It’s very important."

“No, you need to leave right now.”

“Chloe, we’re your friends,” Lilly pleads.

“Not anymore,” she says like a zombie and tries to close the door.

Lilly steps back but I wedge my foot into the doorway.

“Hold on just a minute, Chloe!” I yell. “I don’t know what kind of drugs you’re on right now, but you are
going to let us in and you are going to listen to us.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” she squeals like a child and starts banging the door against my foot and that turns into
a pretty painful experience because I’m wearing flip flops. I drop a shoulder against the door and push it open.

Chloe falls back onto the parquet floor of her foyer, screaming and waving her arms like a mad woman. I grab Lilly
by the arm, jerk her in the house, and slam the door shut behind us.

“Uh, Ace,” Lilly mumbles as I rub my throbbing foot, “I don’t think this is what Gloria Peacock had in mind
when she said to handle this gently.”

“Shut up, Lilly,” I say, standing on one leg like a chubby sea gull. “Just shut up!”

Chloe jumps up like cat and runs for the phone screaming how she’s going to call the police and have us
arrested.

“Oh, hell no! I’m not going back to jail,” I yell at her, then grab her by the arms and shake her for a second.

“Snap out of it, Chloe! What the hell is wrong with you? Who the hell are you?”

“Who the hell are you,” she screams, “to break into my house and assault me? I have started over. I have
started a new life and you are not a part of my new life.”

“She has lost her damned mind,” Lilly whispers.

“I heard that!” she screams, even louder. “Get out of my house and never come back again! Ever!”

“That’s it,” I say. “This is seriously more than I can stand. I’m done.”

“No, wait,” Lilly says. “Chloe, could we please sit down in the living room?”

“No!” she screams. “Get out! Get out now! I know you’ve been following my husband and I hate you both
for it.”

“You fucking told us to, you nut case!” I yell at her. “You fucking told us to follow that piece of shit!”

“Ace, stop!” Lilly says. “Stop it right now.” Lilly reaches into my bag and pulls out the envelope.

“You told us to follow him and we did, Chloe,” Lilly says quietly as she slips the photos from the envelope.

“We did just what you asked us to do,” she flips one of the pictures up so Chloe can see it, “and this is what we
found.” She flips another one and another one and keeps saying, “This is what we found.”

“No, no, no!” She screams. “Get out! Get out now! I know you’ve been following my husband and I hate you both
for it.”

“Your are here to ruin my new life! And you have done it! You have ruined my new life and I will hate you
forever for it!” she screams and falls out on the floor and starts banging her head on the wall and screaming and
criing and it scares the holy hell out of me because I’ve never seen anyone act like that. Especially not my beautiful,
perfect friend Chloe.

Lilly looks at me and I look at her and we get in the floor and I put my arms around Chloe and Lilly puts her
arms around us and I whisper, “It’s gonna be okay, Chloe. Everything is going to be just fine. We love you and we
are here to take care of you.”

“What took you so long?” she whispers and I look at Lilly, who, of course, starts sobbing her eyes out.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry we didn’t come sooner,” I whisper and stroke her hacked up hair.

“I remember you coming into my room and hugging me and telling me I was going to be okay, but then you
ever came back. You never came back, Ace. And I started to think I’d dreamed it. But then when I heard you just
now, I remembered. I remembered that you were there.”

“I will always be here and so will Lilly,” I whisper. “We will always be here because we love you.”

“What am I going to do?” she wails. “What am I going to do? I don’t know what to do and I haven’t had
y’all to help me and I don’t know what to do,” she looks down at the pictures scattered on the floor. “Are those real?
When did you take those? Where did they come from?”

“Most of them Saturday night,” I say quietly, “in Memphis.”

“This past Saturday night?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Why?”

“He said he had an important meeting with a client in Memphis on Saturday night,” she says slowly. “Let me
see those.”

Lilly gathers up the photos with shaky hands and when she turns to give them to Chloe, she freezes up. She lays the pictures to the side and grabs Chloe and hugs her and squalls all over her and tells her she’s so sorry and that she loves her so much, but Chloe isn’t crying anymore.

“Let me see the pictures,” Chloe says, pulling back from Lilly’s sappy embrace.

“Chloe,” Lilly says, “I don’t want to hurt you worse than you’ve already been hurt.”

“Oh, Lilly,” she says like a zombie, “that would be impossible.”

She flips through the pictures two times, then lays them on the floor and gets up.

“Let’s go in the kitchen and get some water,” she looks at us through puffy red eyes. “I’m so, so very sorry.”

“Hey, you don’t worry about a thing, girl,” I say and breathe a sigh of relief that she appears to be somewhat back to normal.

Just as we get on our feet, the front door flies open and Richard Stacks charges into the foyer like a bull on steroids.

“What are you whores doing here?” he booms and nobody moves.

“You!” he says, pointing at me. “You stupid bitch! I have had enough of you!”

I take a few steps back into the living room and he comes at me hard and fast and I mentally prepare myself to get knocked out. Lilly makes a run for it and I glance over at Chloe and see that she has pulled a wrought iron cross off the wall. Just as Richard Stacks draws back a meaty arm to punch me in the face, Chloe swings that cross at his head like she’s trying to knock a baseball out of the park.

“Enough!” she screams and, as I squeeze my eyes shut, I hear metal crunching against flesh.

Lilly is back from wherever she ran off to and is ransacking my purse screaming, “Ace, why didn’t you bring your goddamned gun? Where is the Pink Lady?”

Richard staggers but doesn’t fall. He turns toward Chloe and roars like a bear. When he pauses to finger the bloody wound on his head, Chloe swings again. He takes the hit, stays on his feet, and stumbles toward her swearing on his mother’s life that he is going to kill her this time once and for all. She lets the tip of the cross rest on the floor while he totters toward her then she pulls it up and hits him with a nut shot that puts him on the ground.

“Chloe,” I say. “Chloe, I think you need to stop.”

“Never stopped! He never stopped for eleven years!” she screams and I take a step toward her and she looks me dead in the eye and says, “Don’t. Don’t you dare try to take this from me.”

I don’t know if she’s talking about the cross or the moment, but either way, I take a step back. Richard is moaning so at least he’s not dead. Yet.

“Chloe,” he says, barely audible, “Chloe, baby, please I’m hurt Chloe.”

“You expect me to care?” she yells. “Do you really expect me to care?” She hauls that cross over her shoulder, brings it down hard on his skull, and Richard Stacks doesn’t move.

“Oh my God,” Lilly says and I can see that she is shaking all over. “Oh my God!”

Chloe looks at him, drops the cross onto the floor, and leaves the room.

“What are you going, Chloe?” I ask and try to sound like I’m not scared shitless but Dammit! I am.

“To take a shower,” she says calmly.

“What are we going to do?” Lilly asks. “What the fuck are we going to do?”

