

"Sarah Creech weaves together a magical tale of sisters and mothers and the power of human love. *Season of the Dragonflies* is a rich, deeply satisfying debut."
—BEATRIZ WILLIAMS, AUTHOR OF *THE SECRET LIFE OF VIOLET GRANT*

SARAH CREECH



Season of the Dragonflies



A NOVEL



Season of the Dragonflies



SARAH CREECH

WM

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication



FOR MY MOTHER, CHAREATHA



Epigraph



I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.

—MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

A woman who doesn't wear perfume has no future.

—COCO CHANEL



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The page is decorated with several faint, grey dragonfly illustrations scattered across the top and right sides. The text is centered and rendered in a blue, serif font.

THE BEGINNING OF LENORE INCORPORATED:

Serena's Story

THE HEAVY WOODEN doors to the office opened, and there stood the shortest man Serena Lenore could've imagined. "Come along," her father said, one hand on Mr. Chase's shoulder. "It's time for dinner."

Mr. Chase smiled at Serena, his thin lips spread so wide they nearly disappeared. The sight of him made her thighs lock together. Those lips, and only those lips, would eventually find their way beneath all these layers of petticoat. His head was so long, like a horse's, and his eyes too small, like a doll's. How could her father do this to her? Did he have no feelings at all? Did he not remember what it meant to be in love? Mr. Chase was a banking heir. His family owned stock in rail, steel, and now oil and even grocery chains. They invested in small men with big dreams and made fortunes. Anyone who wanted to develop real estate in the city needed the Chase family, and her father needed Serena to sacrifice herself for his business expansion. "For your future and fortune, my darling," her father had reasoned.

"But what about love?" And to this her father had no answer. Could she say no? Serena dreamed about saying no; every night the same settee and the same tumbler of scotch in her father's hand appeared. But when she told him, he dissolved on the spot, her only living parent lost to her forever. The same dream every single night, just like the same dull days in the dull marriage she'd succumb to soon enough.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Chase would work as hard as her father and be home just as little, and that had brought Serena her only comfort. Her bitterness bubbled like percolating coffee as she walked behind the two men down the mahogany hallway, which was as narrow as a coffin. She smelled vegetable broth boiling in the kitchen. She sat down at the dining room table set for sixteen, thankfully many seats away from her father and Mr. Chase. Serena recognized only a few faces at the table, like the decrepit Mrs. Barts, whose breath smelled like rotten meat. Serena's trust manager, Mr. Hart, arrived without a date, as usual, and he was seated next to Mrs. Barts. At least it wouldn't be Serena's charge to conduct close conversation with the old woman tonight. Otherwise, Serena's father had invited potential business partners to witness this momentous day in her life. She hardly knew any of them, though Mr. Chase seemed familiar with all of them. He shook their hands and they patted her

shoulders, one by one, before taking their seats. Mr. Chase's mother was the only other woman in attendance.

A young man sat directly across from Serena, a man she hadn't seen before at her father's table. He'd slicked his dark blond hair into place with pomade, like waves in the ocean, and his eyes were a deep blue she had to look away for fear of being indecent. But he didn't look away from her. Indeed, he stared. His lips were not too thin, his skin not prematurely wrinkled.

Her father stood with a champagne flute in hand (none for Serena, of course) and said, "Tonight is very special. My daughter, Serena, is now engaged to Mr. Chase. Such a delightful match; I couldn't have asked for a better son-in-law." Everyone turned and smiled at Serena and raised their glasses. The man sitting across from her looked at Mr. Chase and back to Serena. He mimed a small gag, and for a moment Serena really thought he was choking, until he smiled and his leather shoe rubbed against her ankle. She immediately sat up straight.

The man leaned over and spoke to the mayor as if nothing had happened at all, but no one spoke to Serena, and she stirred her vegetable soup until it went cold. Occasionally she glanced to the end of the table where Mr. Chase and her father leaned close together and gaily conversed, like lovers. "You must do it for the family," her father had told her again and again to counter her very reasonable objections: *I don't know him. I'm not ready. I'm only eighteen.* "It's what your mother would've expected," her father had said, and this always silenced her.

Serena knew very little about her mother, except that she had been quite the beauty, a daughter of one of the wealthiest textile merchants in the city, and Serena's father had loved her very, very much. Her nanny insisted on this point. True love. However, her mother didn't return to the woman she'd been before her marriage—witty, charming, free. Only the birth of Serena had offered her temporary happiness. Throughout the years Serena had overheard the staff telling new hires the rumors about her mother, how her sadness brewed storms in the Atlantic, and the more she was confined to the home, the more her once-gleaming blue eyes turned the color of ashes, the more hair she shed, and the more weight she lost. Until a doctor promised Serena's heartbroken father that the only cure was temporary bed rest in Connecticut, and "temporary" became ten years. She died in her sleep when Serena was fourteen. Serena had never been allowed to visit. Her father had promised it would hurt her too much.

Wicked hurricanes would brew just for Serena. Her unhappiness would make lightning strike. Though her father had fallen madly in love with her mother, Serena wasn't convinced her mother would have wanted this kind of marriage for her, not if it felt like this.

During a main course of lamb medallions in a red wine and rosemary reduction, Serena's foot found its way into the pant cuff of the blond man. Their feet caressed for a brief moment before her father called upon him. "Dr. Alex Danner," her father said in his booming baritone voice, "please tell us of those wild adventures of yours."

Dr. Alex Danner cleared his throat, smoothed his tie with one hand, and then said, "In Southeast Asia there are remote islands with the world's oldest rain forests and an amazing range of biodiversity. Much like the Amazon, which most of you are familiar with, I assume." He had captured the full table's attention, especially Serena's.

"There's an English-speaking community in Borneo and Sumatra now, as those islands are referred to, and my company's offered to send me there to study the flora," he said. His cheeks reddened and

his voice grew louder. “And to discover—at least we hope—cures for the maladies of our time—Tuberculosis and malaria, chiefly.”

“Is it a dangerous place?” Mrs. Barts said.

“Yes, ma’am, I suppose it is.” Alex smiled and added, “Tigers frighten me most.”

“I should say so.” Mrs. Barts fanned herself with a linen napkin.

“What do you most want to see there?” Mr. Chase said, and Serena cringed. He was the kind of man to ask others about the unknown world without any desire to experience it for himself.

Alex said, “Orangutans in their nests. They build them so high in the forest’s canopy, they can be rather hard to spot. Dragonflies too. More species there than anywhere on earth. But I assure you gentlemen, I will not go for sightseeing. I’m convinced those islands hold cures for human disease and that mystery is the only one I care about.”

“Of course, of course,” her father said. “Five years, is it?”

“I will make a return visit for an update then, sir,” he said.

“Very well,” her father said.

