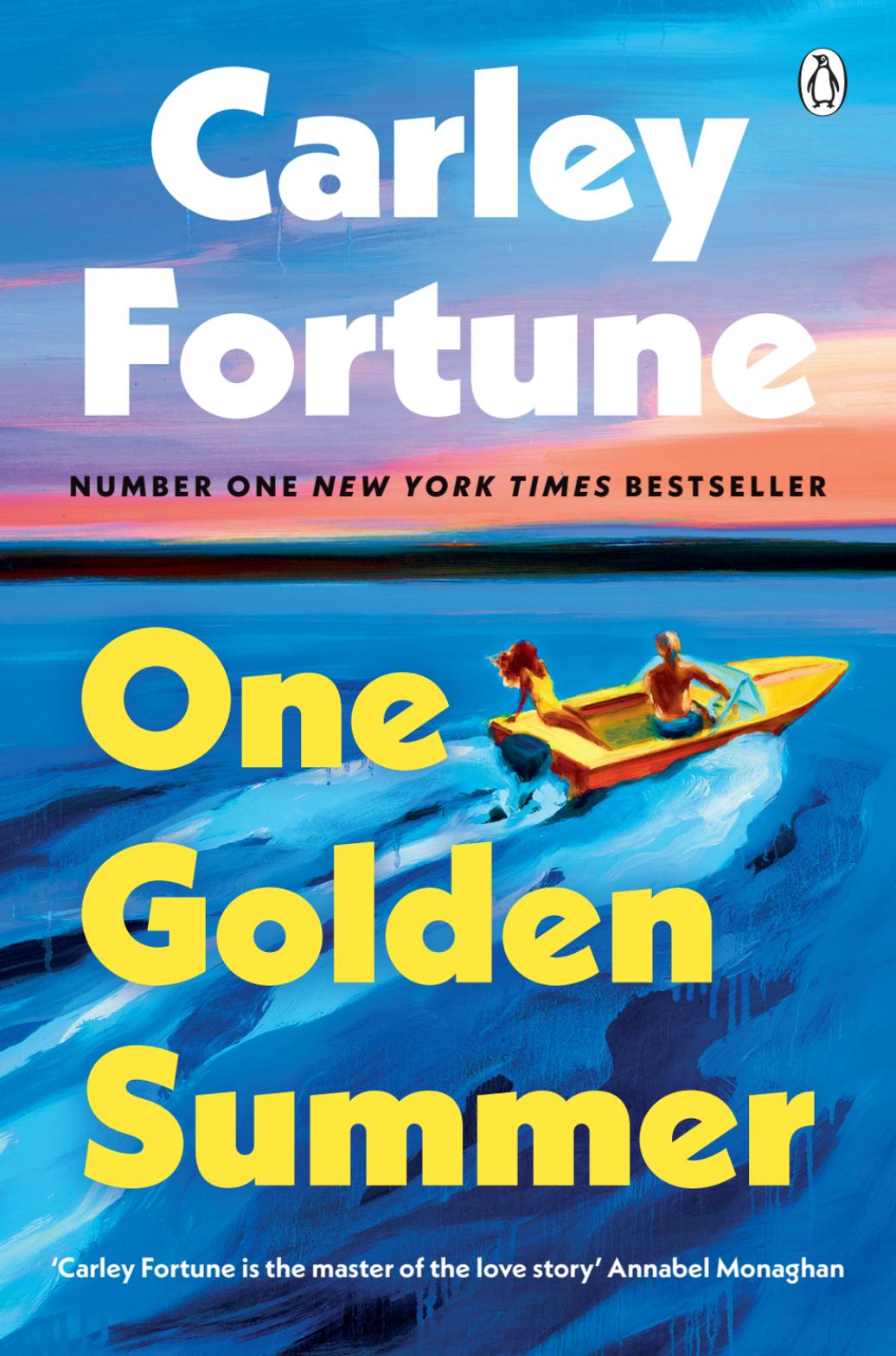




Carley Fortune

NUMBER ONE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

The background of the cover is a painting of a sunset over a body of water. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow near the horizon. The water is a vibrant blue with white, brushstreak-like waves. In the center, a yellow motorboat is moving across the water, leaving a white wake. A woman with long red hair, wearing a yellow swimsuit, is sitting on the left side of the boat. A man with short hair, wearing a blue swimsuit, is sitting on the right side, holding the steering wheel. The overall style is painterly and evocative of a summer scene.