I get down on my knees and pick up his hand.

“He still has a pulse,” I say and swallow hard to keep from vomiting, “so I think he’s just unconscious.”

“Should I call 911?”

“No. Call Sheriff Jackson and ask him what do to.”

Sheriff Jackson instructs her to call 911.

A crowd of nosy onlookers gather on the Stacks’ front lawn, no doubt quizzing the Sheriff and Deputy Dax Dorsett about what happened. One particular nosy neighbor comes into the house without so much as knocking. She looks down at the blood on the floor, then up at us like we’re a pack of child molesters.

“What happened here?” she demands. “Who did that to Mr. Stacks?”

I was about to launch an explanation when Chloe steps around the corner and says, “Mrs. Franks, why don’t you mind your own business for once?”

Lilly and I look at each other in mutual shock.

“Why, Mrs. Stacks, I understand that you must be upset, but there is no reason to be rude.”
“There is no reason for you to be in my house, Mrs. Franks, so would you please leave?”

“I was just wondering if it was a home invasion. Do we need to be on alert? Did they catch the person who did that?” she eyes me suspiciously as Chloe takes her arm and escorts her to the door.

“Nothing like that, Mrs. Franks, no need to worry,” she pushes the lady over the threshold. “Thank you for your concern. Now run and tell everyone everything you’ve seen here and try to blow it out of proportion as much as you can.”

Chloe closes the door and I just stare at her with my mouth hanging open.

“The ambulance is pulling out,” she says with no emotion. “What now?”

“Pack a bag and let’s get out of here,” I say.

“Alright,” she says and turns toward her bedroom, not even casting a glance at the fancy oriental rug stained with her husband’s blood.

“Pack a big bag Chloe,” Lilly calls. “We may not be back here for a while.”

“That would be great,” she says and disappears down the hallway.

“Let’s see what we can do about this.” I nod down at the rug.

“Ugh, okay,” Lilly mumbles and doesn’t move.

I ransack the kitchen, throwing junk everywhere and gather up all the cleaning stuff I can find. I run to the laundry room and grab the whole box of washing powders, a can of spot remover, and a long handled brush. I hustle back to the living room where Lilly is standing with a handful of towels, looking down at the stain.

I return to the kitchen and scrounge around until I find some hot dog tongs that I take back in there and use to peel the rug off the floor. Lilly throws a towel down on the pecan wood planks and I stifle a gag.

“Oh, this is disgusting,” Lilly says and I nod my head in agreement because I’m afraid if I open my mouth, I’ll hurl. “I’m going to get a trash bag.” She runs to the kitchen and returns with trash bags, the vacuum cleaner, and two pairs of rubber gloves.

“Here,” she says, handing me a pair, “bastard probably has AIDS.”

We scrub down the rug. Lilly runs it over with the vacuum, then we repeat the entire process two more times. Luckily, the rug is mahogany and the stain was virtually unnoticeable after the second round of scrubbing and vacuuming.

“What about that?” I ask, nodding to the cross. “What do we do with the murder weapon?”

Lilly picks it up, struggling with its weight, and holds it out for me to wipe down.


“Well, it is a symbol of redemption,” Lilly says. “Help me get it back on the wall.”

“Jeez,” I say as we struggle to get the cross back on its nail, “she was slinging this thing around like it was nothing.”

“A woman scorned,” Lilly says, straightening it on the wall.

We both just stand there for a second, looking at the cross.

“Wonder what God thinks about this mess?” Lilly asks.

“Probably glad to see a demon beat into submission,” I say, and Lilly looks at me like I’m stupid so I say, “How should I know? It’s hard sometimes to tell how and where all that forgiveness fits into a situation like this.”

“I’m ready,” she says, her eyes devoid of any emotion. “Let’s take my car so we can load this stuff while the garage door is still down.”

“Great idea,” I say, amazed at her transformation from certifiable nut case to murderess to a level-headed, clear thinking woman.

I call Gloria Peacock and tell her what had happened and she instructs us to come to The Waverly Estate immediately. Chloe drops me off at my car and Lilly rides with her and I follow them to the majestic iron gates.

We are taken to the indoor patio of The Waverly Estate and when we walk in, drinks are set up and it’s not sweet tea. Chloe doesn’t seem to notice the grandeur of the place. I guess always having money numbs you to things like that. Or maybe she was distracted because of that murder she damn nearly committed. I can’t really say.

“Boy, when I picked you girls to hang out with, I really picked some doozies, didn’t I?” Gloria Peacock says when we walk in. “Drinks?” She waves a hand toward the bar and I’m first in line. While I’m shaking my Whiskey Sour, she continues, “If you would allow me, I’d like to give you all a little update on something of interest.” She smiles, “Catherine Hilliard has been forced to resign her position as principal of Bugtussle High School and Ardie Griffith voluntarily resigned his position as superintendent and word is they plan to leave town,” she pauses,
“together.”

“Ugh,” I say, “that’s good to hear, but gross to think about.”

“Good for them,” Lilly says with palpable disgust.


“As you might guess, very few are privy to this information and it won’t be made public until a designated
time and, of course, the legal issues already in play will still have to be dealt with, but rest assured,” she smiles,
“things have been set right pertaining to the matter of Catherine Hilliard.”

“Just like you said,” I say and Lilly nods in agreement.

“Just like I said,” she smiles and pours herself a drink.

News of the beat down spreads fast and Mason, Ethan, and Logan Hatter arrive shortly after we get settled
into our comfy seats. They all make a fuss over Chloe to the point she gets annoyed and politely asks them to stop
treating her like a burn victim. She tells us that Richard gave her a cocktail of pills every night and she didn’t know
what they were and didn’t care; she just took them because they made her numb.

“I picked this up before I left,” she says and pulls a really expensive laptop out of her bag. “It’s Richard’s.”

“That will be most useful, I’m sure,” Gloria Peacock says, “but let’s save that for later. The Sheriff just
arrived and you need to get that dealt with.”

The Sheriff comes and looks uncomfortable at first, but when he sees the whole gang sitting around, he
appears to relax a little. Deputy Dax comes in behind him and doesn’t so much as cast a glance at Lilly. The
questioning goes quickly and is mostly a formality. He gives Chloe a long hug and tells her that he will take care of
everything and she needn’t worry her pretty little head about a thing. Upon his exit, Gloria Peacock turns to Mason.

“Sweetheart, how long will it take you to draw up some divorce papers?”

“Not long, but we need a notary.”

“Well,” she opens a drawer and pulls out some kind of silver thing that looked like it might cut really thin
cookies, “I just happen to be one.”

“Wow,” Mason says, “is there anything you can’t do Mrs. Peacock?”

“Cook corn bread,” she says. “I tried for years and got so frustrated I swore I’d never do it again and I’ve
been hiring people to cook it for me ever since. So that’s one thing. Now, how about those papers?”

