

One
Thing
Better

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ONE

Is it weird that a grocery store can feel more like home than the place I actually live? That's how I feel about Publix. With its shimmering brightness and ultra-friendly employees, it feels like they've captured the sun and held it inside just for me. The *ah* feeling I long for at home only happens when the automatic doors slide open here, where everything is fresh, modern, friendly, well-stocked, and, most importantly, in proper working order.

Two years ago, I first pulled into this parking lot during its grand opening when a physically strenuous visit with her rheumatologist left Mom in bed, aching more than usual, and me scrambling for cheering-up supplies. A muggy spring rain had made everything gray and annoying, but that didn't matter here. Traversing the wide, gleaming aisles, I didn't get in anyone's way, nor did they get into mine as my cart filled with baking supplies and Mom-comforts. In line, the cashier asked what I planned on making—I *love* to talk baking. The bagger insisted on carrying my single paper bag out for me and held an oversized lime green umbrella for us as we walked to my car. There, she handed me a coupon for free ice cream on my

next visit before wishing me an amazing day. *Free ice cream? Who does that?* Since my social interactions had been mostly limited to doctors and nurses and were rarely positive, being there felt like a spa day, especially for an exhausted caregiver with zero time for a real one. I've loved Publix ever since.

Falling in love is all about the little things. Well, at least when it comes to grocery stores. And this one has an entire aisle dedicated to alcohol.

Today, I'm on another supply run. My brother's plane has just left the airport, spiriting him back to California after a prolonged trip that began fourteen days ago when our mom died, and tonight's the first I'll spend alone in my crumbling family home. *Why do things always feel worse at night?* Supplies will help.

Well, not really "supplies," but wine. I need wine.

I ignore pricy bottles for something more budget-friendly. It's a classy move, anyway—buying wine in bulk. So what if it's boxed wine? It's practical and easy to open. And it's best to bypass a corkscrew search in *that* house—the place with everything you need if only you could find it... and it's not broken... and it's safe to use... and I'm tired just thinking about it.

Anxiety rising over going home, I close my eyes and inhale the clean air. Then, I drop a merlot and chardonnay into my shopping-for-one cart. That should do it. It doesn't scream desperation or loneliness. It says I'm having a party.

A nice party.

A wine party.

Not that anyone cares. Besides, after three years of a stalled life, I'm all about catching up on things I've missed—I *have a list*. Tasks take on more importance when they're on a list. And when it's a long one filled with overwhelming must-dos for restarting said stalled life, it's smart to begin with easy items first. *Get properly drunk*.

Another cleansing breath pushes me toward the dairy section. *Cheese goes with wine, right?* An extra-large can of Cheez-Whiz clangs into my cart. Again, practical and easy. That's another thing I haven't had in forever—junk food. For far too long, it's been a low-sodium, low-fat, and low-flavor rotation of chicken or fish with vegetables. My taste buds need stimulation to shock them alive again like Dr. Frankenstein reanimating dead cells with electricity. Cheez-Whiz coated Flaming Hot Cheetos should work... *must hit the chip aisle*. Junk food ranks high in my revised priorities.

So does personal care. The burning wood stove odor embedded in my hair forces a bothered sigh. Since the wood stove is *that* house's only heat source, the campfire smell can't be helped. But maybe it could be masked with the right body spray, like farts under a blanket. *Lena! Don't be gross!* My mother's voice skips through my thoughts. I slump and detour down the health and beauty aisle. *Don't be a sad sack*.

I'm not sad. I've barely cried in weeks. I pass by the Visine, wondering if eyes can get so clogged with dust and soot they can't produce tears anymore. That's probably it—that and icy determination. I *hate* crying. Even more, I hate having witnesses. Who needs rubberneckers for her emotional trauma?

Not me! *This is my mess. I'll deal with it. Nothing to see here.* Being alone frees me from that, too.

The body sprays pull me into a hypnotic stupor. *What mixes well with campfire? Cucumber Basil, Pineapple Mango, Strawberry Cheesecake. Do they have a marshmallow scent?* Grabbing the *Coconut Rum Cake*, I read the label, hoping it'll advertise a *100% Odor-Masking Guarantee*.

"Help you find anything, ma'am?"

"Shit!" My expletive accompanies a cat-like jump at the voice.

A *male* voice.

Talking to *me*.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." The dazzling smile of a neatly buttoned-up Publix employee meets my dumbfounded shock, which is doubled because he's yummy-good-looking. His skin is like milk chocolate—and yes, I know it's wrong to describe people in food terms, but is it still offensive if I genuinely want to taste him? And if that's wrong, how come dousing women with food smells is still appropriate?

I return the *Coconut Rum Cake* to the shelf. A weak hand wave suffices for a response when words stick to my throat, afraid to come out. *God, what's wrong with me?*

"Having a good day so far?" His buttery baritone sends a warm tingle along my spine, forcing me to straighten my back.

I manage a raspy, "It's not bad, thanks." His eyes land on my bare ring finger before bouncing up again. *Is he checking me out?* The innate mechanisms in place to decipher such things grind with rust and malfunction. *No, he's just being nice.* Maybe

he's a hologram, and I'm blind-testing a new customer service feature. Or perhaps the Publix gods zeroed in on the lonely woman in aisle eight and sent her what she *really* needs—a meet-cute. Or at least normal human interaction that doesn't involve anything medical, funeral, or family related.

"Glad to hear it." His warm brown eyes stay laser-focused on mine like it's part of their training—OSHA guidelines, cash register operations, and making single thirty-somethings feel *seen* again. "Is there anything I can help you find today?"

Answers stream my thoughts, but none I can say. *A decent place to live. Days that are better than not bad. Someone to talk to. Ugh, that's so pathetic.* Even worse, I gawk like he's asked me to solve for X in a complicated equation. Is this what happens to thirty-somethings after a long hiatus? X must be the last time I had sex. *God, how long has it been?*

Unable to math out the answer, I shake my head. "No. I'm fine. Thanks."

He points to his lime green name tag. "I'm Sam. I'll be at customer service should any needs arise."

"Ms. Lena Buckley," over the loudspeaker makes me jump. Again. "Please return to the pharmacy."

I whip my cart around, nearly losing the Cheez-Whiz and cutting off Mr. Publix McDreamy while I rush away. Norman—pharmacist and old high school friend—holds up the bag of unused pills I handed him twenty minutes ago and waves me toward the storefront.

"Giving me that refund after all?" I'm only teasing. Big Pharma doesn't do take-backs, even if something doesn't work

or gets you addicted or, hell, kills you. Funny how nothing else I buy keeps such loosie-goosey standards.

Norman smirks anyway. “These pill vials aren’t all filled with pills, Lena.” The bag rattles as he shakes it.

I extract a vial, opening it. Coins spill onto his tidy counter. “What the hell?”

“Clever recycling, I guess. I removed all the medications. It’s good of you to return them properly, especially the pain pills.”

“I lucked out that you’re an official take-back site. Couldn’t flush all these pills down the toilet. Not at *that* house.”

The bright lights shimmer off his forehead as he nods. “There’s a coin machine in the vestibule. You could exchange them for cash.”

More wine! I scoop up the bag.

“Oh, Lena, wait.” Norman flips through the plastic pouches on his shelves. “You have a prescription for once.” He holds up the baggie and mouths *Xanax* before asking if I still want it.

“Gosh, no, Norman. A kind ER doc insisted on the prescription, but I’m fine now.” My hands strangle the cart handle recalling just before Mom died when the mother of all panic attacks in the hospital emergency room prompted the doctor to write it.

Norman’s pressed lips curve into a look of pity, making me sink. “Is your brother still in town? Sophie could bring over another casserole. Lucas loves her eggplant parm.”