Five years. *Five years?* Serena glanced at Mr. Chase at the far end of the table, who dabbed at his mouth with his handkerchief like a woman might, and she swallowed hard. Five years from now she would have two ankle-biters with that man and she’d be used and gray, just like her poor dead mother. She wrapped both of her ankles around Alex’s leg and squeezed, and he pretended not to notice. With one elbow propped on the table Alex carried on about his research to the mayor, and with his free hand he lifted one of Serena’s ankles and caressed her foot in the shadows of the tablecloth.

After dinner the men planned to sequester themselves in the library for scotch and cigars and to discuss investment in Alex’s project. The women gathered for a game of bridge. Alex asked to be excused and the crowd of men moved ahead without him. As he neared the bathroom Serena took his hand from behind and led him to a room beneath the staircase, glancing over her shoulder just in case her father or Mr. Chase might inquire.

In the darkness of the closet she lit a candlestick, and here he discovered her romance novels and blankets and candies, this place she saved just for herself, a place where her father assumed the stacks kept dry goods or utensils. And this is where she took Dr. Alex Danner into her arms, kissed him, and said, “Take me with you. Please, you must.” He backed her against a wall and kissed her with such force she thought her corset might tear. She loved him immediately, and she knew he loved her just the same when he said, “Your eyes flicker with jungle fire.” She wanted out of that corset, that closet, that brownstone, out of New York City. She was made for much more than she knew existed. Borneo, Sumatra. Plants unseen and unnamed. Exotic smells floating on warm night air. “Take me,” she begged. “I can’t stay here another moment longer.”

SERENA PLANNED THEIR SECRET DEPARTURE as her father slumbered. She and Alex escaped from New York Harbor on the *Princess Anne* liner to the south. She’d left her father a brief note about her desire to travel without disclosing an exact location, and she prayed he might forgive her, though she doubted he ever would; there was much she couldn’t forgive him for, and thus, they were even. They sailed beyond the Caribbean, South America, Cape Horn, places Serena had only read about in travel books. The ship stopped at seventeen ports, but she spent much of the time ill in their windowless

berth, only partially from seasickness. Almost nine months later they docked on the north coast of Borneo, an area governed by British rule. Here she found medical assistance for the birth of her daughter, a girl whose first toys were palm fronds, rocks, and dirt sculptures of her making, not dolls. No one would force her daughter to wear a corset.

Serena and Alex grew more deeply in love and more infatuated with each other's company in the isolation of the jungle. Alex did not let a day pass without reminding Serena how happy she made him. Their conversation was restricted to each other and the children they raised together. They lived happily with their two daughters, the second one born in their mud-and-bark hut far inland from the coast of the South China Sea. Serena and Alex were more in love seven years later than either had imagined possible.

Serena's hips widened from childbirth, her breasts softened from feeding, and her back grew stronger from carrying her babies slung across it like the local Dayak women did. Serena had transformed in those seven years from a girl of eighteen to a woman of twenty-five with more firsthand knowledge of the world than any of the girls she had tutored with in New York. Serena missed many things about New York, like her bathroom and its running water; her father, whom she loved more now that she lived far away; and her brownstone, because her mother had decorated it. But in the pristine rain forest, the uncultivated privacy of the world she'd grown to understand, had become her chosen reality. Her daughters wore loose-fitting clothes to ward off mosquitoes, but inside the dwelling they were as naked as the orangutans that loomed in their stick-and-leaf nests in the trees. Stinking peels of durian fruit signaled a nearby ape, and Serena's children found playmates in the young ones and tasted those huge, spiked fruits that smelled of burned milk custard and onion. Serena loved her life. Most of all she cherished Alex, the only scientist daring enough to bring a woman to a place like Borneo.

Some families lived in more Western villages, but Alex and Serena did not often go to visit them as it took a day's boat ride. With two young children it was only worth it if they needed supplies. They battled together as a team—fevers, bouts of malaria, strange carnivorous insects, bites so unusual only the local tinctures could heal them—and they survived together. Even prospered together. Only during the comparatively quiet nights in the jungle did Serena question whether she had a purpose other than raising her girls and supporting Alex's research, both of which she loved doing. Her daughters gave her laughter, and she enjoyed tagging plants and helping Alex organize his notes. Alex had discovered so many different species of plants with such promising possibilities that he believed they would be wealthier than Serena's father when he developed them in America.

News of America's financial collapse reached Borneo almost a year after the market crashed. Alex had been the one to share the news with Serena. She thought of her father and wondered how he had fared. Alex and Serena debated the severity of these events after sunset when the girls had fallen asleep and only the forest and its wild symphony were still hotly awake. He held her in the hammock they shared and said, "Investments are down; the company doesn't know how much longer they can support us." The company had postponed his return twice already.

"Maybe it's time," Serena said. She almost added "to go home," but the hut was home, and she had no idea what they'd find when they returned to the States. A few weeks later, the company requested Alex's return. His years of work had not been in vain. He had treated multiple local children for

malaria in the past year with a formula based on an oil extraction from a small purple flower shape like a honeysuckle that the Dayaks ritually rubbed on themselves for good health. He needed more advanced laboratories to develop his TB cure.

During their final days, Alex and Serena and the little girls sang sad songs about their hut and the jungle and made jokes about a return to civilization. Serena told them, "It'll feel like a jungle of buildings." She knew it would feel as foreign as Borneo had the first moment she stepped from the godforsaken ship and stared at a wall of untamed trees so unlike any she'd seen in Central Park. Her girls would feel the same deep sense of fear at their first sight of a Model T.

On their last afternoon in Borneo, they cleaned up their hut for the next scientist and placed their few belongings by the curtained door in preparation for their boat the next day. But the girls worked slowly, and Alex continued to wrap a splintered bamboo shaft fifty different ways. Serena said, "Let me take a walk and do this later."

Serena led her family outside but stopped when she heard chanting. The voices lowered and then heightened in waves. Alex pulled on her hand. "Shouldn't we go a different way? They're worshipping."

And even though their children trailed her and normally she would've avoided interrupting a local custom, she couldn't resist the sound of those voices. She felt compelled into the depths of the forest. The sounds grew louder until she saw a group of bare-breasted Dayak women hovering together over a single spot on the forest floor.

Serena advanced until she stood directly behind the circle of women and tried to peer inside, kneeling just as they did, as it was the only way to glimpse the small white flower barely visible among the brush. One woman's dark hands gently pushed the woody leaves away from the plant, and each time her skin brushed the petals it looked as if the plant wilted on the spot. Each time the woman moved away, the plant grew healthy again and the group made noises of astonishment. The women had never seen this particular gardenia flower before, that much was clear.