“I can do a standard no-fault in about an hour, but I don’t think no-fault is the way to go.”

“No, she really needs to nail him.” She hands a list to Mason and he looks over it then gives it to Chloe, who
nods in approval and hands it back to him.

“Get to work, sonny boy,” Gloria Peacock tells Mason. “Now girls, I recommend that as soon as Richard
Stacks regains consciousness, we get those papers signed.”

“How would we do that?” Lilly asks.

“Easy,” Gloria Peacock says, smiling. “just go in there and offer him a little motivation.”

“I can do that,” Chloe says and Gloria Peacock smiles.

“Ethan, keep your ears open at the bar tonight and let me know what the word around town is.”

“Will do, Mrs. Peacock.”

“Coach Hatter, could you do the same at school tomorrow?”

“Too easy, Mrs. Peacock.”

“And you two wild women,” she says, looking at Lilly and me. “No more stalking. Anything after today can
and will be an issue of the court.”

“Yes ma’am,” I say and Lilly just nods and looks at the floor like someone just slapped her hand for being
bad.

“Why don’t the three of you just stay here this afternoon?” Gloria Peacock asks and my eyes light up. “We
can relax in my private spa.” She looks at Chloe, then Lilly, then me. “I think you girls could use a little rest and
relaxation.”

“Sounds good to me,” I chirp.

“Speaking of court,” Mason says, “I got a call from the school attorney and they have scheduled Lilly’s court
hearing for Monday,” he pauses, “and I asked about yours, Ace, and she put me on hold, then came back and said
that your paperwork had disappeared and she’d have to call me back.”

“Well, I wonder why,” I say sarcastically.

“That’s not all,” he continues, smiling. “No more than five minutes after I hung up, Catherine Hilliard called
me and requested a meeting with the two of you. She said that all charges will be dropped against Lilly and you can
both have your jobs back if we could, and I quote, ‘find a way handle all of this privately and quickly’.”

“My ass,” I grunt “she’s just trying to cover her own.”

“I’ll tell you what she wants, she wants to sweep the whole deal under the rug.” Chloe says, “just like
everyone does everything around here. Just make it go away.”

“Well, I’m not a fan of sweeping wrongs under the rug,” Gloria Peacock says. “Never have been, never will be.”

“Me either,” I say. “Let’s make this so public that Anderson Cooper shows up to cover it.”

“I don’t know about all that,” Lilly mumbles.

“I don’t want a big scene,” Chloe says, “but I know that’s what I’m in for after today.”

“You do not worry,” Gloria Peacock says, putting an arm around her shoulder, “we will take care of you.” She looks at Lilly, “With Catherine’s forced resignation, the school district does not have a legal leg to stand on and, even if they did, they would not be interested in pursuing the dismissal of a teacher who works as hard as you do, Lilly.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Peacock,” Lilly says, beaming.

“And, Lilly, your Uncle Rye wishes to speak with you and I would consider it a personal favor if you would give him a call.”

“Yes ma’am,” she said flatly and starts staring at her feet again.

“Alright, ladies,” Gloria Peacock says, getting to her feet, “Let’s to the spa room.”

“Let’s,” I say and I’m genuinely excited.

We follow Gloria Peacock through the majestic hallway, down a marble staircase, and into the most luxurious locker room I’ve ever seen in my life.

“There are some robes in there,” she says, pointing, “and towels, swimsuits, sandals, lots of other stuff. Please help yourself to whatever you need and I’ll meet you all out by the hot tub in thirty minutes. It’s out that door and around to the left.”

I grab a swimsuit that looks like it might fit me, then head to the robe closet and grab a big fuzzy one. I slide on a pair of fluffy slippers and prepare myself to be pampered.

Lilly, Chloe, and I slip into the hot tub and wait for Gloria Peacock to reappear. When she does, she is wearing a blue one-piece swimsuit and her body looks like that of a 25-year-old yoga instructor. She tells us that two women have just arrived to do pedicures, manicures, and facials and the masseuse and his partner will be arriving shortly.

The servant lady appears and informs Mrs. Peacock that the nail technicians are set up and she asks Chloe to join her in the cushy white pedicure chairs about a hundred feet from the hot tub.

“Can you believe this place?” I ask Lilly, once they’re out of ear shot.

“No, I can’t,” she says, laying her head back. “Can you believe our luck that we are sitting here?”

“No, I can’t.”

“So what about that Chloe?” she asks, raising her head back up.

“Man,” I say, shaking my head, “what a day.”

“What a day, indeed,” she says. “This is just what I need right now.”

“So, uh, what’s up with you and Dax?”

She takes a deep breath and sighs heavily before answering, “Old girlfriend just got a divorce and she’s been staying with him for the past week.”

“Aw, Lil, I’m sorry to hear that,” I say, “at least he told you.”

“He didn’t,” she says, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. “She answered his phone when I called last week and told me, in so many words, not to ever call him again.”

“Jeez, no wonder he wouldn’t even look at you today. That’s got to be embarrassing,” I say. “How juvenile can you get?”

“Well, he’s only 23, Ace, so she’s probably around the same age.” she gets a pained look on her face, “or younger.”

“That’s a pretty shitty deal, Lilly,” I say. “I hate it didn’t work out.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she says but I can tell by the look on her face that it does.

I decide to stop asking questions and soak in the peaceful calm of our surroundings and allow my poor jilted friend to do the same.

After the single most relaxing afternoon of my life, Lilly and I leave The Waverly Estate with specific instructions from Gloria Peacock to lay low. Chloe graciously accepts Gloria’s offer to be a guest of honor at The Waverly Estate and the golf cart chauffer is loading her bags onto the six-seater as we drive out the gate.

“That sure was nice of Mrs. Peacock to invite Chloe to stay,” Lilly says as we drive away.

“No doubt,” I agree. “There is no better place on Earth for her to be right now.”

“Gloria Peacock certainly has taken a keen interest in us,” Lilly says. “I wonder why, I mean, we could be a
bunch of idiots for all she knows and she has taken us in like we’re her own.”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing,” I reply. “You know Mason’s grandmother is one her close personal
friends, so maybe that’s it.”

“Maybe,” Lilly says, “but it still seems kind of random, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I say, “maybe she’s just lonely and bored.”

I drop her off at her pink doll house and head home. When I get there, Mason McKenzie’s Escalade is sitting
in my driveway. I walk through the gate and find him asleep in one of my loungers with Buster Loo tucked under his
arm. I smile despite myself and my heart starts to flip and flutter and I wish I could make it stop, but I can’t. Buster
Loo opens one eye, sees me, and goes ape-shit crazy.

“Hey,” Mason says, rubbing his eyes.

“Hey,” I say, smiling so hard my face hurts.

“Y’all have a good afternoon at The Waverly Resort and Spa?”