“Ah, tell her thanks, but it’s just me now. I’d hate to waste Sophie’s good food.”

He eyes my stacked boxes like he might ask about my imaginary wine party, so I wave goodbye and head to the vestibule. Nothing against Sophie. But, with a dozen dishes still crammed in the fridge, I wouldn't know hers from anyone else's and don't want more to throw away.

Besides, I'm into junk food now.

The machine clanks as coins slide into its mysterious underbelly. Last night floats back to me with every metallic clink. Lucas and I sat on the patio. Ever the Eagle Scout, he built a fire in the wobbly fire pit. In equally precarious lawn chairs, we bundled in blankets against the bitter wind—still better than being inside.

His words surround me, the weight of them. "I want you to have it. All of it."

I said nothing.

"It should go to you," he went on. "You've been here. You've taken care of everything."

I wanted to say, *yes, I've taken care of everything, and now I'll have to take care of everything else*. But I didn't. A teacher married to a lawyer and living in Malibu with their amazing daughter, Lucas doesn't need coins in medicine vials. His ne'er-do-well older sister, though, can't turn away his charity.

Pouring more coins, I muse over Mom's creative money-keeping. A strange paranoia prompted it like travelers separating their cash between pockets, bras, and suitcases so hypothetical robbers couldn't get away with everything. As if after being robbed, the victim might raise her fist in triumph. "*Ha! You didn't check my shoes, loser!*" Of course, thieves would

prefer the pills to loose change these days—an irony Mom never would've gotten.

Thirty bucks richer, I reenter the store near Norman's perch, where he flashes another coy but sympathetic grin. "Oh, Lena, I almost forgot. Happy Valentine's Day."

"Um, thanks. You, too." *It's Valentine's Day?*

My pace quickens through the red and pink balloon monstrosities, gaudy flower displays, and awkward men perusing the Hallmark cards. *How'd I miss that?*

I grunt, imagining the sappy choices on TV tonight. *Where was I?* Oh, personal care. I beeline for my previous aisle, grateful that GQ-Publix Sam isn't in it. Though I love Publix, they can't meet *all* my needs.

Resuming my deliberations over body spray, I take more deep breaths. Lucas doesn't understand—*why should he?*

"I hate leaving you like this," he said. "I haven't done nearly as much as I wanted."

"That's what I've said for three years, and it's okay. You have a family to get home to," I said in a slightly defeated tone. Honestly, he did a great deal, and I told him so. He stayed an extra week, meticulously sorting his old things and shipping boxes to California. He saved baby clothes—just in case—baseball cards, Boy Scout memorabilia, and the rainbow wine glasses Mom adored, but he didn't want the floral china, silver flatware, doilies, or tea sets. "Who bothers with that anymore," he said, making me inexplicably sad and forcing me to wonder what will happen to Mom's treasures now.

He tended the fire, stacked wood, and mowed the high grass I'd let go last summer. He forced me to sort her closet, where he salvaged beautiful dresses and suits he dry cleaned and donated to our old high school's theater department.

Oh, and he left me a list. Lucas *loves* lists—not fun ones like mine, either. #1 *Take unused medications to a proper disposal site.* #2 *Clean out fridge.* #3 *Wash Casserole Dishes ...* and so on, like I'm a child, even though I'm older and have survived tougher things than him. But he means well. He *always* means well.

"You're in your head too much again, Lena. I can tell," he said, mid-listing, "Come with me. Leave this place and Nervous Nellie behind for a few days."

When he was eight, he thought himself so clever calling me that. He first stole the idea from our parents, who used the term affectionately somehow. Then, when he found Nervous Nellie amongst his *Garbage Pail Kids* cards, it stuck. The card depicts a freaked-out girl sitting in a dark, cinderblock corner biting her nails down to the bloody bones. Though exaggerated to delight middle schoolers and younger brothers everywhere, my fingers used to bleed from nail-biting all the time—an unconscious anxiety habit kicked thanks to my ex—not a good Valentine's Day story.

Giving up on body spray, I grunt and refocus. Shaving cream. Razors. *God, how long has it been since I shaved my legs?* A Venus multi-pack lands in the cart. And my "not bad" day feels worse, somehow.

Maybe I should've agreed to the getaway. I'd be on a plane with Lucas right now while he regales me with mixed drink

recipes we'll try at his poolside bar—*Frose` Cocktails, Gin Fizzes, and Baileys espresso-tinis*—and books I must read, and tapas I must sample... *Ah, Malibu.*

My cheeks perk in a strange smile. He's only been gone an hour, and I miss him.

But I'll trade North Carolina for California soon enough. A pool house apartment, a job at a posh restaurant called Root & Bone, and living with my only remaining family—everything's set. It's better to move with nothing hanging over me and no reason to return. Besides, leaving *that* house empty isn't wise. It's an open invitation to whatever wants to come in—robbers, nosey neighbors, critters, poltergeists, *anything.*

Coins in medicine vials? Really, Mom? Lucas will say. "Aw, she left you a treasure hunt." And I'll roll my eyes and say, "No, she left me more work to do." *Haven't I done enough work?*

Inside, I wilt, feeling terribly selfish.

In line, the *Redbox* selections near the exit divert my attention. That's another thing I haven't done in a while... pick a movie just for me. I've seen enough TV crime shows and sappy Hallmark originals to last a lifetime. I need bad words. Gratuitous violence. And hot, shirtless musclemen... ones I don't have to talk to.

"Looks like my kinda party," a voice interrupts my movie deliberations. A fifty-ish blonde gives me an approving grin, motioning to my cart like we could be besties based on this information alone. *Friends—another thing to put on my list.*

"Yes, I'm having a party. A wine party. I thought, wine not?"

She leans in with a gracious laugh, bringing a whiff of gardenias and leather. “Don’t look now, but a cutie in customer service has his eyes on you.”

Of course, I look. Publix Poster Boy Sam offers a flirty wave. I gnaw at my bottom lip, feeling a rush of heat—not the good, sexy kind but from nerves. “Um, he’s just my Publix groupie. You can rent them at the service desk.”

“Dang, I gotta get me one of those!”

She laughs, and since she’s a polite, kind woman, I attempt more conversation. Her cart has three bags of birdseed, duct tape, and a frozen pizza. I don’t know what to say about that, so I point to the logo on her hot pink, collared shirt. *Pines & Palmettos Equestrian Center.* “You’re into horses?”

“I better be. I’ve got a hundred and seven of ‘em.”

“Mom says you can solve all of life’s problems on the back of a horse.”

“Sounds like a smart woman.”

“She is.” My breath hitches, squeezing my throat. “I mean...” My last words to Mom bully their way into my thoughts... *Please, don’t leave. Stay with me. Fight through.*

It’s like someone’s smashed wine boxes on either side of my head, breaking my anti-tear determination and knocking my dust-clogged tear ducts free. My Publix meltdown tarnishes my bright home away from home and sends me scurrying to hide in the real one.

Two

Solo wine parties aren't a good idea, not in this house. The power goes out on my second glass. My brain works sluggishly to fix the problem, letting my overactive imagination play up. *What's that scratching noise? Is that a shadow moving outside? What if the power didn't go out but was cut? And someone's creeping closer?*

Tightroping between anxious and panicked, I regret the wine and the *Criminal Minds* marathon I watched while drinking it. I *really* need to break Mom's crime TV habit.

Deep breaths. Slow down. Everything's okay. Mom's voice ghosts in my head, mixing weirdly with other mental noise. *Blunt force trauma. Shallow grave. Bones breaking. Breaker box, dummy.*

I bang my feet twice, getting there. The house is so damn dark. Darker than most homes, I suspect. Open concept before that was trendy, it's a cave with burnt red shag carpeting, wood-paneled walls, and heavily draped windows because, *God forbid*, a glare catches the TV.

