

# A Little Bruised

A novel by

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## Chapter 1

### — NYLA —

Nathan is in the family room watching sports on TV. My handbag and car keys are on the foyer table next to the flower arrangement I sent myself yesterday for our twenty-third wedding anniversary. I grab my keys, my handbag, and open the front door. I pause in the doorway to look back over my shoulder, at the life I lived here. Then silently, almost invisibly, I walk out the door.

I have no idea where I'm going. All I feel is the overwhelming burden of where I've been. The toll and heaviness of an undesired life. So for now, a hotel will have to do. One where no one can find me, and has big, fluffy pillows to hold my tears and muffle my screams. Tomorrow, when Nathan's at work, I'll go back for a few personal things because all I have now are the clothes on my back—clothes which are hanging wearily from my marriage-torn body.

The truth of the matter is, I'm a murderer. I've killed the one person who could've saved me—myself. I've traveled down this lifeless road for far too long, and now I'm stuck in blandness. I miss the flavor of life. The pleasure and joy of actually feeling feelings, instead of faking feelings. Faking joy, faking happiness. I'm living life without the spice of life and it's taking its toll on me.

But thank God the dead has now risen, and it's time for me to take back my life. To absolve my death. Which is precisely what I did over dinner this evening while Nathan was eating in front of the TV, and I was dining alone at the kitchen table. I asked myself two questions: (1) How much longer can I play a role that's no longer suited for me?, and (2) How much longer can I hold my breath when all I want to do is breathe? The answers to those questions are what caused me to rise from the table, grab my handbag, and walk out the door.

The thing is, I don't know how to love my husband anymore. Or if I ever loved him at all. It seems I did. I must have. But I just don't know anymore. It's exhausting spinning your wheels in a marriage that doesn't seem to move. Not forward, not backwards, just stalled. Stagnant. There's a lot of bitterness that accompanies stagnation. A lot of anger. A lot of slicing each other apart, and chewing each other up. It's treacherous. It's sad. It's time to move on.

After driving for a half hour to the next town over, I find a nice hotel with clean, spacious rooms, a deep Jacuzzi tub, fresh linens, and a complimentary hot breakfast in the morning. Nathan will be calling me when it becomes the middle of the night and I haven't returned home. He'll wonder where I am with a slight bit of concern. Or perhaps he'll sleep like a log through the night and never give my absence a second thought. Either way, I've turned off my cell phone. His concern or lack of concern is no longer an issue for me.

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“I’ve moved into a condo by the lake,” I say to my therapist three weeks later.

“How do your kids feel about that?”

“They’re in college, and living their own lives.”

She looks at me knowingly.

I lift my chin in defiance. “They’ll get over it. Soon enough, they’ll be fine.”

“Mmm hmm,” she says.

Dr. Audrey Stone, the best in the business they say, and not accepting new patients. I got in by sheer luck when one of her patients, Lettie Wilkes, ended her sessions with Dr. Stone and suggested I take over her time slot.

Lettie Wilkes owed me a favor for seducing her husband. The agreement was I’d meet her husband at a business conference, indulge in suggestive behavior, invite him to my hotel room and leave the door unlocked so Lettie could walk in on us. Prior to this, she could never get substantial proof of his infidelities. She needed it for her divorce. The truth is, if I hadn’t grown fond of Lettie, I would’ve actually slept with her husband. That’s how low I’d sunk in my marriage.

Ronald Wilkes is so good looking it stops you dead in your tracks and makes you want to slap yourself. He’s also an intricately woven charmer. If you weren’t already paralyzed by his warm hazel eyes; plump full lips; clean-cut salt and pepper hair; deeply rooted dimples; and well-chiseled jawbone, then you would’ve been swallowed up and eaten alive by his insatiable charm.

I see why women easily drop their panties for him. However, I wasn't going to do any panty dropping that night, but believe me—would of, could of, should of.

What's also interesting is Ronald Wilkes is a wealthy man, which takes him to an all new untouchable level of massive goodness. And as we know, a man with money looks good automatically, even if he's butt ugly. So, of course, Lettie wanted to make sure she walked away from that marriage paid in full.

My reward in Lettie's divorce was Dr. Audrey Stone, and three years of paid psychotherapy. We're in year two of therapy and it has made a tremendous difference in helping me understand the who and what of my life. What I like best about Dr. Stone is she can see right through me. She cuts to the chase without a lot of hemming and hawing.