Serena needed to touch that plant. She pushed through the crowd. A velvety red dragonfly fluttered nearby, a much larger species than the ones she and the girls had chased during their stay. Without warning it dropped down near the plant and then disappeared into the surrounding trees. Serena closed in. The plant's white petals grew larger, and a woody branch appeared beneath it and reached in her direction. The Dayak women pulled away with small shouts of horror, and one woman tried to hold Serena's arm back. Alex and her daughters stood far away. Serena pulled herself forward and reached her small hands down to the plant as an invitation. The moment her finger touched its stem, the plant began to shake itself free from the ground, exposing its long white roots, and nearly leaped into her palms. A scent more heavenly than any she'd encountered in the forest invaded Serena's nostrils and filled her entire body with more glory than motherhood or love or sunlight could.

Her black hair fell loose from its bun and draped her shoulders. Serena placed the plant on top of her head and wrapped it up with her bundle of hair, the same pompadour style she had worn as a girl of eighteen. The Dayak women parted as she walked past, and a gentle rain followed them out of the forest. A perfumed wind surrounded Serena and her family with every step she took.

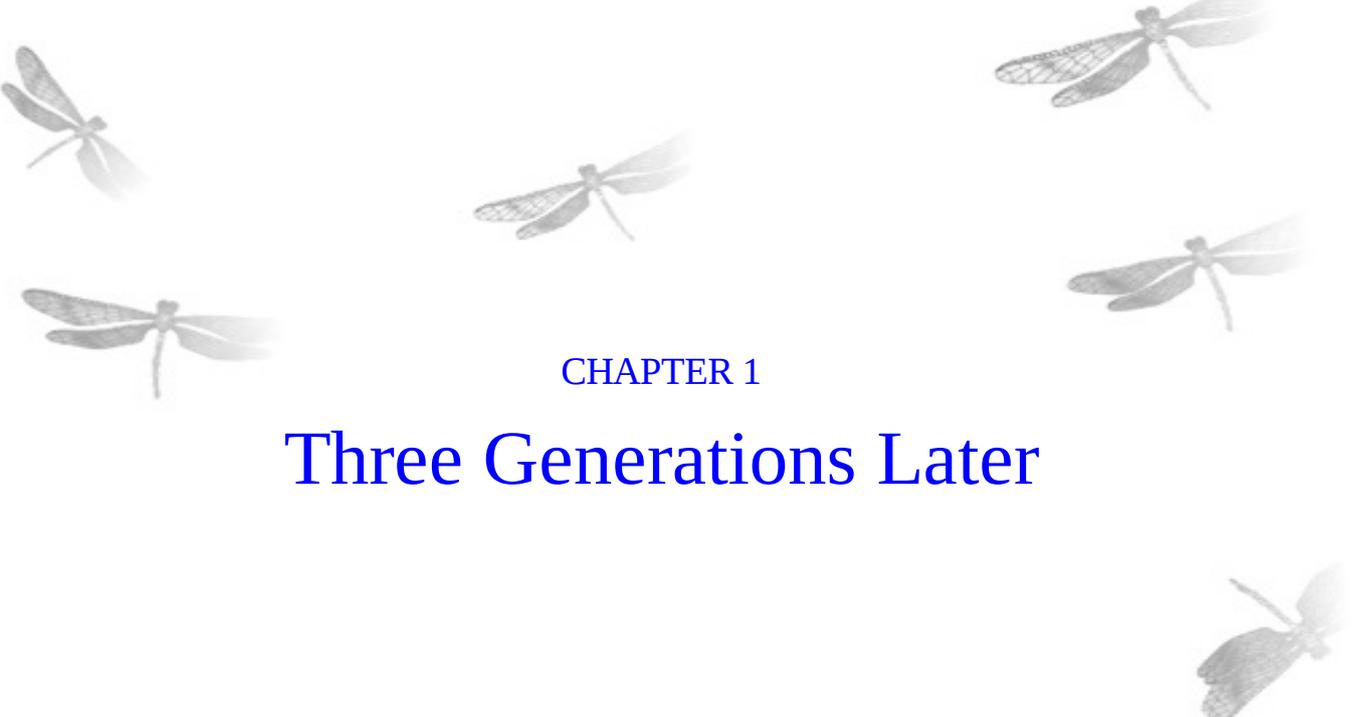
The plant she named *Gardenia potentiae* had chosen her, and it survived in her nest of hair for the voyage back to the States; it required only a splash of water in the mornings to keep its strength. With

every day that passed on the liner, Alex vowed that Serena looked more regal than the day before. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissed her neck, and said, “Your skin’s never smelled so good. This is your perfume.” Other people on the ship destined for New York deferred to her in all matters, and the waiters offered her nothing but the best service. Exotic orchids arrived in their rooms each time the boat docked, and the staff reserved the richest of desserts and rarest of fruits for Serena’s daughters. She was the most powerful woman on the boat. She swore *Gardenia potentillae* would be the last scent she ever wore.

The harsh northern winters of New York could not accommodate a plant that Alex deemed the most impressive species of flower he’d encountered in Borneo. They needed privacy for Serena’s flower to flourish, lest people start questioning how and why the plant moved. So they decided to dock early in the Chesapeake Bay, the plant hidden safely in Serena’s hair without raising a single suspicion from an inspector. The family journeyed three days to the fertile ground of Quartz Hollow in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, where Alex had been born. Serena wrote to her father upon settling in the cabin and notified him of her return, but he never responded. Alex turned in his research and gave up his post to take over his ailing father’s farm, where Serena could graft and grow hundreds of acres of *Gardenia potentillae*. The flower moved only for her hands and the hands of her daughters, and it soon became the secret ingredient in the most enigmatic, expensive, and successful perfume in history. Serena appointed herself president of the perfumery and bestowed upon her business her name—Lenore Incorporated.

PART ONE
DISTILLATION





CHAPTER 1

Three Generations Later

JONAH HAD LET his curly black hair grow out the way Lucia Lenore always liked it, maybe even in spite of her, and his blue eyes seemed even brighter. He dropped down on their organic futon, sending her side up like a seesaw. This final piece of their shared furniture was destined for the landfill, and with good cause. At least Lucia would never sleep another night on a worn-out cushion.

Jonah said, “The sublet starts next month. I’ll make sure the paperwork’s straight.”

“I’m out today,” Lucia said, her thigh touching his knee by accident. She signed her name on the last page and handed Jonah his pen. He placed the stack of papers on the cardboard box she’d set up on a coffee table. A prenup and no children made this transaction easy, almost too simple—like it had been set up to fail. Overall, they’d met little resistance from friends, and as far as family, only Jonah’s happily married parents knew, and they refrained from offering wisdom: “We’d better not weigh in on this” translated into “We agree this is best.”

Jonah placed one long arm around her and squeezed. She let her head fall on his shoulder. Here was the moment he’d take it back, shred the papers, and finally apologize . . . and what was *wrong* with Lucia that deep down she wanted him to do exactly that?