On the cobweb-covered back porch, my fingers slide over switches in the breaker box until finding one out of place. Flipping it restores the lights, but not my wine-motivation.

Growing up, I loved this house. Sleepovers, Halloween parties, and epic hide-and-seek games highlight my memories. I fell in love with baking in *that* kitchen, and late-night blueberry pancakes became a tradition. It was everything a home should be, once.

But time wrecks things. Well, that and my parents' inclination to *keep everything* and *make do* when things went wrong. With never enough money to fix anything properly, my folks relied on patchwork home improvement, mostly done themselves or by some "guy down the road," whose appearing then disappearing acts and good-natured help always made me think they were Hogwarts grads, probably Hufflepuffs. When Dad died, those fixes and fix-it wizards vanished, too.

Now, it feels nothing like home, not by myself. So, my wine night ends with me sober and restless on the couch in my makeshift bedroom.

The next morning, sipping coffee at the kitchen table, I peruse Root & Bone's website.

"Today's special is pork tenderloin with purple cauliflower puree and a red cabbage and apple salad." I eye the scant portions. "Thirty-seven dollars on a dish that'll leave you hungry. Hmm, what's for dessert? ... Seasonal fruit, cheesecake, or vanilla sorbet. No wonder Lucas says the restaurant needs me."

Mom and I often made fun of Root & Bone. Never around Lucas, of course. He and his husband Drew believed in the bouchée restaurant enough to invest. But to us, the server's spiel sounded like an investigation on *Forensic Files*. The veggies came from organic farms within a thirty-mile radius. The meat grazed, formerly, on California countrysides with known associates like butterflies, free-range chickens, and migrating sea birds. Every serving came with a thorough background check.

Once, I jokingly asked the server how the cow used for my beef Wellington was murdered. "Did he know it was coming? I'm allergic to fear, you see."

Mom laughed, but the server gaped blankly before admitting he didn't know. He raced off to ask the co-owner and manager, Brian, who thought little of the question or me for asking it.

And soon, I'll be working there, and Brian will be my boss—a prime example of snark coming back to bite me and, well, my life, generally.

Curious, I turn to online job sites. Dishwashers, cooks, cleaning services, catering—having done all those before, a sudden distaste stirs at reconsidering them, like I'm picking second chance opportunities from hundreds of bad dates and saying, "*Is this really all there is?*" For someone with three-quarters of a business degree, a failed bakery, and three years of unemployment, it probably is, making Root & Bone a clear winner.

Feeling chilled under my jeans, long-sleeve t-shirt, and thick cardigan forces an angry glare at the wood-burning stove. It'll demand my attention today—it's a pushy and controlling roommate. Sometimes, it's like I live in *The Little House on the Prairie*, only that house seemed easier to maintain and, well, less creepy at night, maybe because they had each other.

Chair legs scrape the dingy floor as I stand. I slide into my rubber boots but don't bother with gloves. Outside, the February wind pinches my exposed skin.

Babying a log in one arm and reaching for another sends a toothpick-sized splinter into my finger. "Motherfucker!"

A rattling truck up the driveway stops my loud cursing. My visitors look horrified, but I don't care if Jack and Alice Harvey disapprove. Being the foul-mouthed girl next door has its advantages—usually that they keep their distance.

Jack meets me at the woodpile, scratching his forehead under his tattered ball cap. Maybe it's the crime shows talking, but he looks like a countrified serial killer. Dark overalls, dirty and stained. Well-worn work boots. A grimy towel bulges from one pocket, a tool handle from the other—a small hammer, maybe. He doesn't wear a coat—that would only get in his way. The rifles racked on his truck's back window contribute to his threatening air but contrast oddly with a stuffed white puppy on his dash. A Valentine's gift from Alice, perhaps?

"Everything alright, Lena?"

The logs fall to the pile as I hold out my hand. Blood oozes from the wood spear jutting from my index finger. Jack yanks it out, and a sad whimper escapes me.

“Should wear gloves, little lady.”

Alice bustles over with authority. “Bless your heart, Lena. How ‘bout we fetch you a bandage, and you make us some coffee, huh?” Her dainty arm circles my shoulder, escorting me to the patio. She smells weirdly of lavender and country-determination.

“I don’t have your casserole dish yet, Alice... if that’s why you’re here.”

“Oh, well, we’re just here to chat.”

One rule of country life is that people just stop by, expecting spontaneous hospitality. Before and after the funeral, this place resembled Grand Central Station for all the do-gooders toting casseroles. The visits have dwindled lately, except for the occasional one asking for her casserole dish back. #2 *Clean out fridge* made Lucas’s list for a reason.

Jack’s heavy jowls push up as he smiles. “Is Lucas around? We wanna talk business.”

“Lucas left. What business would you have with him, anyway?”

“He’s the man of the house now,” Jack says. Alice doesn’t bat an eye at that remark—no surprise.

“I’m the man of the house. If you have business to discuss, it’s with me,” I say.

“Okay, then. We’ve got good news.” He scoops up six logs in one arm and motions for the door.

Inside the cave, he tends to the stove while I dab my wound with a paper towel. A seasoned snoop, Alice tours the room,

eyeballing family photos and peeking under china cups on Mom's hutch for their identifying stamps.

"Your Momma has such beautiful things," she says.

Things you have no business touching. The Keurig heats up, and I ask how they want their coffee.

"One *Sweet and Low* and a splash of cream," Alice says.

"I'll take a cup exactly the way you make it. Ruth always said you make the best coffee."

I shrug lightly. With few other bragging rights, Mom often praised my coffee.

Jack settles into a chair, searching for conversation topics amid the scattered debris on the table. Unread mail, no. Wilted houseplants, no. The twelve-gauge shotgun leaning near the door, no. He eyes my laptop screen. "What's going on here? Job hunting?"

"Researching, for now."

"You're still headin' to California, right?"

It isn't a pushy question, but I feel shoved off a mountainside whenever asked, like Wile E. Coyote—hanging midair and waiting for gravity to catch up. "That's the plan."

I deliver their mugs, luring Alice to the table. Before sitting, she dusts off the cushion like a home plate umpire. *The house isn't that bad, is it?* Then, a light flips on—I see the dusty film atop the glass table, dirt and firewood bark trailing to the wood stove, and smudges on the sliding glass doors behind them. Mom would be mortified.

I'm not, though, as this supports my bad-girl-next-door image. "What's the good news?"

He tosses his hat on the table and rubs his gray crew cut with his free hand like it helps him think. “Me and Alice want to buy your property. We’ll take it as is. It’s been hard on you, keeping up with the place.”

“It’s not so bad.” *Defensive about the same place that thwarted my wine night, really?*

Their twittering chuckles harmonize as they share a grin.

“Come on, Lena. This place is one stiff wind away from falling over.” He takes a long sip. “My, that is good. You should be, um, what’re they called? Gals who make coffee?”

“A barista.”

“That’s it.”

Alice takes the tiniest sip I’ve ever seen. “Yummy.”

Her serial-killer vibe matches her husband’s. Her heavily made-up face, Sunday clothes, and tightly rolled hair give her a fifties throwback look, like she’s stepped out of a minor role in *I Love Lucy*. Combined with her sly grin and dark, sinister eyes, I imagine her pulling a butcher’s knife from her purse, chopping me to pieces, and baking me in a pie to serve to her church friends, all while smiling and singing a hymn.

Okay, maybe the hymn’s a bit much. And yes, too many crime shows.

Jack meets my eyes again. “I’m happy to call Lucas. Ruth said she was leavin’ everything to you kids.”