One Golden Summer

'Carley Fortune is the master of the love story' Annabel Monaghan

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To the lake, to the hills, to the sky

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ONE
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PROLOGUE

A great photograph makes you think you know the subject, even if you've never met. A great photo reaches out and pulls you inside the moment, so you can feel, smell, and taste it. And this, by all accounts, is a great photo.

I stare at it, and just like that, I'm seventeen.

I hear them across the bay. It's the end of summer, and those three voices are as familiar to me as the weight of the camera between my hands. The older boy is calling out to the other two—his brother and the girl, who lie on the floating raft in their bathing suits, sunny-side up.

I've been at the cottage since the end of June, watching them swim and flirt and fly around the lake in their yellow speedboat. Each of them is beautiful. So sun-kissed and free.

They climb into the boat. The oldest drives. His brother and the girl sit in the front. I stand on the edge of the dock, adjusting the aperture.

It happens in the shortest blink of time.

I hear the boat. Their laughter over the engine. I look up to see them heading toward me. I bury myself behind the lens. They enter the frame.

Click.

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FRIDAY, JUNE 13

They are five of the most stunning women I've ever seen. It has nothing to do with the lighting or how much time they've spent in hair and makeup. It's the genuine smiles on their faces. The fan is blowing, the music is loud, and the photo editor *oobs* as she watches the images load onto my laptop screen. I don't need a glimpse to know they're spectacular. I can feel it with every press of the shutter.

I'll crash later, alone in my empty condo, but right now I'm in my element. When I'm behind a lens, I can draw out a sly grin or a slight tilt of the chin. I'm in command. It's one of the reasons I've been working so much lately. I *need* this feeling. The buzz of a perfectly humming set is my high.

The youngest woman is in her twenties, the eldest in her seventies, and none of them are professional models. It took time to earn their trust when they arrived at my studio. If anyone understands how nerve-racking it can feel to have your photo taken, it's me. Now, the women dance and pose in bathing suits without a shred of self-consciousness. Their stretch marks, wrinkles, and

cellulite are on display, emblems of their lives given due reverence in each frame.

“It’s going to be impossible to make selects,” Willa, the photo editor, says once we wrap. We’re standing shoulder to shoulder, scrolling through the images on my computer. The best will run in *Swish*, a weekly style magazine that debuted this spring. “There are so many great shots, Alice.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I say, beaming. I’ve never worked with Willa before, and I want to wow her. *Swish* is distributed in the country’s largest paper, and it’s all my industry friends can talk about. This is my first gig for the magazine, and I want to nail it. Magazine work doesn’t pay very well, but it’s far more creative than what I get to do with my commercial clients—it’s also increasingly rare.

I pause on a shot of Monica, a new mom who was the most nervous of the group. Her head is thrown back and her arms are flung out. It’s a moment of pure joy.

“We have two weeks for you to file,” Willa says.

“No problem.” This will be a low-touch edit. The assignment brief described it as a “refreshingly real” swimwear shoot with “regular people” showcasing the looks. It’s another reason I was excited about the job: no aggressive photoshopping. “I’ll just fix the flyaways and blemishes. It’ll be fast.”

“Well, you might have to do a little more than that.” Willa lowers her voice. “I want to keep it authentic, but let’s say the lumps and bumps are more like a *suggestion* of cellulite. I’m sure you can work your magic.”