He kissed the crown of her head before saying, “I’ll always be here.”

“I know,” she said.

“Nina’s?” he said quietly, perhaps to reduce how insulting it sounded that she would couch-surf at her friend’s place, the very same friend who had introduced Lucia to Jonah at his MoMA opening eight years ago.

“Probably,” Lucia said, but she didn’t know; she hadn’t even asked Nina yet. Silence settled between them.

Jonah squeezed her one more time and then stood up and said, “Can I go back to get a few things?” Lucia nodded, and Jonah retreated to their bedroom for the final time.

Lucia would never hear his hangers slide on the short metal rack again or see his beard trimmings in the sink or dropped toenail clippings beside the couch. When they were in love she thought those little

memories might comfort her when he died. *If only I could see those obscenely hard toenail clippings stuck one more time in the low-pile rug.* But for the past year, maybe longer (if she forced herself to pinpoint), wicked arguments about such things had become another tenant in their small apartment. He couldn't stand fishing her long black hairs out of the tub drain. They felt genuine hate for each other, and that's all they needed to know.

What she never wanted to reveal to anyone was how many holes Jonah had punched in the drywall, hidden for so long by his overpriced canvases, and how many times she'd thrown shoes, keys, purses, and infomercial scripts at him. Jonah and Lucia and their marriage had crumbled together like old buildings during an earthquake, but no single person or event deserved the blame.

She stood up from the futon and stumbled over the Persian rug they'd found at the flea market. For years later it still smelled like dog. Lucia opened the clear five-gallon storage tub that held the liquor, all going to Jonah's new place. The gin and vodka and whiskey had acted like kerosene for their fires, a sure way to embolden a fight that could've been avoided or start a fight if one didn't exist. Yet they couldn't keep themselves from drinking together, like it was their only sport. She squeezed the last bottle in and then tried to snap the top into place. But it wouldn't go. She sat on the floor and hoped weight and gravity would do the rest.

Jonah returned from the bedroom and said, "Here, let me help." With her still seated on the top, he placed an arm on either side of her and closed the top with one forceful push down, his sinewy biceps bigger than she remembered—had he started working out? The sex had been hotter when they had separate apartments and no legal contract promising to be faithful, and suddenly this slight embrace on the storage tub made her horny for the first time in who knew how long. She wanted to tell him this, as if they could try again.

Jonah stared into her eyes. She let him kiss her, but she couldn't manage to relax her lips and she kept her eyes wide open. Too much had happened between them now to recover this element of their relationship.

A dart of indigo flashed by the windowpane; Lucia glanced in that direction and pulled away from Jonah. She saw nothing save concrete beyond the glass, but the moment to make this big mistake had already passed, and she ducked underneath his arms and stood up. "Not my best idea," she said.

Jonah traced the corners of his mouth with his thumb and pointer finger, the way he always did when he didn't agree with her.

Another bright streak of blue dashed outside the window. "Isn't that the strangest thing?" she said. Lucia moved toward the exposed brick wall in their apartment. "Are you seeing this?" She pointed at the window in the center, but by this time she didn't need to; so many blue dragonflies hovered right outside that she couldn't count them all, their collected mass blocking out the sunlight and darkening the room like a curtain. The insects tapped their jaws against the glass.

Jonah said, "It's like they want in."

Lucia closed her eyes and clasped her arms together. She couldn't suppress the smells of wild honeysuckle vining on fenceposts and split trunks of cedar and tulip poplars and oaks ushering forward from her memory; the smells of wet leaf mulch on the forest floor and peeled peat moss along creek banks; the smells of girlhood, of her mother and her older sister and the Blue Ridge Mountains; across upon acres of her family's flower planted on the hills above the cabin, blanketing the town of Quar

Hollow with a smell richer than jasmine.

She hadn't been home in so many years—fifteen, to be exact—and she knew these weren't random bugs coming down from Syracuse or Albany. These were Lucia's dragonflies. One dragonfly paused close enough to the glass for Lucia to gaze into its bulbous jade-green eyes, each with a black speck in the center. They appeared to gaze right back at Lucia. The yellow thorax tapered into a thin abdomen the same color as the clear blue sky in the distance. Lucia bent down slightly, and the filament etching inside the wings turned metallic red in the sunlight. Adult dragonflies lived for only a month or so, but the symbol of infinity gave shape to their two sets of wings; they could control each set separately and had the freedom to change directions whenever they wished. Lucia envied them this trait. Then, just as quickly as they had arrived, they darted away; the dragonflies dropped below Lucia's window and vanished without a trace.

"I hate summer bugs," Jonah said, and backed away from the window. With both hands flat on the pane Lucia continued to stare, desperate to catch sight of them again. Jonah placed his hand on Lucia's shoulder and she turned around. He presented the only canvas of his that remained in the apartment—the one she'd purposely quarantined in the bedroom; the real Lucia slept on the futon. It was a mural painting from when they had first started dating. He'd captured Lucia's bountiful hair, long eyelashes, pale skin, and alert blue eyes with an exaggerated lucidity. He had chosen not to sell it, though now she wished he had. How long had it been since he last painted anything connected to her? Two, three years? Why even count anymore?

"It's yours if you want it," he said. She stared at the painting but didn't recognize that girl. She never existed, not in all that confident glory. She shook her head.

"You're sure?" he said.

Lucia couldn't bear for him to recommend she sell the painting to the SoHo Corner Gallery, even though they both knew she could use the money. She said, "I'm sure," before he had the chance to suggest it.

Jonah placed the painting and a box of supplies on top of the storage bin of liquor and his jeans and sweaters on top of that, then crowned it all with his black-and-white-checkered Converse sneakers. Those sneakers had now become her emblem for Jonah: juvenile and on top of the world. He probably had an appointment with a buyer.

Jonah tucked the signed divorce agreement beneath his arm like an umbrella. "Call me in the next few days and let me know how you are," he said, and went to their door and looked back at her one last time before leaving.

The door clicked shut, and the brake-slamming sounds of the Upper East Side emanated from three stories below their small apartment. Those noises used to give Lucia comfort; when she moved to New York City on her eighteenth birthday they were auditory finish lines, a must-have soundtrack to her new life away from Quartz Hollow, but they had morphed into a recursive loop, and all she desired was an "off" button. Now she had another move before her. How had she let herself become so dependent on another person? Or how had *they* let it happen? Certainly Jonah had a part in it too. Lucia had so many questions for him that he would never answer. Such was the way of divorce.