“She did, but Lucas turned it all over to me. His husband’s a lawyer. He signed the papers before he left.”

Jack’s brow pinches together like two caterpillars banging heads. *Is he bothered by the mention of Lucas’s husband or that this*

little lady would make the decisions? “Well, he did right by you, then. You took good care of Ruth.”

My shoulders slump. “What’s the offer?”

“Two-hundred thousand. Just pack what you want to keep, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

The rest. Like Wile. E. Coyote finally falling, the weight of *the rest* heaps on my shoulders. Sheds, outbuildings, an enormous barn with stables, a car graveyard, and the house—not quite a hoarder’s den, but close.

My parents never turned anything or anyone away. In its heyday, it was a haven for foster kids, rescue pets, and even two bikers who stopped in for water and shade because the house looked so friendly.

It’s not friendly anymore.

Jack’s offer should inspire a celebratory dance like Mom used to do over good report cards. But I can’t move. Or speak.

“Sellin’ to us’ll save you from showing the place and dealing with agents,” Jack says. “Why not just make it easy and get your hiney to California sooner?”

My throat tightens. *Why not, indeed?* One working toilet. One working shower. Each in a different bathroom. Tripping breakers. A stove with only three semi-operating coil burners. That damn wood stove that still isn’t heating the room. And—

“Shit!” A scurrying mouse forces my legs into the chair. It stops, looks at us defiantly, and strolls under the piano.

Alice shrugs, as if thinking, of course, there’re mice *here*.

Jack belly-chuckles. “It’s just a little country fella. It’s cold outside. He’s trying to get warm.”

I scoff, pulling my sweater tighter. “Joke’s on him.”

Mice are another shit-rule of country life, showing up even when the house was in clean, working order. A few days in California can’t happen because the mice would erect a rodent kingdom, forcing me to play executioner when I returned. I can’t deal with that.

Embarrassed and pissed, I desperately want to shake his hand and be done with it. “What, um, what would you do with it?”

“Turn it into farmland. We want to grow—”

Alice’s stern throat-clearing stops Jack. He gives her a funny look before saying, “Grow stuff. We want to grow things.”

The Harveys own the farm next door. Mom’s twenty-five acres mean expansion—an opportunity that rarely happens out here, where people hold on to homesteads like precious relics.

He leans forward, the chair creaking. “I’ll leave the tree. I promise you that.”

The tree. I deflate like a pattering balloon. When it came to her death, Mom wanted two things: to die at home and have her ashes strewn at her tree. Neither had come true. Her urn sits on the Formica countertop, waiting.

Alice taps her chest like this soothes her. “Oh, Jack, you’re so sweet and generous, but it’s not like Lena can just pack up that tired Honda and make way for the bulldozers... She just lost her Momma. She needs help, too.”

Tired Honda? “I’m fine. I don’t need any help.”

She stands up, practically twirling in her dress. “First, you need a dumpster. Cousin Tommy runs Waste Management. For a few hundred, he’ll park one in the yard and haul it away as many times as you need.”

Arguments stream in my head, starting with the few hundred I don’t have.

“Muscle, too. We’ll send our boys over every day after school to help you lug the big stuff.”

“Alice, that’s unnecessary.”

“Hogwash!” Her sappy voice turns eerily stern, shutting me up. “Football season’s over, so Will and Max need somethin’ to do.”

“It’ll keep ‘em out of trouble,” Jack says.

She returns to Mom’s hutch, knocking the wood with her fist. “We’ll get you a portable moving container. I gotta guy for that, too.”

“Alice’s contact list reads like a who’s-who of Wilmington. Anything you need, she’s got a number for it.”

“With a pod container, you can pack as you go. Easy, peasy.”

“Oh, since she’s job huntin’, what about Jason?” Jack perks up.

Alice’s dark eyes become cat-like in pouncing intensity. “You’re right, hon. I never thought you’d mesh well in California, Lena.” She grabs a pen and an overdue bill from my mail stack, scribbling. “My gay nephew Jason Ford owns The Bean Machine in Asheville. His restaurant’s been around for years now, so no chance of it tankin’ like your bakery did. Email him your resume. He’s lookin’ to hire a pastry chef.”

Panic edges the corners of my plastered smile and automatic nod. Sitting on my trembling hands, I measure my breaths. *Slow down. In and out.* “Um, thanks. You’ve given me a lot to consider.”

Their expectant faces prod me to say more, but nothing ekes out. I glance at their mugs to see the progress. Jack’s drained his, but Alice’s is barely touched.

She flashes her serial killer smile. “Well, we’re happy to help. That’s what neighbors are for.”

“I’ll, um, think about it.” My words tremble slightly, but my beaming smile counters their concern.

Alice looks ready to convince me, but Jack puts his beefy hand on hers. “Lena, you sure we shouldn’t call Lucas?”

We *do not* call Lucas. Streaming assurances and thanks, I stand, encouraging them to do the same. Jack complies first, complimenting my coffee again before lumbering to the sliding glass door. I yank it open, anxious for their exit to lock it and draw the curtains. Only Alice whips around. Too close to her, I stumble, knocking into the dusty shotgun leaning by the door.

The gun slips, falls, and fires.

An explosion of dust and paper billows from the bookshelf across the room. I blurt expletives while my guests cock their heads, amused but otherwise unaffected, like with the mouse. *Just another day in the country.*

“Bless your heart, Lena. This house is nothin’ but a big booby trap.” Alice gives me a cold once-over. “You definitely don’t need any guns ‘round here.”

“They’re not mine. I don’t like guns, but my folks... is it a country thing? Keeping guns at hand like you’re expecting a zombie invasion or Michael fucking Myers?” Unable to hide my shaking voice, I lock my fidgeting hands behind me.

Jack moves toward the weapon like he means to disarm it for me. But Alice stops him with a raised hand and another stern throat-clearing.

She reaches for the bill and pen again. “Here, I got a guy for guns, too. Call ‘em. TODAY.”

A significant look creates an understanding between them, and like the stuffed puppy, it bothers me. Accepting his wife’s secret message, Jack shrugs and heads to the truck.

Alice’s bright red lips press into a tight smile like she’s about to offer comfort. “My Corning Ware dish is white with blue flowers. I’ll get it next time.”

THREE

I drive away from *that* house, with its mice, guns, and overwhelming neighbors, taking country roads way too fast in my late model Honda Pilot—the *only* thing I own, well, that I earned myself. *Tired Honda? Damn it, Alice.* I crank hip-hop and mentally kick myself for not telling them *yes* with a wide smile, a thank you, and a curtsy for good measure.

Two hundred grand would secure my new start in California. Or, hell, anywhere I could score a good job, ideally one I didn't feel weird about because my brother is part-owner. In a more reasonable cost-of-living locale, I could buy a small house outright—a tempting alternative to Lucas's pool house since I'm thirty-five and I've *never* had my own place.

Seriously—how can I be this old with nothing to show for it? I hop onto I-40 toward Wilmington, the country roads no longer accommodating my speed. I pass grumbling tractor-trailers and overstuffed minivans, beach-bound for cheap, off-season vacations. DVD screens brighten the backseats, where kids and dogs cram between coolers and totes. My hands strangle the wheel as my right foot dips lower.

Eventually, traffic congestion inspires a detour. I fly across an intersection, heading cityward through thick-bellied oaks draped in Spanish Moss and bloated old houses with manicured everything.

Whipping around slower vehicles with Charlotte-speed-way-style acumen, a brief but much-appreciated *I-drive-better-than-you* feeling couples with *Ludacris* blasting over my speakers. *Move, bitch. Get out the way.* I flick surging energy from my trembling fingers. *Is this helping or making things worse?*

Flashing blue lights in my rearview answer my question.