My smile vanishes. I’ve collected enough euphemisms for digitally altering the female body to fill a thesaurus. I’ve been told to make women look more flattering, appealing, engaging, enticing, attractive, and fat-out more fuckable. But I’ve never been asked to *suggest* cellulite.

“I thought you wanted this to be *refreshingly* real,” I say calmly, like I’m not ready to throw my camera at the wall.

“I mean, yes, *absolutely*.” Willa goes on. “It’s great having different body types represented, but let’s just clean it all up.”

I don’t bat an eye behind my tortoiseshell glasses. On the surface, I’m the picture of polished professionalism. I’ve quieted my auburn curls into a sleek ponytail. My makeup is minimal but effective. There isn’t a single chip in my ruby red nail polish. But underneath, I’m crumbling.

It’s not the first time I’ve been asked to do something I disagree with. Being a freelance photographer means I sometimes need to bend, compromise, and push my beliefs or vision to the side to please clients. It just happens more often than I’d like at this stage in my career.

“It’s your call,” I tell Willa, heart sinking. “It’s your magazine.”

I’m not a combative person, but even if I were, I’m too worn down to argue. It takes a lot of energy to be *on* all day, and I’ve been on for so long, I suspect my off button is broken.

And it’s not just me who’s noticed. I met Elyse, my brilliant instructor turned mentor and now friend, for coffee last week, and she told me I looked like a ghost. I’d had the dream the night before—the one where I’m being chased—and I was even more drained than usual.

“You excel at capturing inner light,” she’d said. “But I worry you’ve lost your own. Get it back, Alice. I want to see you shine.” Elyse told me to slow down.

For the first time ever, I ignored her advice. Work is what’s kept me together these past six months. Or at least I thought so. But as soon as Willa leaves, exhaustion slams in. I sit on the floor of my studio, rubbing my fingertips against my temples. I’ve taken on so many assignments to keep busy, but I took this one for me. And it backfired.

What I need is a night off. Just one night where I don't curl up with my laptop and color correct until my eyes burn. A few solid hours in which I pretend deadlines don't exist, where I can forget about the group show in August, and the look of concern that flashed across Elyse's face when she saw me. I need an evening where I definitely, one hundred percent will *not* think about Trevor, and that night is tonight. I'm going out with my big sister.

Eventually I peel myself off the floor. I'm locking up when my phone vibrates with a string of texts. I know it's her before I check the messages. Heather almost exclusively sends texts in multiples.

PUT ON YOUR PARTY SHOES! I just scored us a table at Jaybird.

Wait, do you even own party shoes?

I'll buy you a pair on my way to pick you up.

I'm typing out a reply when another message lands. But this time it's not my sister.

2

It's a message to the Everly family group chat from my father.

Nan is in an ambulance.

My grandmother Nanette Everly—Nan to all, not just her grandchildren—has always been my biggest champion. I was a toddler when she identified my creative streak, and she nurtured it like one of her peony plants. When I was six, she took me to the Art Gallery of Ontario for drawing lessons. We sat among the Henry Moore sculptures, sketch pads on our laps, experimenting with shadows and shapes and lines. She taught me how to use a sewing machine when I was eleven. She gave me my first camera in high school. I've always tried to emulate her poise, the way she makes everyone around her feel seen. Nan's more practical than a road map and has a knack for making the best out of a bad situation. I admire her as much as I love her.

So when she falls in dance class and shatters her hip, drinks with my sister turn into a sleepover at Sunnybrook Hospital. As Nan undergoes an emergency hip replacement, I wipe my schedule clean so I can help her recover. I'm the best option. My father is in the middle of jury selection, and Heather has even less spare

time. She's a lawyer like Dad *and* a single parent. Our younger twin siblings, Luca and Lavinia, are . . . well, they're Luca and Lavinia. I love them endlessly, but they're twenty-four and still take being the babies of the family seriously.

The morning Nan's released from the hospital, Heather comes with me to help take her home.