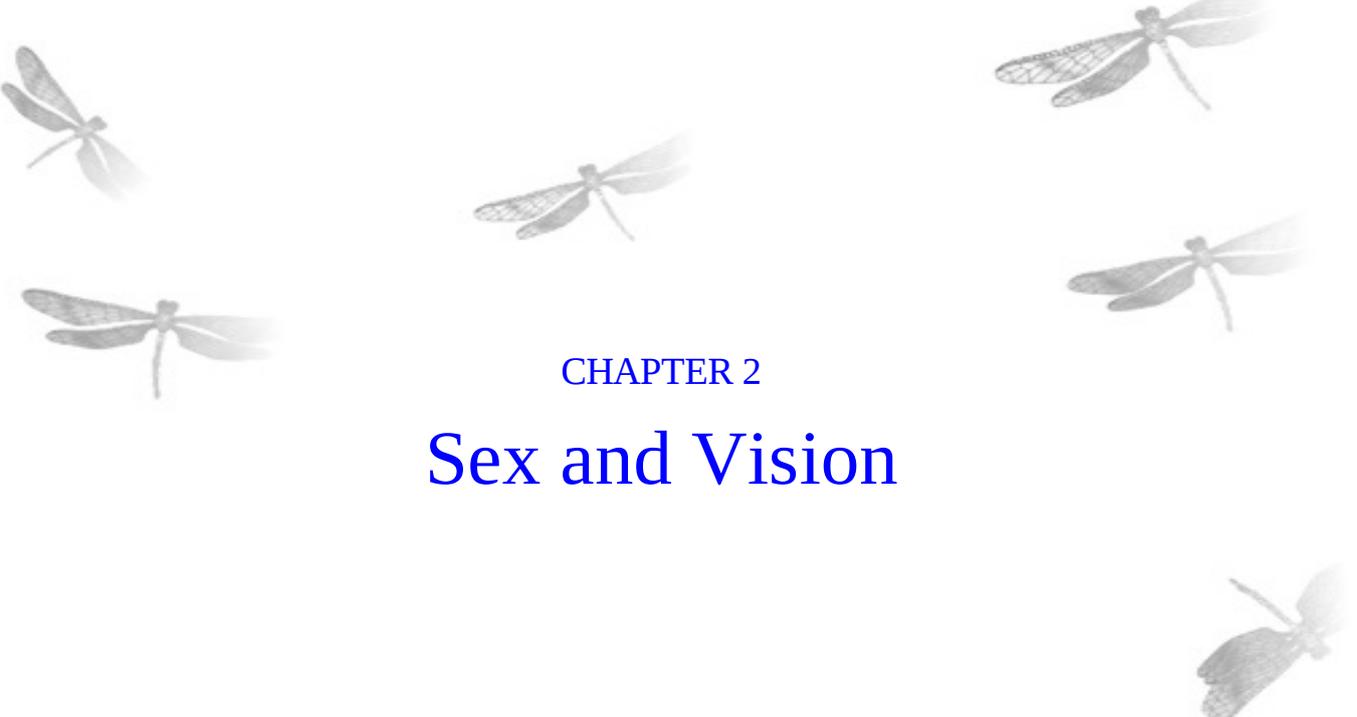
Left alone in this apartment for the past few weeks, Lucia had made canned soup in the microwave and drunk Pinot Grigio from a box. Jonah could afford a one-bedroom apartment in SoHo, along with

his studio on Eighth Avenue. Without Lucia to support, he had plenty of cash to spend on dating anorexic fashion designers. And only one recurring thought haunted her: *If I were as successful as Jonah Little, and on my own like him, then our relationship might've survived.*

Lucia Little. She wasn't comfortable using that name to sign checks or thank-you cards; she especially disliked using it at auditions and casting calls. Ms. Soon-Not-to-Be-Little plopped back down on the futon and opened the faded *Forbes* magazine she'd tucked underneath the cushion a week ago. Lucia stared at her maiden name on the "400" list, and she looped her mother's entry with the tip of her finger: *Number 27: Willow Lenore . . . Net Worth: \$11.9 B . . . Age: 61 . . . Residence: Quarry Hollow, Virginia . . . Source: Diversified.* Why had she given up her maiden name? It sounded much better than Little. Lucia tossed the *Forbes* magazine in the black garbage bag she'd begun for all her soup cans and many boxes of Franzia. A poor effort on her part, considering how many splayed Progresso cans remained scattered on the floor.

Lucia couldn't stay in their empty apartment another night replaying the same bad marriage scene in her head. With tomato soup as her only comfort. The dragonflies were headed home to Quarry Hollow, had to be. As much as Lucia hated to admit it, she had nowhere else to go. She could move into her friend Nina's place for a couple of weeks, but then what? Her funds were barely getting her by; she was just one nanny job away from eating nothing but one miso soup a day.

Lucia pulled well-worn yoga pants, one pair of jeans, and two T-shirts off the floor next to the futon and tossed them in a pink duffel bag. She promised herself it would only be a short visit home. A memory of her mother's moonshine and one of her extravagant picnics in the woods might go a long way toward restoring her, and maybe the quiet away from the city would help Lucia figure out her next move. She gathered her knockoff Coach purse and put on her black ballet flats to go to the airport and take the next flight to Richmond, the last charge on her Visa card before it imploded. Lucia locked the apartment door, headed down the hall toward the elevator, and refused to look behind her at a life she no longer called her own.



CHAPTER 2

Sex and Vision

PINNED BENEATH MYA Lenore's thighs, Luke rolled from side to side as if he couldn't lift her into the air and toss her onto the mattress like a sack of soil. She liked him just where he was, caught by choice beneath her. Mya released his arms, only to guide his hands up her bare abdomen so he could cup her breasts. His callused hands roamed the planes of her hips and ribs and collarbone before stopping at her chin. In his husky mountain accent, Luke said, "I never knew a woman like you."

"Tsk, tsk," Mya said like a preschool teacher, and locked his arms down beside him, then eyed the yellow silk scarves on her bedside table and walked two fingers over to snag them.

"You're bad," Luke said. Mya tied his wrists to one of the brass poles of her headboard and proceeded down from there.

Luke moaned and then said, "Get to it now."

"Patience," she said, and tickled his etched abdomen with her fingernails, dirt still visible beneath them. What she found appealing about a twenty-six-year-old at times also troubled Mya. Luke's youthful eagerness highlighted their ten-year age difference when she hadn't had enough rest, like today.

Luke pulled his wrists free and the scarves dropped to the floor. Mya let her long blond hair create a tent around his pelvis, and he stroked it at the roots. The flowers she'd gathered on her walk and inserted in her hair fell onto the bed. The sweet scent still lingered, but the limp and browning petals no longer looked like a white pinwheel. Luke spread Mya's hair all over his torso and said, "It's so fucking long and beautiful."

Mya said, "A family gift."

Luke pinched her nipple and said, "Don't bring up your mama. It's not a good time."

"True," she said, and rubbed her hand along his inner thigh where his thick, curly hair tapered.