A tree-lined street in a charming neighborhood offers a safe stopping place. I put the window down and turn off the engine. My head rests atop my hands on the steering wheel. *Stupid, so stupid.*

“Good morning, ma’am,” the officer says, jolting me from my hair-covered pocket of shame. He tells me his name, but it doesn’t stick.

Lifting my head, I plaster on the best smile I can manage. Only he fails to match it like most people do. His chiseled face seems permanently fixed on tough-guy-having-a-bad-day, and the jagged scar stretching from his left eyebrow to his ear suggests he’s earned the demeanor. He’s military-crisp with blond hair, cropped short and highlighting his protruding ears. Meticulously tucked, ironed, and assembled, everything about him assures me I’m not getting out of this.

“I was speeding.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I have a good reason,” I say, trying to come up with one.

He glances at the detachable handicapped decal on my passenger seat and the wheelchair behind me. “Are you in medical distress?”

“No. Those aren’t mine. I mean, I didn’t steal them, either. They’re my mom’s, and I haven’t cleaned out the car yet. Thank God you can’t ticket me for being messy, right?”

Though at least smirk-able, my comment earns nothing but a monotone, “No, ma’am,” as if I’m serious.

“How fast was I going?”

“Fifty-three in a thirty-five, ma’am.

“It’s my rubber boots. They’re heavy.”

“You were driving erratically.”

“It’s Wilmington. I’m fitting in.”

“And your tags expired in January.”

“Shit. I’m—um—shit.” My head gently thumps against the steering wheel. A call to Lucas looms in my future—begging for money until the house sells. And worse, sitting through a lecture from my *younger* brother about safe driving and fiscal responsibility.

“Sounds terribly expensive. Any sales going on this week? Three for the price of one? You should talk to your higher-ups about offering deals for people who drive cheap cars. Save the expensive tickets for the BMWs, Mercedes, and Range Rovers. Cops should pick on them first—not sad-sacks driving fifteen-year-old Hondas.”

He locks eyes with me. “Are you under the influence of drugs or alcohol, ma’am?”

“God, I wish!” I regret my words immediately, especially with the unamused narrowing of his eyes like he’s about to have me exit the vehicle for a sobriety check in the middle of Good Family Avenue. “No, I’m not on anything. And sorry. You’re just doing your job—I know. But everything’s personal when it happens to you, you know?”

He nods slightly. “Care to explain your hurry?”

“Honestly, officer, I have nowhere to be. No destination. Away. I just wanted to get *away*.”

“From?”

My hands tighten on the wheel as possible answers stream in my head. “Um, everything. Things have been rough lately.” The words choke out slowly, and I regret them like I’m spewing my private drama on someone who’s wandered into my theater by mistake.

Through a weak, pinched smile, I scrutinize his slightly cocked brow. “I see your cop-senses tingling. I promise—I’m in no danger, either from myself or others. My car’s my escape pod. I was enjoying it a little too much.”

“Recreational activities would serve you better, ma’am.”

His robotic demeanor makes me laugh, but dumb tears slip out, too, as if I can’t have one without the other. I swipe my eyes quickly. “You’re right, officer, um...”

“Wright. Ben Wright.”

“See? You are right.” The name pun makes me chuckle, but he remains stoic. “I’m Lena Buckley.”

“Driver’s license, registration, and proof of insurance, Ms. Buckley?”

A frenzied search ensues that ends with me dumping the contents of my purse and the glove box into the passenger seat. *I can't afford this. Jokes aren't working. Tell him he has nice eyes. A kind smile... wait, he hasn't smiled. Play the grief card. Can't get much better than a dead-mother excuse.*

"I deserve the tickets." My fingers tremble as I hand him the items.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Just nerves." I stretch my fingers and smile assuredly.

"Sorry I'm such a mess."

"No apology necessary. It happens. Sit tight." He leaves me for the computer in his patrol car.

"Flirt with him, Lena." I imagine Mom beside me with her cane propped between her legs. She shakes her head while I argue how wrong that would be, though I absolutely would've tried—and did—in my younger days.

"What's the problem? He's handsome," she decides, *"in a rough and tumble way."*

Is he? Too worried about my financial ruin, I haven't noticed, but a quick glance in my rearview confirms it. There's *something* about him, like his refusal to smile just to match mine means he's not fake and wouldn't lie either, which I find very attractive—not that I'll give her the satisfaction. "You think all employed males are handsome."

It's bat-shit crazy—I know—but I hear her laugh at me. I wonder how long it'll be before I can't remember it anymore. Or even imagine what she'd say in such circumstances.

For now, Imaginary Mom suggests pick-up lines. *How about movie tickets, instead?... Want to serve and protect me over dinner tonight?... There're some recreational activities I'd like to do with you, officer....* Things she'd never want me to say, *really*. Though she never quite understood my anxiety, years of dealing with me made her an expert at using distraction to thwart my panic attacks. And she's still the only one ever to try.

But make-believing our conversation provides little comfort. This'll be at least five hundred, more with the insurance hike if I can still get it. I'll return the unopened wine boxes and pour buckets of loose change into the coin machine—anything to spare myself from asking Lucas. My anxiety bitches—what I call my bad inner voices—go for a full-on attack. They rarely miss an opportunity to make me feel horrible. *How could I do this? Broke, unemployed people have no business speeding, wasting gas, or forgetting their tags.*

I'm barely resisting a panic attack by his return.

He hands me my items while delivering his spiel. Some words stand out—*court, fines, whatever*. My inner monologue takes center stage. *The panic's bad enough. Please, don't cry. Or hyperventilate. Or cry.* I'm desperate for home and some light day drinking when power outages can't deter me.

Finally, he hands me the folded paper, which I quickly toss on top of Mom's handicapped placard. "Thank you, officer. I'll think of you when I pay up."

A slight smirk pokes his clean-shaven cheek—the first hint that he's not *RoboCop* after all. *But did I say something funny?*

“I’ll think of you next time I pull over a luxury vehicle. Good day, Ms. Buckley.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to commend his joke—at least, I think that’s a joke. Said with such speed and awkwardness, it’s hard to tell, especially since he bails as soon as he says it. Most joke-tellers wait for a reaction.

That the encounter is over and the damage done calms me immediately. Deep, tension-releasing breaths settle my panic.

I pull off the shoulder slowly, using my blinker and checking every mirror. He follows but U-turns at the next intersection. For more distance, I stay residential, ogling massive homes through frustrated tears, and lacing through the city until I reach unlined, desolate country roads again. I pick turns indiscriminately, wanting, almost needing, to be lost.

Dingy gray fields sweep my window before a farm comes into view. A bright red barn centers paddocks of grazing horses. A sign for Pines & Palmettos Equestrian Center marks a dirt lane, so I turn in and park by the barn. I take a deep breath. *What am I doing here?*

In the passenger seat, the ticket paperwork flaps open just enough to see large block lettering atop the page. **WARNING.** Scanning the terse *suggestion* to renew my tags, I gape, a little breathless. No court date. No fines. No trouble. A choking laugh rumbles from me. Then, I read what he’s written at the bottom.

Things will get better.

FOUR

The busy farm beckons me from my escape pod as if proof his note is true. Things are definitely better *here*. Riders kick up dust in a jump-filled arena while trainers call instructions. Parents line the fence, taking pictures of their kids who seem too young and small to sit atop something so big. There are older equestrians, too—teenagers taking jumps and an adult lunging her horse in circles. Focused enjoyment is the prevailing mood of the arena.

As I pass the stable's entrance, two horses clop out, sandwiching the woman from Publix. She yanks them to a halt.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in. You found me!" Her buttery Southern accent and wide smile soften my weirdness.