"You girls have other things to do than dote on me," Nan says as we guide her into the house with her new walker. For an eighty-year-old who had surgery thirty-six hours ago, she looks good. She gets her short white hair set once a week, is always smartly dressed, and has stayed active. Her posture is immaculate. I find myself pulling my shoulders back whenever I'm in her presence, even now.

"Not at this moment," Heather says. "But I'm due in court this afternoon."

"I, on the other hand, will be at your beck and call," I tell her.

Nan frowns. "I hate to think of you stuck here with me, Alice. You should be out living your life."

"What life?" Heather mutters under her breath.

"I'm happy to stay here," I say, ignoring my sister. "You know I love this house."

Nan lives in Leaside, a leafy neighborhood in midtown Toronto. During those first hectic years after the twins were born, Heather and I slept at Nan and Grandpa's on the weekends more often than we did in our own beds. Our home was a few streets over, but I loved this house best. The plump peonies that line the walkway. The homemade paisley curtains over the leaded glass windows. The doorbell that tolls as if announcing a newlywed couple. You can hear its thunderous ring in every corner of the redbrick Georgian, but to me, it's the sound of calm and quiet. No screaming babies. No overwhelmed mother. A bedroom of my own.

“Let me do the stairs by myself,” Nan says sharply when Heather takes her elbow.

It’s not like Nan to be snippy, but I get it. She’s been living on her own since Grandpa died twenty years ago, and she guards her independence like a dragon. Plus, she was supposed to leave for an Alaskan cruise next week. I’d be prickly if I were in her shoes, too.

“Poor Nan,” I whisper as she navigates her walker over the threshold.

Heather shakes her head. “Poor you.”

“We’ll be fine.”

After a good night’s sleep, Nan will be back to her optimistic, high-spirited self.

But three days pass, and Nan grows even crankier. I’ve never seen her so low. On the morning the cruise sets sail without her on board, her silence is as brooding as the clouds that darken the western sky. She hasn’t even touched her crossword puzzle. When rain pelts the windowpane, I glance at her. Nan loves a good, “bracing” storm, but not a glimmer of interest brightens her face. I’m caught off guard by how old she looks. It sneaks up on me sometimes—that her hair is white and not gray anymore. And then I remember the peonies.

I run out of the house in my pajamas with a pair of scissors, but the flowers are already bent over, dozens of pink and white heads kissing the mulch, beads of water clinging to their ruffled petals. Under normal circumstances, Nan would be out here in her housecoat before the first drops fell—she prefers the flowers in a vase to seeing them droop like this. I snip quickly, but when I return to the house, my arms full of fragrant blossoms, wet hair plastered to my cheeks, she looks at me vacantly and says, “I didn’t realize it was raining.”

I need to fix this.



When Nan lies down for a nap after lunch, I sit in the same spot I used to as a kid: at the top of the staircase, staring at the wall of family photos opposite the banister. My niece's first step. Luca and Lavinia's high school graduation dinner. Nan and Grandpa at their best friends' cottage in Barry's Bay. They used to visit John and Joyce there every year. It's Nan's favorite place in the world. I spent just two months at the lake, but it left a mark on me, too.

I turned seventeen that summer. For my birthday, Nan gave me a camera—a very good SLR. I shot frame after frame, teaching myself, trying to get better. I put the best photos in an album that I gave to Nan on our last day at the cottage. I find it now on the basement shelves, and sit on the red carpet, legs crossed beneath me.

Even before I open the cover, it comes back to me. My first time away from home. My first taste of freedom. Two months of waking to sunlight bouncing off the lake and rippling on the ceiling. Diving off the dock, then swimming beneath the surface as far as I could. Barbecues on the deck. Permanently damp hair. Art projects in the boathouse. Red life jackets. Canoe trips. Picnics on the island. The Harlequins I'd sneak from Joyce's stash. Coconut sunscreen and watermelon slices and my terry cloth bathing suit cover-up. The kids across the bay. And their yellow speedboat.