Luke placed one arm behind his head so he could see her better, his biceps curved like a mountain slope. He said, "Your sunshine hair makes me crazy." He ran his fingers through it, and Mya continued to stroke his thigh and rested her cheek on his abdomen. Luke placed his hand at the back

her head and gently nudged it forward, and she gathered him in her mouth and let all her anxious thoughts drain away like water on a drought-blighted plot of earth.

Ten minutes later he shouted out, “Holy mother of good God!” Then he rolled over on the red poppy-print quilt and Mya slapped his pale behind before he got up to go to the bathroom.

Mya left the bedroom and went to the kitchen, where she poured a glass of water mixed with fine sea salt. Luke was still in the bathroom when she returned. What was he doing in there? Mya spread her body out on the hardwood floor and placed the glass of salt water between her feet. She stared at the exposed wooden beams on the ceiling and then called out to Luke, “I dyed my hair black one summer and it turned split-pea green for three months.”

After a delay he finally answered, “That was dumb.”

“It was,” she said. “Lucia had such dark hair and I wanted mine like that.” Her little sister had hair as smooth as an onyx stone, and it smelled of summer rain no matter how often she used shampoo. Hair like Great-Grandmother Serena’s, a point their mother never failed to brag about, like Lucia’s, earning straight A’s. So much of a normal life had always come easily to Lucia, but in all other ways she had nothing in common with Great-Grandmother. Lucia might have had her hair, but she had no gift for scent or visions.

Luke said, “She’s still in New York?”

Mya said, “Married, acting, that’s all I know,” and she stood up and moved her operation to the bed. She stretched her long legs out on the lavender-scented sheets, balanced the glass of salt water on the bed, and clasped a pillow to her stomach. She stared at the room as a whole—the black rocking chair in the corner beneath an old net that held her stuffed animals, her clothes in a stinking pile desperate to be washed and hung on the line—and then she spotted a stray hair from Luke’s head.

She caught it with her fingernails, lifted it up like the metal claw in the toy-vending machine at the grocery store, and secured it in her side-table drawer. A single strand of hair, dried chamomile flowers, seven drops of geranium oil, and a black ribbon secured with a safety pin always did the trick. Sometimes only this spell could break the irrational and impulsive bond of sex that so many people mistook for love.

Luke sauntered back into the room completely nude except for one stray flower pressed on his pelvis and stopped at the foot of the bed. He reached out for the glass, and Mya lunged for it and said, “It’s salty.” She moved the glass to her bedside table.

“What weird thing are you up to?” Luke said.

Mya tucked her knees to her chest and said, “My foot chakra’s messed up.”

“Your what?” he said, and he gathered his jean overalls and white undershirt.

“I made a mistake,” Mya said.

He looked down at her like she was speaking French. “That got something to do with why we were out molly mooching so damn early?” he said.

She nodded.

Luke hooked his overalls and put his hands in his pockets. “Anything else?”

“That’s all,” Mya said.

He looked like he might protest but then gave her that sweet side smile. Luke bent down, kissed her on the neck, and tried to pull her closer for round two, but she said, “Can’t. Don’t you have fields

plow?”

“Ten,” he said, and laced his work boots. When he stood back up he grimaced and grabbed his right shoulder.

“Your daddy’s working you too hard,” Mya said. She turned Luke around and massaged his smooth shoulders, then moved her hands down over his chest muscles.

He dropped his head down and groaned as she worked out his knots.

“When’s your mom get back?” he said.

“Tomorrow,” she said. She led him through the pale green linen curtains on the doorway. He reached for her hand as if to hold it, but Mya rubbed her hip instead. Not that close, she wanted to tell him. They entered the reading room—Mya’s laundry spilled out from the bedroom and landed in the communal living space. Her mother had grown accustomed to it, and she didn’t say anything about Mya’s messes anymore. Not that tidiness came naturally to her mother. Mya couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen the coffee table free of her office overflow.

Luke moved through the clutter without comment. Six months ago Mya had visited Luke’s family farm to contract a year’s worth of grass-fed beef. She’d expected to talk to his daddy, but he wasn’t home. Luke had been restoring the barn’s roof and came down the ladder to speak to her. He was shirtless and smooth and sweating and suspicious of why a Lenore woman had come to visit. Mya knew as soon as his boots landed on the earth that she had to have him. She asked him to deliver each week’s portion in person, and on his first stop she asked him to stay for lunch. When Luke finally entered the cabin, she wondered what he’d say about her messiness, if he might judge her for having bras and underwear strewn about, but all he said was “How long’s it been since a man lived here?” And it had never occurred to Mya that a man’s presence in the house might shape the array of items she left out. She told him, “Not since my granddaddy died when we were girls.” That was the only time Luke mentioned the chaos. They could afford a maid, but her mother didn’t like having strangers in the house.

Now they moved through the reading room, with every wall encased in books about perfumery, and botany—so many books only her mother read. Mya’s vegetable stock continued to simmer in the kitchen, filling the house with the earthy smells of onion, carrot, celery, and potatoes. She opened the red front door, where a dried bunch of eucalyptus and rosemary branches hung upside down on a hook. A family of wrens nested there, and each time Mya opened the door, one or more of the family members flew inside. Luke dodged them. They stepped onto the porch together and Mya said, “I’ll make food for us tonight.”

“Or we could go out,” Luke said.

“That’s not us, remember? I like us here,” Mya said, and this had always been her response because she always felt the same way: she didn’t like going to town unless it was for business. But he hated this answer. “You know I’m too old for you,” she said, and she brought his mouth to her own and kissed him.

Luke patted Mya on the hip and said, “You’re going on a date with me sometime, Mya Lenore. I mean it; I don’t know when and I don’t know where, but I want to take you out and buy you a drink and some food, and I don’t give a damn who sees us.” Then he crossed the threshold of the ivy-covered front porch; there was so much of it that the porch fans had been choked by the vines years

ago. Long strands hung like a beaded curtain on all sides of the porch, and no one could see past the flora that led to their house. Not that anyone was around, not with a thousand and seventy-seven acres of buffer and the Blue Ridge Mountains just above like a fortress. He jogged down the slate front steps and walked to his Toyota pickup truck.