“Oh, absolutely,” I say, “massage, manicure, pedicure, cucumber facial, the whole nine yards.”

“I’ll give you a facial,” he says with a devilish grin and starts laughing.

“You wish,” I say and open the door. “You could’ve gone inside, you know.”

“Well, I didn’t want to piss you off, so I thought I’d hang around out here like a stranger.”

“Or a stalker,” I offer.

“Or that,” he says, getting up and I see he has a boner the size of Nebraska. I can’t help myself. I just stare.

“Oops,” he says, grinning and adjusting himself. “My bad.”

“Why don’t you come on in the house?” I say.

“Are we gonna have sex?”

“Let me think a minute,” I say. “Uh, no.”

“Good because I wasn’t going to come in if you said yes.”

He wants to go to Ethan Allen’s but I tell him that we were instructed to lay low and I don’t think showing
my face at the bar the same day Chloe Stacks nearly beat her husband to death is a good way to do that. So we order
Chinese take-out and pick up some movies.

“So you and Lilly really had it out over the Panama City trip, huh?”

“Yeah, I was pretty pissed,” I say, “especially when I thought she was doing it to ol’ Drake Driskall.”

“Is that Dean Driskall’s kid?” he asks.


“Just like his daddy and his granddaddy,” Mason says. “Football runs deep in that family. Has he signed
anywhere yet?”

“He’s going to the University of Alabama,” I say. “It’s a tragedy.”

“Oh God,” Mason wails. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Wish I was.”

“So, would you have sex with him?”

“What kind of question is that? Hell no! I’m not into pedophilia.”

“No, I mean if you were in high school, would you?”

“I’d be on his ass like white on rice,” I say in an overly serious tone.

“Damn girl,” Mason says and looks at me in a way that makes my blood run hot.

After dinner, Mason goes into the living room and sprawls out on the sofa.

“What do you want to watch first?” he calls.

“I don’t care,” I say, “whatever you want.”

On the table, his phone starts buzzing.

“Hand that to me, would you?”

“Sure,” I say and tell myself not to look at the caller ID. But I just can’t help myself, I look at the caller ID.

Candy.

That gets me good and pissed off.

Candy was the reason I left three years ago.

I hold my breath and smile when I hand him the phone, praying my countenance doesn’t betray me. He looks
at the caller ID, gets up off the couch, and walks out the back door.

That pisses me off even more and I think for a second about going out the front door and sneaking around
back so I can hear what he’s saying, but I remind myself, yet again, not to be so pathetic. Seven minutes and thirty
two seconds pass and he walks back in, says nothing, and returns to his spot on the couch.

“Did you pick a movie?” he asks.
I just stare at him, shaking.
“What?”
“Who was that?”
“Nobody,” he says and picks up the movies. “Why?”
My inner bitch and outer grown-up tangle in a vicious brawl and I just sit there and stare at him like I might rip his head off and feed it to some wild hogs.
“Oh my God,” he says, getting up. “Don’t tell me you’re pissed off because I took a phone call outside.”
“I’m pissed off because the caller ID said Candy and, if my memory serves me right, I remember a Candy.”
“Ace, really?” he says, walking into the kitchen. “I’m not having this fight with you again.”
“Again?” I explode, “what the hell do you mean, again? We never had it to start with! She showed up and I left and that was the end of it until you came up here on your little trip to save our souls.” I say dramatically.
“Graciela,” he says, giving me a hard look, “don’t start being a bitch.”
“How can you expect me not to be a bitch when you come to my house, weasel your way back into my life, tell me you are staying here until I marry you, then you take her call in my house, or rather outside my house, and then, as if that weren’t enough, you have the nerve to tell me not to act like a bitch? What the fuck do you expect?”
“I meant it when I said I wanted to marry you,” he says. “Don’t throw that up in my face! And for your information, psycho, Candy is Daniel’s wife, you know my new partner, and she’s helping him out around the office and he’s working late and needed to know something, so she called me. But, please, let me thank you for thinking the worst of me!” He storms back to the guest room and Buster Loo starts running up and down the hallway looking like he’s about to have a nervous breakdown.
“I can’t put up with this,” he says, coming back with his bags. “I have tried everything with you and you have made it clear that you don’t want anything to do with me, plus you are still impossible to get along with. I’m leaving.”
“Mason, I want an explanation!”
“For what?”
“For Candy!”
“I just told you!”
“Not her, the one who showed up at your house that night.”
“It’s been three years and now, all of a sudden, you want an explanation?”
“Yes! I do.”
“Wouldn’t it have made a bit more sense if you’d asked for an explanation then,” he says, “instead of wasting three years of our life that we could’ve spent together?”
“You didn’t offer an explanation!” I yell. “She just showed up and waltzed into your house like she owned it and you politely asked her to leave then walked outside and spent thirty minutes talking to her and when you came back in, you said nothing! Nothing! Just acted like nothing had happened and went back to watching ESPN!”
“Honestly, I didn’t think I had to explain anything to a woman I’d just moved into my house,” he says, getting angry. “I didn’t think I had to explain anything to a woman I’d just spent the best six weeks of my life with. To a woman I bought a building for, a whole fucking building that I still own, by the way, so she could create the art studio she’s always dreamed about. I didn’t think I had to explain anything to you because I was so sure you were happy with me. I’d planned to give you a ring that night and when that fucking idiot showed up, it ruined my plans, and I went in and sat down and was trying to decide if I should go ahead and give you the ring or if I should wait, but I didn’t have to worry about that too long, because you blew up and left.”
“I didn’t know about the building then,” I say quietly, “or the ring.”
“No, but you did when you got back home and Ethan told you about the building and Lilly told you about the ring and what did you do?” he looks at me coldly. “Not a damn thing.”
“I’m sorry, Mason,” I begin.
“No, Ace, I’m sorry,” he says, “I’m sorry for coming back up here and trying to make this work.”
“Why couldn’t you just tell me who she was and why she was there?”
“Because it didn’t matter who she was or why she was there,” he said, “that wasn’t the important part.” He looks me right in the eye. “The important part was that you didn’t trust me,” he picks up his bags, “and you still don’t.”
“Mason,” I say, but he walks out the door.
The phone rings and I rush to pick it up, ready to sacrifice all my dignity and beg him to come back, but it’s not him. It’s Lilly.
“Here’s the plan,” Gloria Peacock says, “Lilly is going to create a distraction and you,” she looks at me, “and Chloe are going to slip into Richard Stacks’ room and get him to sign these papers.”

“Is he going to do that?” I ask, trying to hide my skepticism. “Sign the papers, just because we ask him to?”

“I’m not asking him,” Chloe says. “I’m telling him.”

Lilly and I stare at Chloe and I see a smile creep across Gloria Peacock’s face.

“Oh, you, uh, seem really confident this will work, so?”