"I was driving by and saw your sign. I'm sorry about my spectacle yesterday."

She flings the leather straps. "No need to apologize. You doing okay? Did you chardonnay your troubles away?"

I laugh at her clever rhyme and wish I could say yes. "I'm fine, really. Just embarrassed."

The speckled gray horse groans as if bored. "Don't be. It was worth it to see those Publix employees jump to your rescue."

I laugh again as it replays in my head. My sudden tears set off a chain reaction, starting with being swarmed by employees as if their training includes a crying-woman-contingency. “I got about ten coupons out of it.”

“There you go! Next time, I’m crying for coupons, too. And, it was a good test.”

“Test?”

“For the Publix groupie givin’ you the eye. I’ve never seen a man disappear so fast. If a grown man can’t handle a woman’s tears, what good is he?”

“Oh, right. I forgot about him,” I say, brow creasing with the realization. “Assholes are my specialty. I’m very good at attracting and repelling them.”

Her approving look mends my uncertainty as if we share a secret life code. “Well, the coupons’ll serve you better.”

The speckled horse grunts and nudges her with his head. “Okay, Shadow.” She huffs. “My babies are all dressed up with nowhere to go. A couple booked a trail ride but canceled last minute.” Her face lights up. “You interested?”

“Me?”

“You’ve ridden a horse before, right?”

“Ages ago. I’m not even sure I could do it now.”

“It’s like riding a bike. Shadow, here, doesn’t know any speed but slow. Besides, I fancy a ride. Let’s do it together.”

“How much is it?”

“It’s on the house. Stop overthinking and say yes.”

“Okay, yes.” I smile weakly and hope no one gets hurt. “I’m Lena Buckley.”

“Gloria Oxendine. You hear that, boys?” She turns to each horse. “We’re back in business!”

Gloria positions Shadow by a step stool and nods to me. I step up, eyeing the saddle like it’s a bridge to hell. *Can I even do it? Will my thighs stretch that far?* My heart rate kicks into hyperdrive.

“Take your time. We all gotta go at our own pace. Right, Shadow?” She rubs Shadow’s nose, and he whinnies.

My joints crack and pop like *Rice Krispies* in milk as I hoist into the saddle. Shadow shifts under me. My butt chunks press up against my thighs, feeling uncomfortably pronounced.

“Sorry, Shadow.”

“Whatcha apologizin’ to him for?” Gloria asks.

“My fat ass.”

“Honey, his ass will always be bigger,” she says. We eye his bulbous rump and laugh.

After a quick tutorial that brings back hazy memories, she hands me the reins.

“Go at your own pace. We aren’t in *any* hurry.” Gloria clicks her tongue. Side-by-side, the horses move. “See? Nothing to it.”

In the arena, the daredevil teens fly over jumps. They’re young and can do anything. But Gloria’s a fifty-something who can probably take those jumps better than them. *Could I ever do that?*

Shadow farts, getting attention as we pass the fence line. Riders laugh and shake their heads as if he’s known for this. *Great, she gave me the farty horse.*

We circle the property on a worn, rugged path. I'm nervous, scared I'll do something wrong. Small things chisel away at my anxieties, though. The brisk wind feels good. Shadow's horse smell reminds me of riding with Mom and Lucas. High up, opening my chest, and breathing feels almost meditative. And *things will get better* repeats on a loop.

The path narrows with encroaching trees and thickets. Gloria nods for us to go first, so I shift my hips forward and click my tongue. Ahead, a muddy ditch splits the trail. I steer Shadow toward the narrowest part and coax him onward. He hesitates before stepping back.

"Come on, Shadow. You can do it," I say with gentle heel kicks.

He putters his lips but clears the gap. I laugh at his blundering move as we ascend to the other side. I pat his neck. "Good boy."

"Well, color me impressed, Lena. Most first-timers balk at this part, but you took it like a pro. You make a great team."

Though swelling with pride at this rare compliment, I shrug it off. "Yeah, the crying girl and the farting horse. We belong together."

"Trust me. You can do worse than this handsome devil." The path widens again, so Gloria falls in beside me. "Speakin' of, are ya datin' anyone?"

"No. Not for years. Taking care of my mom offered no time or opportunities for dating. Before that, I was married."

"Girl, you've come to the right place, then. Tell me what happened... the more detail, the better. Don't be shy."

She asks like my dumbass marriage story rivals celebrity gossip. Gloria has a definite Kathy Bates vibe, making her easy to talk to.

“Um, there’s not much to tell. I loved him. He loved the idea of me—not the reality.”

“Reality tends to do that to marriages, and I’ve had three.”

“Three? Really?”

“The first one died, rest his lovely soul, the second one left, curses on his, and the third... well, I put him out of his misery... and mine. He’s buried out here, somewhere.” She glances around as if trying to remember where she put him.

I laugh. I don’t know if she’s joking, but somehow, I don’t mind if she isn’t.

With a playful wink, she urges me on. “Tell me about this guy.”

“Well, Mark always knew what he wanted, and he got it.” I scoff, puffing out warm air in the cold. “Have you ever known someone who made life look easy?”

“Oh, yeah. They’re the worst!”

“Maybe, but I was enchanted. He wanted to be the perfect husband, and he was, mostly. He, um, still is, to someone else. I was the problem.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” Gloria’s eyes narrow like she’s mentally picking me apart. “Sounds like a lot of pressure, anyway.”

My forehead creases. “Maybe. He finished college. To be with him, I didn’t. He never understood my anxiety disorder because he never struggled with anything. He had a good,

stable career. I jumped around hourly jobs until I opened my bakery. When that tanked, I felt like a huge loser. He seemed to agree. He was loving when it suited him and an ass about whatever didn't. Anxiety, panic, and failure didn't. But that's not why I left."

"Why then?"

"He supported my business because *that's* what good husbands do. They mow the lawn and hold your hand and tolerate your fanciful endeavors. That used to be great—him ticking all the boxes—but it wasn't honest. I knew things weren't right whenever he ate my desserts. He'd take a bite and say, 'Delicious' no matter how it tasted, even when I tested him with bad cupcakes. It broke my heart that he'd lie about a damn cupcake."

"If he'd lie about that, then..."

"Exactly. That's not love—not the way I want it. And he hated me, in the end." Mark's last words to me rage in my head. *You're right. I don't love you. How could I? How could anyone?*

"Ah, honey. That sounds painful. Well, pretend I'm your fairy godmother. What kind of love do you want?" She waves her whip over my head, wand-like.

"Um, I don't want anything."

"Sure, you do. No one *really* wants to be alone... not for long, anyway. You can't let one mistake ruin you forever. He hasn't. If you put it out there, maybe the universe'll bring it to you."

"I'd rather the universe bring me a steady paycheck and a decent place to live." Her disappointed look forces an eye roll. "Fine. I'd settle for a decent kisser who makes me smile."

“No, I mean your ideal love. No settling.”

“Fine, an excellent kisser who makes me laugh.”

Gloria gives me a disgruntled side-eye. “Best be careful. The universe delivers on low expectations, too. That’s how I landed husband number two.”

To satisfy Gloria, I inhale the brisk, piney air and clear out my snarky, jaded mental trash. I’ve thought little of love since losing it, but it’s a strange day already, and what I *really* want flashes unmistakably in my head—a bright neon sign in the cloudy windows.

“I want someone who needs *me* and doesn’t make me feel bad for *whatever* that is. Someone who loves me too much to lie about anything. A guy who’ll say my food sucks and will fucking devour whatever doesn’t. No holding back. Ravenous. Messy. Sexy. But above all, honest.”