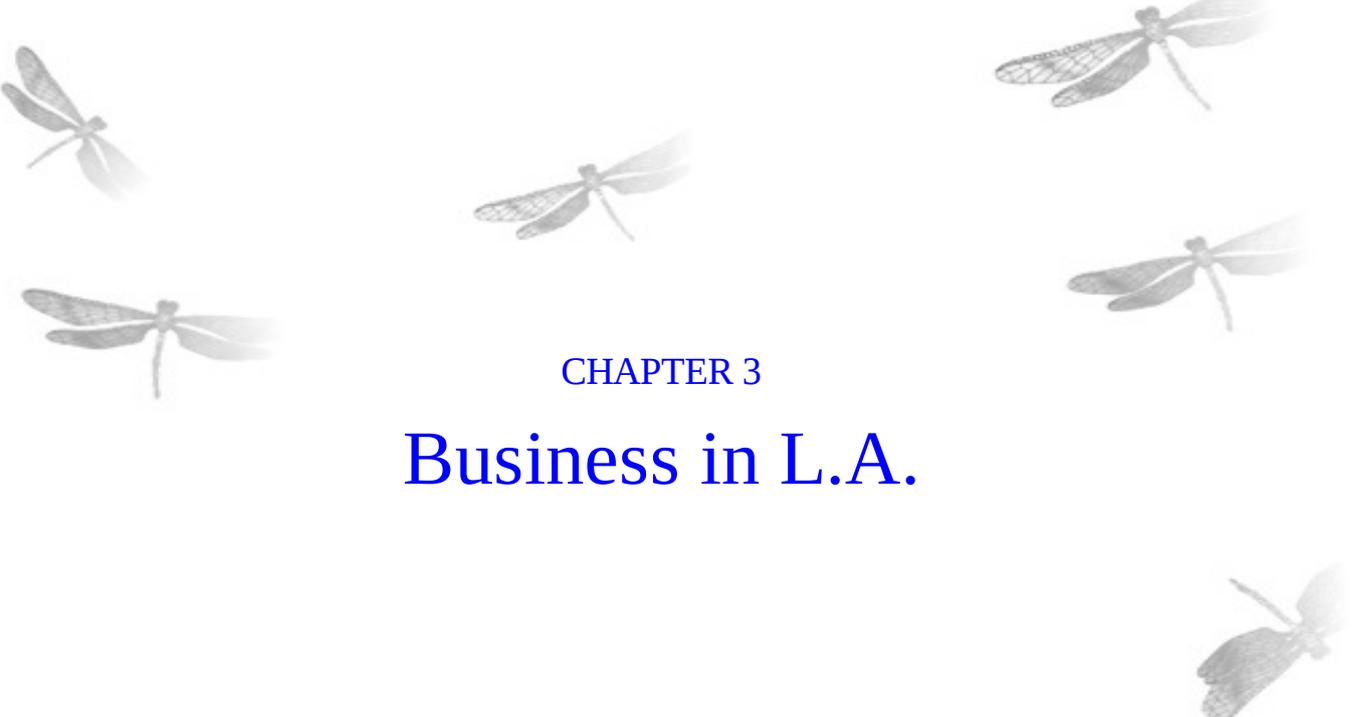
“There’s always hoping,” Mya called after him. Before he closed the driver’s-side door she added, “Text me, if you’re coming tonight,” and he said, “Okay,” and waved good-bye to her. Mya leaned against the wooden support beam on the porch and pulled her long hair over her bare breasts to shield them. Luke drove down the driveway with a thick cloud of Virginia red dust trailing behind his truck. Mya bent down and searched for buttercup flowers dotting the summer grass, and she wished she could rest there. But she couldn’t, no matter how much her body insisted.

If she was going to fix her mistake, then Mya needed this time alone in her workshop with the muspod she and Luke had collected at the waterfalls. Zoe’s poor decision to cross industries jeopardized the business, but Mya had no intention of letting anything happen to Lenore Incorporated. The family business was Mya’s only future. Without some convincing, her mother would never allow Mya to alter Great-Grandmother Serena’s perfume formula to solve this problem, but the formula had to be changed, just this once, for this very special case. Willow would have no choice once she returned from her meeting with Zoe in L.A. Willow wasn’t well, no matter how much she tried to cover it up. Mya respected her mother’s privacy, but for the sake of the business, Willow needed to pass her title over to Mya soon, and then Mya could deal with the consequences alone.

Mya went back inside and turned to close the front door. Luke’s cloud of dust dissipated, and in the green field that sloped down into a valley full of hay barrels, a thousand or more cobalt-blue dragonflies hovered like a standing army. With her blond hair rolling down to the small of her back, Mya pushed the door open again and ran down the steps, across the dirt driveway, and into the middle of the field. Lucia’s dragonflies were amassed in a greater number than Mya had ever seen, and they parted as she approached. Mya grew nervous, and she looked up into heavy cumulus clouds, like giant peaks of meringue. In the center of a large billowing cloud, she saw her sister’s face, so similar to Mya’s with the high cheekbones and tiny chin and wide-set eyes. But it was most certainly Lucia.

Just as quickly as the image had arrived, the cloud broke in half, with the summer sun piercing through to Mya. She closed her eyes to feel the heat on her entire body. Why had the dragonflies returned? Lucia didn’t have a place here anymore; there was no way she’d come home, not now, not after so many years away. But the dragonflies surrounded Mya until she felt cocooned, and Mya swatted at them and screamed, “Back off!” They spun all around her like a dust storm, and then they lifted upward and escaped into the surrounding trees.

Mya’s stomach cramped. The dragonflies always favored Lucia. They had acted as an entourage for her during their games in the forest. They had guided Lucia to find Mya’s hiding spots. The old Lucia had become, the less and less she had talked to Mya and their mother. If she wasn’t with her boyfriend Ben, then Lucia was planning for the day she’d leave for New York City. The dragonflies had become the only way to know that Lucia was nearby. They hadn’t congregated like this since she’d left. Mya had stayed in Quartz Hollow with her mother and devoted all these years to ensure she’d be the next president of Lenore Incorporated. She looked to the sky with its unmoving clouds and said, “Do not come home.”

The page is decorated with several faint, grey dragonfly illustrations. There are five dragonflies in the upper half of the page, and one larger dragonfly in the lower right corner. The dragonflies are scattered across the page, some near the top and some near the bottom.

CHAPTER 3

Business in L.A.

A FIT YOUNG MAN stood up, his heavily gelled hair like fondant icing. He held a disc remote contraption between his palms in a prayer position and said, “I want to thank Ms. Lenore for making the long trip out here. It’s such a rare pleasure to see you.”

How many times had Willow accepted these platitudes? As many times as she had said, “Thank you, it’s good to be here.” Normally she’d add a name. She should have known his name. If he was present, he was important. But he sat down before Willow could recall who he was. Someone had hit the “flush” button in her brain; that’s how it felt. She sent up a small plea to the language gods not to let her forget any words in this negotiation—*I need a free pass, just for today.*

The track lighting turned on by its own volition. The actresses removed their shawls and Jackie’s sunglasses, Jennifer passing her items to an assistant and Zoe tossing hers in a lump on the table. Willow, in her signature pencil skirt, Jennifer Katz sat down first, beside Willow, and ran her long, elegant fingers through her much-coveted real hair—no platinum extensions for her. Zoe Bennett’s red hair fell over one smoky eye, and then she tossed her head and both eyes were visible. Their entourage stood behind them and tapped away at the devices in their hands, arms tucked close to their chests like a T. rex’s.