"My marriage was over a long time ago," I say to Dr. Stone, "years and years ago." I check her face for an expression. Nothing. "We're just... what we're doing now is just the formalities of burying the dead. It was already dead."

"I see," she says and clears her throat. "And now, Nyla, how do you feel now?"

I look her straight in the eyes, without batting one eyelash and say, "Free."

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A few weeks later, I was hanging a new painting on the dining room wall of my condo when I got the call. Nathan was on his way to Houston for a business trip when his plane crashed. There were no survivors. Now I'm sitting here at his funeral, sandwiched between my kids—Tristan and Trista. Twins. Born four minutes apart. I got the two for one pregnancy deal.

For some reason my kids are sitting snug up against me, as if bracing me in case I pass out, faint, or collapse in a huddled mass of tears. I'm pretty sure that won't be happening. I'm probably the least grieving person here. But they don't need to know that. Maybe their snugness means they need to prop themselves up against me in case they're the ones to perform the before-mentioned acts. If so, I'm more than happy to be their leaning post since I'm not the fragile widower everyone seems to think I am.

Don't get me wrong, overall Nathan was a decent guy and a wonderful father to his children. But Nathan and I were separated and headed for divorce when he died. And although only a few close friends and family were privy to this information, still, the point is I'm not so distraught over losing him because in my mind he was already gone. The good part about this whole funeral thing is now I don't have to go through the whole divorce thing. I'm officially a widow—the less complicated way out of a marriage you no longer belonged in.

“Are you okay?” Trista asks on the limo ride home after the burial.

“I'm fine, sweetheart,” I say and take her hand. “I'm more concerned about you. How're you holding up?”

Tears well up in her eyes. “I'm good. Just glad it's over. I'm tired of being around all those people. I just want to be alone.” She wipes away a single tear rolling down her cheek.

I move closer to her, drape my arm around her shoulder. “Too bad that there's more people waiting for us at the house. But you don't have to stick around if you don't want to. You can go to your room and rest. I'm sure they'll all understand.”

Trista's lips curl into a half smile. “I think I'll do that, Mom. I'm not up to talking to anyone,” she says in her twenty-two year old voice, but somehow to me it sounds like she's nine again. Good lord how time flies.

Tristan, however, is plastered against the car door staring blankly out the window. It's spring time here in Cedar Brook, Virginia and the world is coming to life around us as we pass by budding trees, blooming flowers, and singing birds. It's hard not to think of the irony of death in the midst of life.

"What about you, Tristan, you haven't said much. Are you okay?" I ask.

He doesn't utter a word. He doesn't even move or shift his gaze. If it wasn't for his chest rising and falling with every breath, I would've thought he'd turned into stone.

"You don't have to stick around either, if you don't want," I say in my softest, motherly voice.

"I plan to stick around, Mom. Someone has to care that my dad is dead," Tristan says in an abruptly harsh tone without looking from the window.

"Are you saying I don't care?" I say calmly while trying to ignore the sting to my heart from the tone which slung daggers into my chest.

"I don't know, Mom, it sure seems as if you don't."

"I do," I say and lightly touch his arm. "I do care, Tristan. Just because I'm not doubled-over in tears, doesn't mean I don't care."

I see him roll his eyes and briskly rub his nose with the back of his hand. I open my mouth to say something more, but decide against it. Instead, the limo falls into a timid silence. A silence of grief and regret.

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Five whole weeks after Nathan's death I finally break into tears. I'm sitting on the sofa in Dr. Stone's office clutching soggy, wadded-up balls of tissue in my hands.

Dr. Stone allows me to bawl my eyes out for a few minutes before saying, “Tell me, Nyla, what do your tears represent?”

I snort, snot, and blow my nose. Dump the used tissues in the trash can next to the table and reach for more of them from the box strategically placed in front of me. I take a deep breath, think for a moment, then respond.

“I don’t know. What are they supposed to represent? Grief, I guess?”

Dr. Stone sits back in her chair, crosses her legs. “Are you sure it’s only grief?”

I blot my eyes with the tissue and can feel my eyebrows burrow in confusion. “What else is it supposed to be? I mean, my husband of twenty-three years just died.”

“Five weeks ago,” she says in a peculiar tone.

“Yeah, and?” I say, challenging her tone and becoming mildly irritated.

“Your tears seem delayed. How come?”

“You tell me, you’re the doctor.”