“Yes! Dang girl, that’s good!” Gloria beams. “Real over perfect.”

“Can’t get more real than me. I’m jobless, practically homeless, and destined for my brother’s pool house. I have absolutely nothing to offer, and I suck at relationships.”

“Everyone sucks at ‘em when they’re in the wrong ones. In the right one, you’ll do fine. Besides, Shadow likes you, and he hardly likes anyone. That speaks well in your favor.”

I run my fingers on Shadow’s steamy neck. “That’s good enough for me.”

Through the wooded trail, our silence prompts memories. Family horseback riding stopped after Mom’s rheumatoid arthritis left her too hurt to try, and Lucas and I didn’t bother

without her. Regret fills the spaces between steps remembering when the house was cozy, the garden teemed with vegetables, and horses ate carrots from my hands. *Why hadn't I loved it then? Why had I taken so much for granted?* It feels like I've spent my life making do instead of enjoying good things. My life feels like, well, a shadow.

We circle to our starting point, and I'm sad it's over. It's been so long since I've enjoyed myself that I've forgotten what it's like. Hell, even Shadow's farting and questions about my ex don't detract from the good vibes.

"How much for lessons?"

"Forty-five a pop or five for two hundred. You interested?"

"I'm financially challenged right now."

"Wine parties do that to you. We're here if you change your mind."

She borrows my phone to take a picture of me hugging Shadow's neck while he gives Gloria an annoyed look like he's so over it. I post it to Facebook: *Made a new friend today. He's a little gassy, but I think I'm in love.*

After a Chick-Fil-A pitstop and a calmer drive home, I prop the warning ticket mid-kitchen counter against Mom's urn, folding it just right to see the message. *Things will get better.*

They have to, right? Mom scribbled something similar to me in her medication journal. *You deserve more than this. Dream something better.*

She said the same thing when I moved home with my tail between my legs—marriage and bakery over. *Those dreams failed, and that's okay. Dream something better.*

Flipping through Mom's medication journal, still on the counter, I find the page she wrote it on and prop it by her urn. Advertising good thoughts might push back some of the bad ones. It won't make anything worse, anyway.

I get the fire going, pour Pinot, and lament the single sauce packet they've given me. Opening a junk drawer for extras, I find one suspiciously old Chick-Fil-A sauce. A freebie kleptomaniac, Mom never left a restaurant empty-handed.

Scanning the rest of the drawer, I throw packets by the handful into the trash, bypassing batteries, flashlights, and coins. As the drawer empties, satisfaction sweeps over me.

When I first returned home and realized Mom needed me to stay, I dreamed of something better for us both. I planned to recreate the home I remembered—clean the house, get rid of junk, plant a garden, and repair things properly.

But caring for Mom overwhelmed and exhausted me. Instead of big transformations, I settled for a single daily hope: *make one thing better*.

An azalea in a bud vase on her dinner tray. Reading to her. Whipping up a small sugar-light dessert. Every day I tried to make *one* thing better. On hard days, I couldn't even do that.

But this rekindles my mantra. It isn't much, but this drawer is a little better, and it feels good.

That's not all that feels good, I realize, eyeing an Ibuprofen bottle's expiration date. *I rode a horse*. My inner thighs ache, but it's a good ache—soreness I'm proud of having—so I don't bother with the Ibuprofen. It's expired, anyway.

I smirk at Mom's urn. "I rode a horse today, Mom. Can you believe it?"

"I always knew you'd love it if you gave yourself the chance. We'll make an equestrian of you yet," I can almost hear her say.

A small leather pouch shoved between D batteries and restaurant napkins catches my eye. I open it, expecting safety pins or toothpicks—a total Mom thing to store in a change purse since coins belong in pill vials.

But it's cash with a picture shoved inside—me around ten, feeding Mom's horse, Lady, an apple.

The picture isn't surprising. Mom kept them everywhere. She used them as bookmarks and carried them in her purse.

Counting out exactly two hundred dollars, though, makes me reach for my wine.

FIVE

“N ine-one-one. What’s your emergency?” Her words sound muffled, like I’m underwater.

“It’s my Mom. I can’t wake her. She’s unconscious.”

“Is she breathing?”

“Breathing? I don’t know. I’m having trouble reaching her.”

“Tell me where you are, honey.”

“Home.” I spit out the address, kicking through loose blankets to the surface. I sit up, gasping. *Wait. Why am I out here and not in her room?*

“Help’s on the way, hon. Wait, Carsley Road? Is that you, Lena? It’s me, Miss Leslie.”

Miss Leslie? From Sunday school, the Boy Scout troop, and Mom’s funeral. I choke, stomach turning with nausea. *Please, don’t leave. Stay with me. Fight through.* “Oh, shit.”

“Lena, take a deep breath. Are you alright?”

“Miss Leslie, I had a nightmare, and I—please, cancel this call.”

“Well, an officer’s comin’ by to check on ya. Stay on the line until he arrives. Are you in *any* medical distress?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m awake now. Please, do we have to make a big deal?” Shame forces tears. *What the fuck have I done?* The dream replays on a wicked loop—me peeling through bedding, looking for Mom, and finding her pale, eyes closed, unresponsive. *It may already be too late.* “I’m fine now, Miss Leslie. Truly.”

“It’s policy, honey. You call, and we respond—no matter what. Don’t worry, though. These things happen.”

Do they? I doubt it.

“It’s like old friends payin’ you a visit, huh?” A half-hearted chuckle merges into a sigh. “Maybe leave your phone in another room when you sleep? You don’t need it beside you anymore, right?”

The circular drive becomes a flashing light parade with responders spilling from the floats—Miss Leslie sent everyone on shift, it seems, from cops to firemen. I’m mortified—dragging these poor people from their beds for my overburdened psyche. In rubber boots, a long t-shirt, and using Dad’s flannel button-down as a robe, I stand on the raised patio, gushing apologies.

“Yes, Mom’s dead...”

“No, I’m not on anything...”

“Just a bad dream...”

“No, I shouldn’t sleep with my phone...”

“Yes, sleeping in a real bed rather than a couch might help...”

Once satisfied that my alarm is an imagined one, the parade retreats.

My anxiety forces me to the bathroom. I cry on the toilet as my stomach rumbles and retaliates for my nervous offenses. When it refuses to flush, I break down more.

But the fix requires focus—a needed distraction. It takes a half-hour to safety-pin the broken chain back together—we keep safety pins and pliers in the bathroom for this reason. Sure, I could replace the toilet’s inner workings with the help of *YouTube*.

But why replace anything when everything needs replacing? It’s an oblong, yellow toilet from the eighties that matches the yellow walls and the pale, flecked Formica countertop. The toilet bowl is so water-stained that it always looks gross, no matter how clean. The floors around the toilet bend underfoot, thanks to unchecked leaks, never fixed properly. The two other bathrooms suffer the same fate—making do cost them their usefulness. Everything here is edges toward broken.

Sleep now impossible, I turn to job hunting. I email restaurants, coffee shops, and bakeries. I loved working in a kitchen. Few jobs offer that fast-paced energy while creating something people enjoy. Course, I’ll have that at Root & Bone, making this job search superfluous. Only, I’m curious if I can score a job as good but closer and on my own. Prone to screw up good things, a backup plan is smart.

Barbara Moore, my mother’s best friend, shows up mid-morning chauffeured by her grandniece, Dot.

I don’t love Dot.

“Dang, Lena.” Dot leans against Mrs. Moore’s Mini-Cooper and lights a cigarette. “You look awful.”

Meeting me on the back patio, Mrs. Moore gives me a critical once-over, like she used to in her high school chemistry class. “I heard you had a rough night.”