Zoe’s manager held out her seat for her. After she sat down, she crossed her long legs and said, “You must think taking me on was a mistake, but cutting me off can’t be the solution.”

Jennifer said, “My manager thinks—”

Zoe said, “I think they all should go.”

“Fine,” Jennifer said, and waved a hand at her people, as did Zoe. Willow nodded to her driver and the man who had opened the meeting, then rested her laced fingers in her lap and tried to appear unconcerned about why they needed to be alone.

Once the door closed behind their entourage, Jennifer leaned onto the table and said, “We could flip a coin; the winner pays the other to fake her death.”

Zoe gave an insincere smile, her mouth like a copperhead snake’s, and said, “But you’re so ol-

Why flip?"

Willow said, "Cool it." She'd said the same to her daughters when they were teenagers and fought like bobcats.

Jennifer no longer shared her Oscar-winning smile with Zoe. "I have other appointments today," Jennifer said, "and I want this resolved. *Arrow Heights* should've been my script; that was my second Oscar. I need to know what you'll do for me, Willow."

"For us," Zoe said, and straightened her back, her heavy cleavage nearly pouring out on the table, her black bra visible beneath the ripped and diamond-studded tank top that dropped off one petal shoulder. She leaned forward, and her breasts caved and slumped against her forearm. Time would permanently do that to both of those fantasized-about mounds. Maybe Willow could find some way to get Zoe on a show like *Fear X: Celebrity Edition*, and she'd be forced to eat buffalo gonads with hot chocolate syrup. And Willow could keep Jennifer where she deserved to be. At the top of Hollywood.

Willow had chosen Jennifer fifteen years ago, when she was just a teenager and struggling for gigs with Disney. She'd been brought to Willow's attention at a time when Willow needed her passion for the entertainment portion of their business to be reignited. Everyone had underestimated Jennifer's energy, her cobalt-blue eyes and long blond hair. Willow knew that with a small boost from the perfume, her talents would flourish. She'd come to think of Jennifer as another daughter and felt more invested in her career than in those of her other clients, Zoe especially. In the short time Zoe had had access to the perfume (about three years, wasn't that right?) she had landed bigger roles than Jennifer had booked at the same age. No one should have been competing with Jennifer for the best roles in Hollywood, like this highly anticipated film by director Nick Schol. They both knew that Jennifer might not have the chance to land another role like this one. She'd transition into directing and producing and do beautifully, but Willow wanted this script for her.

But then Schol had offered the role to Zoe and refused to explain why. Willow didn't need a direct answer from him, however. She knew he wasn't sleeping with her. Zoe was an energetic new talent who used too much of the Lenore family perfume too quickly. What director could resist her? Altogether, this situation had become a migraine.

Willow said, "What I want is for Zoe to go back to the music industry and give up this role for Jennifer. In fact, this wouldn't be a problem at all if you'd stayed in pop and honored your word." The last bit made Willow sound antique, but she didn't care anymore. It was how she felt.

Zoe tapped her cheek with her red fingernails and said, "My word is not my contract. Look, I can help that Hollywood wanted me more. And I never agreed to stay in music. Just to start there. And I *did* honor that. Come on, Ms. Lenore, you're a businesswoman. This you can understand. Hollywood paid me for work I prefer."

"So then you flew all this way for nothing?" Jennifer said.

"No," Willow said, rather annoyed now. "I came all this way because you two refused a conference call."

Jennifer wrapped her arms around herself and said, "But you came with no real solution? You know Zoe won't quit. I know I'm right for this role and Zoe knows it too, she won't admit it but she knows it, and Schol picked her anyway. It's like the perfume's losing its power for me. Or maybe I'm just too old. I'm so sick of it, the same scent year after year. I don't even want the perfume anymore but—"

“Good,” Zoe said. “Then it’s settled.”

“No,” Jennifer said. “Stop being such a bitch, Zoe.” Her perfume scent changed to musk suddenly that Willow knew she was frightened.

Zoe said, “Mya has a solution.”

“What?” Willow said, her throat suddenly dry.

“She asked me not to say anything, but you came all the way here and haven’t mentioned it yet and I think we should discuss it,” Zoe said, and now she held all the power in the room.

Willow was stunned and wished, as she sometimes did, that she could spank Mya again. How could she offer a solution to a client and not consult Willow? If Mya had all the solutions, she should have been the one in this seat, but instead Mya chose to go hunting for morel mushrooms with her new boyfriend in the middle of the night. That’s what a teenager does to skirt an obligation like this one. Not a thirty-six-year-old woman and not the only woman poised to take over Lenore Incorporated. And this mess was Mya’s fault in the first place. She didn’t add the clause to Zoe’s contract to restrict her to the music industry. Though if what her daughter said was true, she’d left the contract for Willow to review on her desk and Willow had simply forgotten to check it.

Zoe pulled her long auburn hair over one shoulder and said, “Mya will make variants of the perfume’s formula just for Jennifer and just for me, and I quote, ‘to differentiate our strengths.’ ”

“And what are those exactly?” Jennifer said.

“Well, sensuality, obviously, for me. For you I didn’t ask. Probably sweetness or something,” Zoe said.

Jennifer’s nose lifted like she smelled burned hair. Willow said, “Mya can’t make decisions without my approval.” She rested her right palm on the table, the wrinkles in her hands like pleats in a skirt compared to Jennifer’s and Zoe’s smooth skin.

“Then you’ll lose us as clients and I’ll expose your other clients and your entire business,” Zoe said.

Willow looked over at Jennifer, who refused to make eye contact.

“Don’t threaten me,” Willow said.

Zoe leaned away from the table and braced her hands on the edge like it might break. She said, “My career’s still young, so I don’t care if I lose your perfume, just as long as no one else uses it.”

“She’s already contacted a few people,” Jennifer finally said.

“Like who?” Willow said.

Zoe laughed and cast her head back to look at the ceiling, and then she stretched her thin little arms above her head and hugged them together.

Jennifer said, “Important people, just trust me on that. And she’s threatening to expose us all, and you.”

Willow pointed at Zoe and said, “The only solution I’m entertaining is cutting you off. That bright skin of yours will lose its glow within a few days. The ease with which you connect to a script and memorize lines will disappear as quickly as your wrinkles will start to appear, I promise you that. Give it a week, two at the most, and your career will be finished.”

Zoe laughed again and said, “Just imagine the headlines if I go public, Ms. Lenore. Jennifer Kat Hollywood’s golden girl: a fraud, addicted to a substance for her success. And she’ll just be the first you’ll drown in PR shit. I’m young. I’ll play the naïve damsel. I’ve got plenty of time to remake m

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