“It’s not my job to tell you how you feel. Only you can do that.”

I look down at the globs of tissue in my hands, at the black streaks of mascara smeared on them and also a few dots of red. What’s red? Is my nose bleeding? I grab another tissue and stab inside my nose. Yep, bleeding.

“Dr. Stone, I’m not sure what you’re getting at. We were discussing my husband, the plane crash, the funeral. Then I broke into tears. Sounds and feels like grief to me.”

She looks at me and nods her head a few times as if in agreement, but not really in agreement. Silence fills the room for a few moments before I finally confess.

“Okay, it’s guilt,” I say and hang my head in shame. “The tears are a mixture of grief and guilt, rolled up into a big ball of confusion. I should feel more sorrow than I do, and I feel guilty

that I don't. I'm grieving the loss of a human life and the father of my children, but I'm not heartbroken or empty by his death. Maybe because I was living heartbroken and empty in our marriage."

"Do you think you need to forgive yourself for feelings of guilt?"

"Probably, but I don't know how to do that."

"Maybe you need more time to process those feelings before you can release them and free yourself from the indifference and the guilt."

At her words, I feel my eyes fill up again, and against my will, they release their salty liquid defiantly down my cheeks. I sit up straight, wipe them away, and smile bleakly at Dr. Stone.

"Would you like to take a moment to go splash water on your face and tend to your nose bleed?" she asks warmly.

How does she know my nose is bleeding? It's not like it's squirting out profusely or anything. I'm sure it's just a minor scratch inside from all the wiping I've been doing.

"Yes, I could use a quick break," I say, suddenly craving some fresh air instead of the stale air crowding this room.

"Take your time," she says and watches me leave the room.

Down the hallway, instead of going into the washroom to fix my soggy face, I slip passed the receptionist and head outside. To the left of the sliding entryway doors is a wrought iron bench sitting between two large planters that are filled with purple and red azaleas. I take a seat on the bench and inhale deeply, allowing the oxygen to fill my lungs, and the sweet aroma of azaleas to soothe my soul. I close my eyes to relax and regain some composure.

"Are you okay?" a voice says only seconds into my relaxation mode.

I open my eyes to find a woman sitting next to me. Her face warm, friendly and etched with concern as she looks at me with dark chocolate eyes. She has a feisty array of freckles dancing across her face underneath gold-rimmed eyeglasses that are well-suited for her facial structure. She looks to be in her late thirties, early forties, with caramel brown hair, styled into a sassy crop of curls. I force a smile, trying to figure out how she suddenly appeared.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I say, “just needed some fresh air.”

“Must be contagious.” She leans back on the bench, throws her face towards the sky and breathes in deeply.

“What is?”

“Fresh air and how patients from this building need it.” She lowers her head to look at me. “Airing out dirty laundry in a psychiatrist’s office can get a little stuffy sometimes.”

I nod in agreement, wondering which of the four psychiatrists housed in this building was hers. Even though the building held dentists and dermatologists, too. It’s a fairly large medical building. “Tell me about it,” I say, “Very stuffy for sure.”

“You know, I think today is going to be my last session.” She says this part with conviction because as she’s speaking she sits up straight on the bench, pushes her chest out, and arranges her facial features into a stern, more confident expression. “Sometimes you get tired of analyzing life. People should get back to living life. I should get back to living life—boldly, vibrantly, and carefree,” she says rather loudly and I look around to see if anyone else can hear her. She then reaches for the handbag sitting next to her and starts fishing around inside.

I look at her slightly amused, a bit confused, and strangely inspired by her take control attitude. I mean, after all, this strange woman pops up out of nowhere, and talks to me as if we’ve known each other for a few years instead of a few seconds.

Finally after fiercely searching through her handbag, she pulls out a set of car keys, stands to her feet and slings the handbag over her shoulder, missing my face by only a few short inches.

“Well, it was nice talking with you. Have a great day,” she says and rushes out into the parking lot as if she’s running to reclaim her life.

I watch her disappear amongst the parked cars and wonder what the hell just happened. Who was this woman? To me it seems she should be marching back into the building, into the safe hands of her psychiatrist, instead of running recklessly away. Then I realize my own doctor, my own unfinished session, and head back inside to gulp down more of Dr. Stone’s medicine.

## Chapter 2

The new Yoga class is full when I arrive. I see Lettie stretched out in the back corner waving me over.