“So,” she says, “you know I took his laptop from the house?” I nod and she continues. “It took me several hours, but I went through every file and what I found, in addition to being appalling and disgusting, would be quite embarrassing for him should it go public.”

“And what was that?” Lilly asks.

“Pictures of him with that pork chop penis in his hand.”

“We have a picture of him in a dog collar,” I point out. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference, my friend,” Chloe continues, “is that these photos were used in a chat room,” she takes a deep breath, “where men go to chat with other men.”

“How in the world did you find that out?” Lilly asks.

“I have the chat log,” she says. “Just call me Chris Hansen.”

“Okay,” I say to Chloe, “you, uh, seem really confident this will work, so?”

“So,” she says, “you know I took his laptop from the house?” I nod and she continues. “It took me several hours, but I went through every file and what I found, in addition to being appalling and disgusting, would be quite embarrassing for him should it go public.”

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“How in the world did you find that out?” Lilly asks.

“I have the chat log,” she says. “Just call me Chris Hansen.”

“Okay,” I say and can’t think of anything to add to that because this entire situation is getting really weird.

“Trust me,” Chloe says, matter-of-factly, “he’ll sign the papers or I’ll have the pictures and that chat log sent to his fat ass mother’s front door step.”

I barrel laugh at that feisty little comment. “Oh Chloe, I’m so happy for you and so sad for you all at the same time,” I say. “This is crazy!”

“Why can’t Chloe just walk in there and act like she’s there to see Richard?” Lilly asks.

“Because,” Gloria Peacock answers, “in cases of domestic violence, an automatic restraining order is issued against the perpetrator.”

“Chloe, you’re a ‘perp’,” I say and giggle a little. “How ridiculously ironic is that?”

“Yes, I am, which means I go to jail if I get caught anywhere near him,” Chloe says, getting up and when she does, I notice that her hair has been pixie trimmed and highlighted and looks much better.

“Ladies,” Gloria Peacock says, “no time like the present.” She hands Chloe and me a pair of scrubs, hospital name tags, and clipboards. Then she gives Lilly a hospital gown, white leggings, and some really nice looking house shoes. She tells us to change quickly and meet her in the garage and we do as we’re told.

When we get to the garage, we find the golf cart driver standing next to a jet black Mercedes-Benz with jet black tinted windows.

“All right,” I ask, “do you have a ride?”

“No, ma’am, I do not,” the chauffeur says, “and I’m your driver.”

All I can do is grin like an idiot. Gloria Peacock comes into the garage with a handful of electronics and gives each of us a walkie-talkie the size of a pager and a wireless ear bud.

“I feel like James Bond, for real,” I say as I slip the communication device into my ear. “Is this some more magic from Omega Systems?” I ask Gloria Peacock.

“Good guess, young lady,” she says with a wink. “Girls, I wish you the best of luck. Remember, stick to the plan. Get in, get out, and alert George if you hit a snag.”

We go over the plan one more time before we leave, then ride to the hospital in silence. George drops us off at a side door that Gloria Peacock arranged to have unlocked. Apparently when you donate millions of dollars to an organization, multiple favors are only a phone call away.

We take the stairs up to the ICU and Lilly steps into the hallway first. She gives us an “all clear” and we creep into the hallway and stay a few feet behind her. I watch Lilly duck into an unoccupied room and Chloe and I keep walking. The challenge is getting past the nurses’ station and with each step toward it, I get more and more nervous.

“Lilly,” I whisper, “all set?”

“Ready,” she whispers back.

I look at Chloe and she gives me a nod and pats the messenger bag with the divorce papers tucked inside.

“Do you have a pen?” I ask her.

“What?” Lilly says.

“Not you, dummy,” I whisper, a bit too loud. “I was talking to Chloe!”

“Of course I have pen!” Chloe says and looks at me like I’m an imbecile.

“Well, excuse me for double checking,” I whisper, then into the walkie-talkie, “Do it, Lilly, we’re almost to the nurses’ station.”
I hear a table hit the floor and then Lilly yells, “What am I doing in here? Where am I? How did I get here? I’ve missed the school bus again!”

Everyone within sight jumps into motion and Chloe and I turn our backs as the crowd whirs by. When I look up, I see the bed linens and the mattress fly out the door and into the hallway. Lilly slams the door shut and, as specified in the plan, rams the bed up against it. Calls go out for security as Chloe and I hustle past the nurses’ station and slip unnoticed into Richard Stacks’ room.

“What the hell is that noise?” he asks in a rough, scratchy voice. “Tell whoever that is to hold it down, if you can handle that, which you probably can’t because I asked for a glass of water an hour ago and apparently no one here is competent enough to put ice in a cup because I still do not have any water.”

“Shut your mouth, Richard,” Chloe says and stalks over to the bed. He makes a move to push the call button on the bed, but she slaps his hand away and says, “Now, you listen to me.”

What comes out of Chloe’s mouth for the next few minutes leaves Richard Stacks gaping with wide eyes and I’m somewhat shocked myself.

“This is blackmail, Chloe!” he shouts. “Nurse!”

Chloe reaches into her bag and I think she’s about to pull out the divorce papers, but she doesn’t. She pulls out a knife as long as my shoe and presses it up to her husband’s throat.

“Open your mouth again and it will be the last breath you take.” She looks at me. “Get the papers out.”

I hustle over and fumble around till I get the papers out of the bag and onto my clipboard and as bad as I hate Richard Stacks, I’m starting to feel a little sorry for him.

“Here,” I say.

“Hold it down where he can sign it,” Chloe orders.

“I’m not signing anything,” Richard Stacks grunts and Chloe presses the tip of the blade into his neck, drawing blood. “Really, Richard?” she hisses. “Then I guess I’ll have a nice package delivered to your darling little mother first thing tomorrow.”

“You wouldn’t do that too me,” he sniffs. “Please, Chloe, we can go to counseling, anything, please don’t tell Mama. Please, I’ll do anything.”

“Then sign the papers,” she says, handing him a pen with her other hand.

I offer him the clipboard, but the stupid bastard just shakes his head, while the tears pour down his cheeks. The fire alarm sounds and I look at Chloe and say, “We gotta get out of here.”

She wipes the blade across Richard’s chest and he squeals in horror.

“I’m just wiping the blood off, you idiot,” she says, “and if you don’t want to sign the papers, fine, but Mommy-dearest will be looking at pictures of your disgusting dick and reading about all the nasty things you want to do to, who was it? ManAss2004? First thing in the morning and that’s if I don’t decide to deliver it to her tonight.”

“Give me the pen!” he wails. “Give me the pen you heartless bitch!”

“Man,” I say, “you are so fucking stupid. You’re more scared of your mama than you are a knife to your throat?” I hand him the clipboard and he scribbles his name across the highlighted lines. Chloe jerks the papers out of his hand and stuffs them into her bag, along with the knife.