It’s no surprise that she knows. Bereaved Lena Buckley rousing emergency services over a bad dream surely proved irresistible chit-chat material for Miss Leslie.

“I’m fine. That was an accident. Nothing to worry about.”

My most assuring smile leads her inside. With Mom, Mrs. Moore’s visits were a godsend. She’d come over every other morning, push me out of the house, and when I’d return, she’d have Mom bathed, dressed, and laughing over some shared joke they’d kept over their sixty-plus-years of friendship.

I first met Dot at Mom’s funeral, where she asked if I needed a roommate since the house was empty—not for her, but a friend “between cribs right now.” I nearly lost it, but Mrs. Moore said, “Dot speaks first and thinks later. Let it go.”

Easier said than done, and with my luck, it’s no surprise that Mrs. Moore no longer goes anywhere without her.

I start coffee in a china cup, a fitting vessel for her dainty frame, wispy gray hair, understated jewelry, and floral, well, everything.

Mrs. Moore sits at the clutter-covered table, pushing aside mail. “I hear you’re still sleeping on the couch.”

“Wow, Miss Leslie gave you a full report.”

“Well, if you’re going to gossip, you might as well do it right,” she says, smirking. “Sleeping in a real bed might help.”

“It’s not the couch, and it’s the only decent mattress in the house.” The formal living room couch centers the house,

where I could hear Mom at night and stay semi-warm. “I’m fine where I am... and *that* won’t happen again.”

Cigarette smoke follows Dot inside, clashing awkwardly with the wood stove smell. “Cold out there.” She rubs her hands together. “I’ll take one of those, Lena. But, no froufrou frills, okay? I like it black.”

I reach for a chipped poop emoji mug that Dad brought back from New York City. He was a truck driver and found it on a rest stop bench. Smirking, I start Dot’s coffee.

“We have business to discuss, Lena.” Mrs. Moore’s curt announcement comes with a tiny sigh. “You need to take care of things.”

“What things?” I ask though I don’t want to know.

“Women are attached to their baking dishes.”

I grab the cream from the fridge, groaning. Uneaten concoctions stack the shelves, crusted and moldy.

“Holding onto them is downright rude,” she says.

“I never wanted them in the first place.”

“These ladies did a nice thing for you and Lucas. They want their Pyrexes back. If you don’t take care of it, I’ll organize an intervention.” A sly grin pushes up her pale cheeks. “There’s a battalion of church ladies armed with rubber gloves and sponges ready to invade your kitchen.”

“Okay, I’ll get it done.”

I deliver the coffee and change subjects. I tell her about the Harvey’s offer, Shadow, and finding the money.

Mrs. Moore stares over the reading glasses she wears even when she isn't reading and speaks in her delicate but strangely authoritative voice. "Take the lessons."

"No way. That money will go to bills." I motion toward the mail beside us. "I won't be here long enough to commit to five lessons, anyway."

"Sure, you will. California can wait."

"Why should it? I can't wait to get out of here."

"But California?" Dot scoffs. "You won't last five minutes in Malibu."

My left eyebrow creeps up. "Why not?"

Dot shrugs her beefy shoulders, running a hand through her pitch-black hair. "You'll hate it. The traffic. The surfer dudes and Barbie dolls. Doesn't seem your style."

Dot wears baggy, black capris overalls with thick knee socks, Timberlands, a thermal shirt topped with a plaid flannel three sizes too big for her—she's no style guru and hardly qualified to judge me or my Malibu-ness, regardless.

"She means Malibu would be quite a change for anyone," Mrs. Moore says.

"Everything *has* changed. And I need a change from all this." I motion toward the wood stove and garbage couches. "My best opportunities'll be in Malibu."

"Then, what's this?" Dot points to my job search smugly. "Looks like you aren't thrilled about Malibu either." She laughs before singing the Arizona Zervas's song dominating the radio lately, "*Malibu, Malibu, spending Daddy's money with attitude. I'm going to call you Roxanne, Roxanne.*"

Dot sloshes her mug on the table, splashing my mail, which she, of course, does nothing about. “I need a cigarette.”

With Dot gone, I say, “I made some local inquiries in case California falls through. That’s all.”

“Did Lucas say it might fall through?”

“There’s always a chance—a high one with me. The job hunt is extra insurance for getting out of here.”

Mrs. Moore doesn’t speak, as if digesting my words and struggling with heartburn.

“Things were tolerable with Mom around. Now, the place is colder and more broken than ever.” I inhale sharply. Last night replays in my head. *That fiasco would never happen in Lucas’s pool house.* “I hate it, Mrs. Moore. I *hate* being here.”

“You hate what’s happened. We all do.” She places her cup on its saucer. It’s nice seeing Mom’s antiques in use. “Lena, you’re recovering from a traumatic time, grieving, and not sleeping well. You aren’t yourself. What about making things better, huh?”

Once, Mrs. Moore asked me how I managed when things were tough. I shared what I’d been telling myself every morning. *Make one thing better.* If I could do that, it’d be a good day.

I rest my face in my hands and huff. “There are too many things, and I’m tired. With Jack’s offer, I can move sooner. And the sooner, the better.”

Dot slips back inside, bringing a second wave of smokiness and cold air with her.

Mrs. Moore pats my hand. “You shouldn’t rush, Lena. This is your family’s home. It’s full of history and stories and, yes,

junk, too, but it's your parents' legacy. You should go through it properly, or you'll regret it. It'll take time. Months, probably."

"No way. The plumbing or lights won't last months. The mice'll plan a coup."

Dot perks up as if my struggles amuse her. "Oh, what's up with your plumbing and lights?"

"Dot's a general contractor," Mrs. Moore says, almost beaming.

"Wait, *you're* a general contractor?" The words come out in a way I totally don't mean—as if Dot and/or her womanhood prevents her from such a title, and my forced smile does little to cover up my regret. "I mean, really?"

"Well, I'm a *new* general contractor. An electrician, too. I was working with Dawson and Sons, but not being one of the *sons*, I only got lame jobs. Now, I'm my own boss, you know, when I'm not Aunt Barb's chauffeur." She hands me a crumpled business card, which she takes back as soon as I look at it. "I've also been a Coast Guard technician, a construction worker, and a truck driver. A jack of all trades."

I'm a jack of all trades but a master of none. Dad used to say that over his unprofessional fixes. I bite my tongue.

"She's cheap, enthusiastic, and looking for clients," Mrs. Moore says, not realizing how it sounds. Dot and I share an amused grin.

"Tempting, but I'll make do until I leave. And that'll be soon."

“Don’t rush it, Lena. What’s a few months? Don’t you want to leave with the satisfaction that you’ve taken good care of your family home?”

Maybe I *can’t* just walk away. But I *hate* that I can’t. Living here indefinitely when anything can and will go wrong while going through every drawer, the closets, the sheds, the barn—I cringe and my heart races with the sheer magnitude of the project. *Where would I even start?* Alice’s voice coos in my head. *You need a dumpster, and a storage unit, and muscle...*

“Don’t get overwhelmed. Make one thing better at a time.” Her blue eyes twinkle as she leans closer. “Some relaxation would be good, though. How’s your anxiety been lately?”

My eyes pinch, glancing at Dot. I couldn’t control what Mom divulged to Mrs. Moore, but my anxiety disorder should fall under a best-friend-confidentiality clause. Luckily, Dot’s distracted by the fireplace’s stonework. “Fine. Everything’s fine. Really, it’s fine.”

Unconvinced, she nods, anyway. “Take your time, Lena. Figure out what you truly want. In the meantime, take the lessons. It’ll be good for you.”

After last night, I can’t argue. The hope of turning Shadow into my new escape pod offsets the weight of everything else. A little, anyway.