“What took you so long?” she says, moving her Yoga mat over to make room for me. “I told you to be here early to get a good spot.”

Lettie is a very stylish, well-proportioned sized six woman. Today her curly hair extensions are piled high atop her head and bound by a chunky gold hair clip. Why she even bothers with hair extensions is beyond me because she doesn’t need them. I would give my right arm for the natural health and bounce of her hair. Too often my hair sits heavy and lifeless on my scalp, probably wishing it had a better owner.

“I got caught up handling supply orders at the bakery. Owning a bakery isn’t all sunshine and roses, ya know.” I roll out my Yoga mat and slip off my shoes.

“These evening classes fill up fast, Nyla. Everyone’s trying to de-stress after their long workday.”

“Yes, Lettie, you’ve told me that only a thousand times already today. Shall I show you your text messages as proof?”

Lettie laughs. “Well you know me, I have to make sure I get my point across.”

At that moment the Yoga teacher cranks on soothing music and tells the class we’ll begin with mountain pose. She instructs us to stand up straight, feet together, arms down to our sides, and take deep breaths in, then slowly exhale.

After a couple of these, I was beginning to relax. As for Lettie, not so much.

“Pssst,” she whispers, tapping my arm. “There she is.”

“There who is?” I say softly, trying not to disturb the class.

“Your dead husband’s mistress.”

In an instant I lose my balance and almost stumble off my mat. “Are you kidding me? Where?”

“Up there, front row, to your far left.”

I strain my neck trying to see amongst the small crowd of Yoga women. Yet the only problem with this is I have no idea what she looks like so I don’t know which one to look at. I turn towards Lettie who’s planted on the right side of me. “Which one? What does she have on?” I say, whispering frantically.

“Purple tank top, dark grey Yoga pants, short curly hair.”

I strain my neck again to see, but can only get a glimpse of her side profile. “How do you know that’s her, Lettie, when have you ever seen her?”

“It’s her, it’s her. Stacy and I ran into her at the supermarket. That’s when Stacy told me who she was.”

Stacy is Lettie's sister-in-law with a small frame and a big mouth. She's married to Lettie's younger brother and considered the information highway of the family. That's why it's rare I'm ever around Stacy, except on those few occasions when Lettie has dragged her along with us to one of our get-together outings.

"I can't go off of you," I say. "You've only seen her that one time. And how does Stacy know?"

One of the girls in front of us looks over her shoulder giving us the stink eye. Apparently we're whispering too loudly, but her evil eye doesn't stop us from talking. Instead, we lower our voices a wee bit more and ignore her eye daggers altogether. The Yoga teacher is instructing the class to begin a series of moonflower poses.

"Because she hangs out with your husband's secretary," Lettie says, and begins imitating the bodily movements of the Yoga teacher.

"They don't call them secretaries anymore. It's his administrative assistant." I part my legs, allow my arms to go above my head and then swoop down into moonflower.

"Whatever," she says slowly exhaling. "secretary...girl Friday...slave, who cares. The point is, Stacy hangs out with his assistant and the assistant has been blabbing about Nathan's indiscretions to Stacy." She begins another moonflower pose.

"Are you sure, Lettie?" I look at her skeptically before inhaling and flowing into another pose.

"Ladies in the back row," the Yoga teacher says softly, almost nurturing. "...more focus, less talking, please."

This, of course, makes me feel like a scolded child. And the stink eye girl in front of us is smugly grinning. I contort my face apologetically for forgiveness to both her and the teacher. Lettie, however, keeps right on talking.

“Nyla, I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I’m pretty sure. We can get a better look at her after class.”

I look at Lettie with wide eyes and a “shut up” expression. She hunches her shoulders with the palms of her hands facing up, and mouth the word “what?” I close my eyes and shake my head, unsure of the loose screws in Lettie’s head sometimes. I mouth the words “Shhh, talk later.” And with a wave of her hand and a roll of her eyes, Lettie dips down into a downward dog pose because the Yoga teacher has just instructed us all to do so, and Lettie and I continue the rest of the class in silence. But not without sneaking periodic glances at the alleged mistress in the front row.

After class Lettie and I are standing in the hallway by the water fountain pretending to have conversation but really waiting for the woman to come out of the Yoga studio. Several women fill the hallway and are occasionally obstructing our view of the door. I start filling my water bottle at the fountain and Lettie is standing against the wall looking like an idiot.