“If you ever,” she says, “come near me or say one bad word about me, you can rest assured that your fat ass mother will not be the only one who finds out about your dirty little secret. Understand?”

“Yes, Chloe,” he moans. “I understand.”

“Let’s go,” she says.

We bolt out of his room and I grab a gurney in the hallway. We run down to the room Lilly commandeered and find it is surrounded by security guards and fire men. Chloe and I pull our medical masks over our faces and push the gurney through the crowd.

“Sixth floor!” I yell. “Sixth floor, mental health coming through!”

I hear Dr. Sebastian Rain in a heated conversation with Deputy Dax Dorsett who is accusing the good doctor of all matter of wrongdoing. The crowd parts to let us through and I knock three times on the door and then tell everyone to stay back. Lilly opens the door and Chloe pushes the gurney into the room. Lilly jumps on the bed and I fasten the straps and she throws a pillow case over her head and starts singing Row, Row, Row your Boat. I keep my head down as we hustle our “patient” out the room and to the elevator.

“Excuse me,” Dr. Sebastian Rain yells, “could you please stop a minute and let me see that patient?”

“No sir,” I say. “Doctor’s orders to get the patient confined and subdued as quickly as possible.” We push Lilly into the elevator.

“I am a Doctor,” Sebastian Rain thunders and puts his hand out to stop the doors from closing, “and I demand to see that patient!”
“I don’t give a rat’s ass who you are,” I say and shove him back away from the elevator doors.
“You!” he growls.
“You,” I say, “can go fuck yourself.”
I see fury fill his features as the elevator doors close.
“Ace, shit!” Lilly yells, hopping off the gurney, “Why did you do that? Now he’s going to call security on us! Why in holy hell can you not ever just keep your damn mouth shut?”
“He was going to call security anyway,” I yell back.
Chloe has her walkie-talkie to her face. “Pick us up at the loading dock, George. We are on our way.”
“On our way where?” I ask Chloe.
“To the basement and then we have to run like hell to the other side of the hospital, raise the dock door, and jump.”
“How do you know that?” Lilly asks.
“Field trip last month,” she answers. “Lilly you better lose the house shoes.”
When the elevator doors open, we haul ass across the basement of the hospital and I start thinking about every horror movie I’ve ever seen and get really freaked out. Then all of the alarms start going off and I hear people coming after us.
“Pull that red string!” Chloe yells and she slides to a stop next to the dock door. I pull the red string and she pushes the lock back and the door flies open and I look down at a five foot drop.
“Shit!” I say.
“Jump!” Chloe yells and over the edge she goes, followed immediately by Lilly.
I look back and see the guards rushing toward us then close my eyes and leap into the air. When I hit the pavement, I’m sure I’ve broken both of my ankles and one of my legs, but I get up and run to the Mercedes like a Biggest Loser contestant toward a ten pound advantage prize. We pile in and George hits the gas and we clear the area just as the police cars round the corner. George doesn’t let off the gas all the way back to The Waverly Estate and I finally exhale once we are inside the gates. I’m pretty sure Sheriff Jackson would have hauled our asses off to jail without so much as a smile.
“Holy shit,” is all I can think up to say.
“Holy shit, indeed,” George says, and smiles at me.
It’s almost midnight by the time I leave The Waverly Estate. I drive straight to Ethan’s and call Mason.
“I’m in the driveway,” I say and in less than sixty seconds, he’s sitting in my car. We don’t say a word all the way back to my house. He follows me back to my bedroom, gently nudges Buster Loo into the hallway, and closes the door.

When the sun breaks through the curtains, I am wide awake and my heart is churning with feelings I can’t get under control. Most prevalent by far is the crazy, nervous feeling of being madly in love with the snoring man stretched across my bed.
I reach over and stroke his short blonde hair and my mind spins off in a million different directions.
What have I done? Why did I do this? How long has it been since I’ve had sex? Who was the last person I had sex with? Why can’t I remember? What if I’m pregnant? What was that weird move he made just before he finished? Do I want to marry him? Should I make him leave or should I cook him breakfast? How many hot young things has he bedded in the past three years? Why can’t I remember the last time I had sex? What is he doing here? Why did I go get him? Would he be mad if I woke him up to do it again?
I decide to make some coffee and try to sort things out in my head before he wakes up. Buster Loo is standing in the hallway when I open the door and he runs past me without so much as a glance and rocket launches himself onto the bed where he curls up next to Mason. Then he squints his eyes at me as if to convey his dismay at spending the night in the hallway.
I go to the kitchen and put on some coffee and I’m staring out the window trying to tame my crazed thoughts when I feel Mason’s arms slip around my waist. He pulls my hair back and kisses me gently on the neck. I turn around and he hugs me tight, cradling the back of my head in his hand.
He pours two cups of coffee and hands one to me. Smiling, he nods toward the patio and we go outside and sit down. Buster Loo bursts through the doggie door and makes a real scene of running around and doing his speedy dog crazy-eights twice as fast as he usually does.
Mason looks at me and I look at my day lilies and everything in my mind falls away and all I’m left with is a pressing need to spend the rest of my life as Mrs. Mason McKenzie.
“So,” he says quietly and when I look at him, my insides start to quiver. He cocks his head sideways and
saying, “What did you say your name was again?”

I burst out laughing and so does he and we sit and talk like old friends, laughing through two pots of coffee. He helps me make breakfast and insists on doing the dishes while I take a bubble bath. I soak in tub and try not to daydream about happily ever after.

I hear him start the shower in the guest room and five minutes later, he steps into the doorway of my bathroom, wearing only a towel.

“Are you gonna flash me?” I ask.

“No,” he says flatly, “I’m not the kind of man that flaunts my baby carrot.”

I laugh out loud and say, “Baby carrot, indeed.”

He raises his eyebrows and smiles, nodding toward the bed. I tell him to close the door so I can get out. He politely complies and I hop out of that tub, wrap a towel around me, brush my teeth, and shake out my hair. I grab my bottle of Sweet Cotton and spray my body down like I’m putting out a fire. When I open the door, Mason is laying in my bed with the sheet pulled up to his waist. His towel is in the floor and his baby carrot has transformed into a cucumber. I saunter around to my side of the bed and he starts sneezing like he just snorted a line of black pepper.

“What is that smell?” he says, rubbing his nose.

“Sweet Cotton,” I say, cringing.

“Oh God,” he says, “It smells great,” he sneezes again, “but I think it’s got my allergies stirred up.” He sneezes sixteen more times.

I go back into the bathroom, dejected, and shower off half a bottle of Sweet Cotton. When I go back into the bedroom, he’s on my side of the bed, reading Cosmo.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Researching the enemy,” he says and smiles. “Come here, baby, and let me smell that hair.”

“Better not,” I caution as I slip into bed beside him, “you might have another attack.”