“Here she comes,” Lettie whispers out the corner of her mouth, but I don’t turn around. I keep filling my bottle.

From my peripheral vision I see two women walking towards us, one of them wearing the infamous purple tank top and gray Yoga pants. I have it all planned out in my head that I’ll turn around at precisely the moment they’re right in front of us. That way I’ll get an up-close and personal view.

Lettie moves in closer and elbows me. I slowly lift my finger from the water nozzle to stop the flow of water and prepare for my perfectly timed turn. It's a foolproof plan. An idiot could pull it off, except for one thing. From the other direction another woman came up behind me and stood waiting her turn at the water fountain. My peripheral vision so focused in the other direction, I never saw the other woman's approach.

"That was a great class," the woman says behind me just as I begin my perfectly timed turn and startles the craps out of me.

Immediately water from my uncapped water bottle splashes all over her face, neck and shoulders. We both gasp in unison.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I say and reach out to assist her, but both my hands are full with the bottle in one and the bottle cap in the other.

The woman begins wiping her eyes with the back of her hands and I immediately set my water bottle onto the floor and help her flick away excess water. Lettie reaches for the towel hanging from the woman's gym bag that's on her shoulder, and starts drying the front of her shirt and neck.

The two women we were stalking—the alleged mistress and her friend—stop momentarily to assess the situation, conclude there's nothing more they can add to help, and continue walking. I can only get a brief glimpse of the women before they disappear down the hall and out the front doors.

After I profusely apologize to the water-drenched woman, and make sure she's okay, Lettie grabs my arm, drags me down the hall and out the building.

"Did you get a good look at her?" Lettie asks, scanning the parking lot. Hoping to find the purple tank top, no doubt.

“Briefly. I didn’t get to see her the way I wanted to.” I scan for purple, too.

“There they are.” Lettie points to two women getting in a dark, maroon Honda Pilot SUV. “That’s got to be the mistress. I’m almost certain it is.” Lettie stands there deflated, wracking her brain trying to remember if this woman is the same woman she and Stacy had seen at the market. “I wish Stacy were here, then we’d know for sure.”

If Stacy were here, our little innocent stalking would’ve quickly developed into a full blown misdemeanor, and I wasn’t looking to confront or combat the woman. I only wanted to see who she was and what she looks like. What would be the point of confronting her? Nathan is dead. What’s left to be said?

The following week, we brought Stacy to Yoga class with us. Or should I say, Lettie brought Stacy to class. I am taken off guard when I enter the Yoga studio and see the two of them conspiring together in the back corner. Stacy is standing in her hot pink Yoga outfit and jet black hair pulled up into a ponytail, and Lettie is slipping out of her shoes and unrolling her mat. They wave me over and I begrudgingly follow suit. Quickly scanning the room to see if the alleged woman is here, and hoping this class doesn’t end in awkward embarrassment and chilly confrontation. Fortunately, the woman never shows up, and the Stacy-induced chaos is averted. This time.

“What is wrong with you two loons?” I ask in the parking lot afterwards. “Do you really think I want to cat fight with some woman Nathan screwed? Give me more credit than that.” I glare down hard on them with “what the hell” eyes and continue my rant. “This isn’t the *Nathan and His Hoes*, reality show—*Starring Nyla, The Disgruntled Widow*,” I say and thrust my hand into my gym bag looking for my car keys.

They both look at each other and burst out laughing. Hanging on each other through gasps of air.

“Not cool, guys. And not funny.” I take off towards my car. They follow me.

“Nyla, nobody was trying to lure you into a cat fight,” Stacy says, trying to calm her laughter. “Lettie just wanted me to identify the woman, that’s all. I wasn’t going to try to start a war.”

I stop and turn around to see Lettie still laughing and Stacy trying not to laugh. “Stacy, you’re a walking war. Drama follows your every footstep.”

“Not true,” she says “Plus, I’m learning to stay out of other folk’s business.”

“Then why are you here in mine?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Lettie says to me, noticing my tone. “I asked Stacy to come and help us out. You don’t have to bite her head off for it.”

“You know what, Lettie, you’re right. And you know what else?” I raise an eyebrow and look them both over with contempt. “It’s time for me to find a new Yoga class.” I turn and walk off and I can hear Lettie calling after me, telling me to stop being so dramatic, but I keep walking, yet not out of anger. Even though I’m upset, I’m not really angry. I just want to get away from those two crazies.

Once in my car while backing out of my parking space, I make the mistake of putting the car in motion a few seconds before checking the rearview mirror and all I hear is the sound a crash makes. I scream obscenities and jump out of my car. I hear the words “*oh my god*” and watch as the other woman emerges from her car, too.

Our eyes meet. And it’s her.

The exact same woman I drenched at the water fountain last week.

## Chapter 3

### — VIVIAN —

Vivian knew exactly who Nyla was the moment she sat beside her on the bench that day outside her psychiatric office. She knew it during the water fountain drenching, and the parking lot collision. But the thing that works in Vivian's favor, the glue that holds it altogether, is that Nyla hasn't a clue as to who Vivian is.

Nathan had described his wife beautifully to Vivian in his psychotherapy sessions. Nyla's thick brown hair, sitting shoulder-length with streaks of gold highlights. Her full eyebrows that danced when she smiled. Her large, mysterious eyes which looked like they held a thousand secrets. And a thin scar under her chin only visible when she turned her head a certain way.

Yes, Vivian knew her well, and it was upon seeing Nyla for the first time at Nathan's funeral when she realized Nyla Kane was a wrong she needed to make right.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” the doctor says entering the examining room and jolting Vivian from her thoughts. The doctor thumbs through the test results on her clipboard and smiles down at the pages before landing her smile upon Vivian. “Looks like you’re going to be a mommy.”

Vivian, however, does not smile at the news. Instead her heart plummets to the pit of her stomach and a cold chill walks up her naked spine. The chill must have come from the drafty opening of her examination gown, or from the sheer terror of being pregnant at her age by a man she is no longer with.

Not that she isn’t excited to have a baby. The thought of being a mother thrills her. She and her ex-husband had tried for several years to have a child, but never any luck. Unless you count the one miscarriage that devastated her, her husband, and their marriage. Causing the marriage to crumble a few years later when her husband traded Vivian in for a younger, more fertile version. He and the new wife immediately started popping out kids like a factory assembly line. And Vivian coped with her divorce by plunging herself into her job and never coming up for air.

Still, the news of this pregnancy sank into her in an oddly piercing way. After all this time, in the forty-third year of her life, why now and why this way? Over the years, Vivian had gotten good at numbing her pain while her biological clock slowly ticked by. Each year gaining acceptance she’d never have a child. But being a psychiatrist was therapy in itself. Listening to and solving other people’s problems helped her ignore her own. This worked for her extremely well for quite some time, until in recent months when her imminent doom of “burn out” raised its weary head. All hell broke loose, then.

“It looks like you’re about seven weeks along,” the doctor says, looking at her charts. “We’ll need to get you started on prenatal vitamins and regular office visits.”

Seven weeks, huh? That sounds about right. And in the few minutes the doctor rambles on about nutrition, exercise, and high risk pregnancy due to age, Vivian manages to collect herself, fold all her negative emotions neatly away, and allow only positive energy to flow forth.

“Doctor, I can’t tell you how excited I am,” Vivian says with a smile generating from nervous energy instead of the positive energy she was trying to summon. “This is such great news.”

“Okay, then.” The doctor snaps closed the clipboard and shoves her pen into the breast pocket of her lab coat. “Get dressed and meet me down the hall in my office. We can discuss things further there.”

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“What happened to your car?” Stephen asks, pulling in next to Vivian’s BMW in the reserved physicians’ parking, and pointing at the huge dent on the passenger side, near the rear.

“I got rammed in the parking lot of the gym,” Vivian says, grabbing an empty box from her trunk and slamming the trunk shut. She can hear the classical music coming through the open window of Stephen’s car. “I’m on my way to the repair shop, but have to grab a few things from my office first.” She raises an eyebrow at Stephen and grins, “You’re still in your classical phase? Who is that, Mozart? Bach?” Vivian bursts into laughter.

“Ha ha, real funny,” Stephen retorts, exiting his car. “One of these days you’re going to learn to enjoy the finer things in life.”

“Yeah, one of these days, but not *this* day.” She continues laughing. “Plus, you’ll be over it soon. You go in and out of your fine-wine phases faster than the wind blows.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says, dismissing her comment. “So who hit you? Are you suing?” Stephen saddles up next to Vivian and they begin walking towards the building.

“One of the girls in my Yoga class, and of course I’m not suing. What would be the purpose in that?”