He rolls onto his side, drapes his arm around me, and leans down close to my face.

“I might attack you,” he says and pulls me up next to his cucumber.

After discreetly returning Mason to Ethan’s house, I pull into the Red Rooster and pick up a cheeseburger and a butterscotch shake. I’m about to indulge a big juicy bite when my phone rings.

“You are not gonna believe this!” Lilly exclaims, before I even say hello.

“What?”

“Chloe just called me.”

“What?” I almost choke to death. “What the hell is she doing back there?”

“When it happened,” I say, sighing with relief.

“Why wouldn’t I believe that?” I ask.

“Researching the enemy,” he says and smiles. “Come here, baby, and let me smell that hair.”

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“Spray the grass?” I ask, looking at her like she’s crazy.

“Yes, you know that green stuff out on the lawn,” she says pointing, “all of it. But don’t get any on the shrubs,” she says. “The landscapers will be here any minute to excavate those.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I almost choke to death.

“I’d take the bricks if I could get them loose,” she says and turns to crawl up the ladder, then stops. “I thought I’d get this done before Richard gets released from the hospital because I’m afraid if we have another...
confrontation,” she stops. “I’m afraid I might kill him.” She looks at me, then Lilly. “I have so much anger, so much hate.”

I think she’s about to cry so I start trying to think up something funny to say, but she pulls herself back together and continues, “Lilly would you come up here and help me throw this stuff down from the attic?”

“Sure,” Lilly says, “absolutely, Chloe, anything you need.”

“Do you think it’s too much to spray the yard?” she looks down at me with those big brown eyes.

“Oh, hell no!” I exclaim and pick up the weed killer. “I think it’s the best idea ever!”

“Do you really?” she asks, smiling. “When I had the idea, I was thinking that you would be proud of me for coming up with that.”

“Oh yeah, Chloe,” I say, “when you told me, I was standing down here thinking that I couldn’t have come up with a better idea if I’d thought about it for a week.”

“Really?” she asks.

“Really!” I say. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

I pick up the weed killer and Lilly starts climbing the stairs. She looks back at me with a questioning look and I shrug, point my spray gun at her, and mouth the words “bang bang.”

I’m in the backyard spraying weed killer on Chloe’s perfectly manicured lawn when I hear shouting in the front yard. I run around the side of the house and see that bridge troll, Bobbie Sue Stacks, shouting at Chloe with her finger in her face. I make it to the sidewalk just as three moving men step out onto the front porch.

“Everything okay, Mrs. Stacks?” one of the men shouts.

“You stop right now!” the elder Mrs. Stacks shouts back. “This stuff belongs to my son!”

“Everything is fine, gentlemen,” says the younger Mrs. Stacks, “please continue moving everything from the house into the van. Thank you.” She smiles that sweet smile of hers and the moving man tips his hat and says, “Back to work guys.”

“I said for you to cease and desist immediately,” Mrs. Bobbie Sue Stacks screams.

“With all due respect ma’am, I don’t know who you are and I don’t want to be rude, but if you would stop shouting at my crew and me right about now, that would be great.”

“You gather up that crew and get out of here,” Bobbie Sue yells, walking toward him. “And you,” she stops when she sees me and starts waving that fat, crooked finger, “You are the reason for this entire mess!”

“Well?” I say and look at Chloe, who is motioning the moving men back to work.

“Hey, Bobbie Sue,” Chloe says and when Bobbie Sue Stacks turns around, Chloe hauls off and slaps the ever-loving shit out of her. Bobbie Sue staggers back and opens her mouth to say something, but Chloe grabs her by the collar and pulls her up close to her face. I get so excited that I almost pass out right there on the sidewalk.

“Bobbie Sue, I’m leaving Richard and there is not one damn thing you can do about it. Now if you want to play dirty, I can play dirty too, but you might want to run over to the hospital and speak with Richard before you start that fight, because last night when he signed the divorce papers giving me everything but the house—”

“My Richard would never sign anything over to you,” Bobbie Sue snarls.

“Oh, but your Richard did,” Chloe says, “now get your ass out of here before I take it upon myself to make your son’s dirty laundry public knowledge and trust me you old hag, there is plenty of it.”

For some reason Bobbie Sue looks at me, so I give her the finger.

“You will pay dearly for this,” she hisses to Chloe.

“I won’t pay for a fucking thing,” Chloe says, “and if you threaten me one more time, I’ll make what I did to Richard looks like child’s play compared to what I’m about to do to you!” Chloe takes a step toward her and Bobbie Sue takes a step back. “Now get the hell out of here or you will pay in ways you never thought possible.” She looks at me, “Ace, do you still have those pictures of Rich from the strip club?”

“That and so much more,” I chirp, delighted to be involved in the conversation.

“Would you like to see those?” Chloe asks, pushing Bobbie Sue backward. “Or would you like to leave?”

“I’ll leave,” Bobbie Sue Stacks stammers, “but you’ll hear from my lawyers.”

“Will I?” Chloe says, getting in her face. “Will I?”

“No,” she mumbles, “no you won’t.” And Bobbie Sue Stacks scurries to her Lexus and drives away.

I look around and see faces in almost every window of the surrounding houses. Peepers everywhere, but no one dares to venture outside. I guess they don’t feel like tangling with a three man team of crazy women.

“Now,” Chloe says, turning to me, “back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, tickled pink that finally, after missing in action for over eleven years, the real Chloe is back on the scene.

“What are you going to do with all this stuff?” Lilly asks, eyeballing the stacks of boxes in the carport.

“Well, I’m keeping most of it for my new project.”
“What’s that?” I ask.
“I’m starting a shelter for battered women,” she says, “with Richard’s 401K money.”
I can’t help but laugh. The irony never ends.
“You need some help?” Lilly asks. “Seeing as how I’m unemployed.”
“You’ll get your job back,” Chloe says definitively and looks from me to Lilly and back. “We are all going
to be just fine.”
“I hope so,” Lilly says and doesn’t sound convinced.
“Well, I’ve got grass to kill,” I say and start spraying.

It’s almost dark when I get back home and I haven’t heard from Mason since I dropped him off at Ethan’s.
When I open the gate, Buster Loo bursts out the doggie door so I get down and roll around with him for a while. He
pulls the pony tail holder out of my hair and we waller around in the grass, then he runs and gets his rubber starfish
and we play a game of speedy-dog fetch.

On the third throw, he disappears into a cluster of shrubs and I’m about to go inside when I hear a truck
pulling up in my driveway. I can tell from the rumble that it’s Ethan Allen Harwood.

I step around the house and see that Mason is with him, so I shake off like dog in an effort to get rid of some
of the grass trimmings that are most certainly stuck all over me.