“Duhhh, money. That’s the purpose,” he says checking his watch and increasing his walking speed, which makes Vivian pick up her pace to keep up with him.

“There’s more to life than money.”

“Name one.”

Vivian closes her eyes and slowly shakes her head. “Why do I always let myself get tangled up in your ‘stuck on stupid’ conversations?”

“Because I keep you laughing, and keep you guessing,” he says, reaching the side entry of the building and holding the door open for Vivian. “What’s with the empty box?”

The side entrance is where all the doctors go to avoid running into their patients at the front entrance. Passing through the doorway, Vivian looks at Stephen over her shoulder with an “I already told you that” expression.

“Oh, right. You gotta pick up a few things,” he mockingly remarks walking in behind her.

Stephen and Vivian became fast friends several years ago when they first met in the break room of the building. He was busy screaming and banging on the vending machine to release his bottled water, and Vivian was busy laughing at him from a corner table. She’d gotten

up from her table and walked over to offer him change from her pocket. They had become allies ever since.

“Listen, I’d love to chit chat with you forever, but I’m late for my eight o’clock tooth extraction,” he says moving past Vivian and taking off down the hall to the back elevators. “I hope my dental assistant stalls my patient to buy me some time.” Stephen then flips around and is walking backwards down the hall so he can see Vivian. “Can you do lunch, later?” he asks from a distance.

Vivian smiles at his backwards trot. “Can’t. I’m meeting up with the woman who rammed me,” Vivian calls after him.

Stephen laughs in response, flips back around to walk forward, and waves good-bye as he’s turning the corner.

Vivian turns in the opposite direction to head for her office. No need to take the back elevators to hide from her patients because today she has no patients. And by the end of the month she’ll have successfully transferred her existing patients to other therapists in order to take a long overdue leave of absence from her practice. She has plenty of money in savings and investments to do so. However, she hasn’t quite decided how long her absence will be. A year. Maybe two. Maybe forever.

Later that afternoon, Vivian is standing outside the Splendipity Bakery Cafe peering inside to see if she can spot the owner. When she’s certain the coast is clear, Vivian steps inside and is immediately accosted by the smell of warm baked breads. Surveying the collection of baked goods displayed in the long glass counter, Vivian grabs a menu and takes a seat at one of the small cafe tables. The menu offers a selection of cafe sandwiches, beverages, and of course, scrumptious baked goods.

Splendipity Bakery is a local favorite and does very well for itself, however, this is Vivian's first time inside and she wouldn't even be here now if Nyla hadn't insisted she come and try out some of the food—on the house, of course—since Nyla has been causing her so much distress with the water fountain and car crash incidents. But little did Nyla know, the distress she was causing Vivian had nothing at all to do with those minor altercations.

“Ma’am, you have to place your order her at the counter,” a sweet young girl says to Vivian from behind the counter.

Vivian looks up and smiles, “Oh, I’m here to see the owner, Nyla Kane. Is she available?”

“Oh yes, she’s upstairs in her office. I’ll go get her for you.”

“Thanks,” Vivian says, resisting the urge to run right out of the building.

Moments later, Nyla comes barreling through the double doors of the kitchen carrying a basket of goodies.

“Vivian, I’m so glad you came.” Nyla places the basket on the table and leans in to give Vivian a friendly hug.

Vivian can see the small assortment of cookies, brownies, and cupcakes wrapped in individual cellophane gift wrap, tied with an assortment of colored bows. Each one neatly packed and sitting atop pastel colored tissue paper stuffed in the bottom of the basket to give height to this delicious presentation.

“Thanks for inviting me. You have a wonderful cafe. Not to mention it smells stupidly delicious in here.”

Nyla smiles in response and then nods towards the basket. “I’ve put together a little peace offering for all the havoc I’ve been wreaking on you.”

They both laugh and Nyla takes a seat at the table.

“Oh don’t worry about it,” Vivian says, “accidents happen to the best of us. Except, I’m not necessarily a believer of accidents. I think all things happen for a reason.”

“I agree, there are no accidents. The things we encounter in our lives always have a reason—a purpose—attached to it in order to shape who we are and drive who we become.”

“Absolutely,” Vivian says, looking down at the basket of goodies and suddenly feeling unworthy of her peace offering. As she lifts her eyes from the basket and looks over at Nyla, she wonders how this charade would play out? How would she navigate these rocky waters? The one thing she knew for sure, trying to build a friendship on a mountain of lies was not the road to take.