“Good Lord, Ace,” Ethan says, getting out of his truck, “you been doin’ yard work on all fours?”
They laugh and I smile because, what else could I do?
“Come here,” Mason says, motioning, “check this out.”
I look in the back of Ethan’s truck and see the biggest grill I have ever laid eyes on.
“What is that?” I ask.
“This, my dear lady,” Ethan says, “is your new grill.”

“It’s Tuesday.”

“Who cares, it’s not like any of y’all have jobs,” Mason laughs.

“Ha ha, Mason,” I say dryly, “your comedic genius is overwhelming.”

Ethan drops his tailgate and they both hop in the back of the truck and grab that gargantuan grill by its
stainless steel handles.

“Are we going to invite anyone or will it just be the three of us and the dog?”

“Already got that taken care of, baby. Everybody will be here in about an hour,” Mason says and winks at
me and I think I might faint. “Ethan, we’re gonna need a fork lift to get this thing outta this truck.”

“Naw, we don’t,” he says, walking around to the driver’s side, “just hold it steady there for a minute.”

“Are you for real?” I ask Mason.

He pulls me up close to him and gives me a short, but very hot kiss. “I told you what my plan was the first
day I got here,” he whispers and squeezes my ass. “So you better believe I’m for real.”

“Hold it steady,” Ethan yells and the tailgate of his truck slides out and then slowly down toward the ground.

“Holy shit!” Mason hollers and puts both hands on the grill. “Look at this!”

Ethan walks back to where we are, glowing with that special look of pride that comes from a man receiving a
compliment on his truck. He and Mason set the grill onto my driveway and Mason rolls through the gate and into the
backyard.

“Now this right here is what I call I grill,” Ethan says as he and Mason take turns twisting knobs and
admiring features.

“What’s wrong the one I have?” I ask, looking over at my knee high charcoal grill. Ethan shakes his head
while Mason rolls his eyes.

“Well, I gotta run,” Ethan says. “Can I leave him here with you without you trying to smother him with
perfume?”

I gawk at Mason, then at Ethan.

“Is nothing sacred anymore?” I ask.

Ethan laughs and takes off toward his truck.

“Mason,” I ask, looking at the grill, “what the hell?”

“You needed a grill.”

“Says who?”

“Says me,” he takes me by the hand. “C’mon, baby, take me to the grocery store.”

“Just take my car,” I say, tossing him the keys. “I’ve gotta get a shower because I’ve been spraying weed
“Weed killer?”
“Yes, I covered the lawn at Stacks’ residence while movers emptied the house.”
“Yeah, I heard about that,” he says and smiles while Buster Loo jumps and bounces and whines at his feet.
“I’m sure you did,” I smile at him. “Hey, take Buster Loo with you before he has some kind of brain stroke and has to be put in a psychiatric hospital for dogs.”
“I’d love to!” Mason says and Buster Loo, as if understanding the exchange, races over to the gate and starts clawing at it like he’s trying to land a part in Shawshank Redemption for Chiweenies. Mason gives me a quick hug and whispers, “Good to have the family back together again.”
“Nutty as they might be,” I say, not willing to admit I was thinking the same thing.
“She can speak for herself can’t she?” Mason says and Buster Loo starts barking his fool head off. “See,” Mason says, picking up the little dog, “he agrees with me.”

Two hours after the arrival of my new grill, cars line the street and my back yard is packed with folks drinking beer and eating hot dogs. Deputy Dax shows up with Lilly and he’s acting all funny and weird like he feels out of place. I make a point to make him feel at home and instruct Mason and Ethan to do the same and he loosens up a little. He gets back to his usual self when Sheriff Jackson shows up and starts carrying on about some bizarre incident they witnessed at a road block.

I look around and see Chloe making her way toward J.J. Jackson. I smile to myself when I realize how happy she must be to finally be rid of ol’ pork chop Dick Richard. Lilly comes up and gives me a big hug and tells me how great the party is.

“Don’t I always have great parties?” I ask her.
“That you do, my friend,” she says.
“Hey,” I say, nodding toward Deputy Dax, “How’d you pull that off?”
“Well, it’s not so much the how as the what,” she smiles, “and, you know, I used to be an underwear model and all and that ol’ girl, well, let’s just say she’s not on my level,” she pauses, looks over at Deputy Dax and sighs. “I just went over there and ran her off. And after she left, I did what I had to do to convince him that I am what he needs.”

“Really? Well, good job on that, sister,” I say and she’s smiling from ear to ear like a goon. “Lilly, please tell me that he doesn’t have a list.”
“He didn’t till he dumped me,” she laughs, “but don’t worry, I threw it away. And I’m not going to show him the notebook.”
“You have got to stop that crap,” I tell her. “That damned book of yours needs to be burned.”
“What needs to be burned?” Dax asks, sneaking up behind us. He wraps a beefy arm around Lilly’s thin waist and she smiles and bats her eyelashes like a school girl.

Those wieners don’t need to burn,” I say quickly and run over to where Mason is standing by the grill.
“By the way,” I ask as he flips the dogs, “what are we celebrating?”
“Success, baby,” he says. “Because I accomplished everything I came up here to do.” He closes the grill cover and looks at me. “Chloe’s divorce will be final in a few weeks, Lilly just signed a three year contract with Bugtussle School District—”

“Three year contract?” I interrupt. “Since when does a high school teacher get a three year contract?”
“Since Mason McKenzie came to town, babe.”
“Oh, you are too much.”
“Am I?” he says, giving me a quick smooch. “Am I?”
I squeal with laughter and he takes my hand and pulls me into the house.
“Hey, baby,” he says, smiling. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”
“Yeah,” I say.
“Been meaning to ask you for a while now.”
“What’s that?”
“Do you really wanna know?”
“I really wanna know, Mason.”
“How bad?”
“Really bad.”
“Really, really bad?”
“Really, really, really and truly bad,” I say.
“Okay then,” he says and pulls a small, felt box out of his pocket. I get a little dizzy and start thinking that
this is it. This is the day that I will finally pass out and die for real. He gets down on one knee, and I feel the sting of oncoming tears.

“Ace Jones, will you marry me?”

“Why, yes, Mason McKenzie,” I say and tell myself to keep breathing. “I do believe I will!”

He slides the ring on my finger, kisses my hand, and smiles.

“Finally!” he says.

“Finally!” I say.

The End

SPECIAL THANKS:
To Brandon, for constantly reassuring me that I wasn’t out of my mind for trying to do this and for patiently allowing me all the time I needed to get it done. To Mandi, original list maker and co-conspirator in the root beer shenanigan, for entertaining the character of Gloria Peacock for so many years. To Molly, for still being friends with us after the root beer shenanigan. To Sandy, for willingly accompanying me on many a wild adventure and consistently blaming me for any and every consequence thereafter. To Tina, my impromptu editor, for stepping in at a moment’s notice and doing an unbelievable job on such an arduous task. Thank you all so much for the support and inspiration.
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