I flip through photos of shorelines and treetops, wildflowers and rocks, the twins, their heads bobbing in the water, almost impossible to distinguish. There's one I took of myself in the bedroom mirror, my hair sopping wet. I thought it was clever: Alice through the looking glass.

Most are photographs of Nan. My original muse. Nan reading on a hammock, the twins tucked into her sides. Nan mend-

ing a rip in Lavinia's shorts, her glasses perched on the tip of her nose. Nan paddling a canoe, waving at me onshore with an incandescent smile.

On the very last page is the photo that started it all.

I slide it from its sleeve and study the faces of three teenagers in a yellow boat. From the moment I took it, I've been chasing this kind of perfection in an image. The emotion. The movement. The sense of timelessness. A whole summer of practice, and I got this shot on one of my last days at the lake. I still can't believe how well I captured them. Even now, I can smell the gasoline, hear their hollers across the water.

The older boy is at the steering wheel and the younger one stares at the girl, who's smiling into the wind. The light is gorgeous, but not because I've bent it to my will. There's a naivety to the image, a lack of artifice. It's been years since I've seen it, but for some reason, I still feel deeply connected to these three kids, preserved in never-ending summer.

The photo is the first chapter of my origin story, the beginning of my love affair with photography. It launched me on the path to becoming the person I am now.

I flip back to the picture of Nan in the canoe with her star-bright smile, and an inkling of an idea begins to take shape. A way to cure Nan's blues and get her out of the house. A change of scene. Fresh air. Endless skies. Glittering water.

A second trip to the lake.

Our return to Barry's Bay.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18

I find John Kalinski's number in Nan's address book. I haven't seen John since his wife's funeral more than a decade ago, but I remember both him and Joyce well. They were entwined in my grandparents' lives.

John sounds happy to hear from me. "Stay the whole summer if you want," he says when I ask about renting the cottage for a couple of weeks. He tells me he's been thinking about selling it for years—the place is empty.

The offer catches me off guard—both John's unexpected generosity and how appealing a two-month hiatus from my life sounds.

When I relay the conversation to Nan over afternoon tea, she doesn't react with the excitement I expect. Instead, she's silent for a long stretch of time.

"John assured me it was okay with him," I tell her. "He can't visit the cottage at all. He'd prefer if someone was staying there."

And then she smiles—*really* smiles—for the first time since her hip replacement.

I do the math. I check my bank account. I pore over my invoices and am surprised to find that I've already made more than I did all of last year. The silver lining of the breakup is that I've been relentlessly productive.

I think about my last conversation with Elyse.

You're even paler than usual, Alice. You look like a ghost. I'm worried about you.

I can afford to take a break. More importantly, maybe I can't afford not to.

Everything falls into place after I call John and tell him that yes, we'd love to stay at the cottage until the end of August.

I manage to postpone many of my assignments and help find other photographers to cover the rest. I track down a physiotherapist in Barry's Bay who can see Nan, and her post-surgery checkup goes well. John gives me the name and number of the guy who's looking after the cottage for the summer—he has a spare set of keys.

"If you need a hand making the cottage more comfortable for Nan, I'm sure he'd be able to help," John tells me.

As I dial the number, I find myself sinking back into memories of Barry's Bay. Saffron sunsets. Fireflies twinkling in the dusk. The heat of the dock's sunbaked wooden planks underfoot. A red-roofed cabin shaded by evergreen boughs.

The daydream ends with a record scratch when a man's voice booms through the line.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Um . . ."

There's more shouting, now muffled. I check my screen to make sure I've dialed the right number, and yes.

"Excuse me? Hello?"

I'm about to hang up when the voice says to me, "This is Charlie Florek."

"Charlie, hi. This is Alice Everly calling."

I hear the metallic *thwack* of metal on metal. A hammer, maybe.

"One sec," Charlie says, annoyed, and then: "For the last time, Sam, will you kindly fuck off? You're going to ruin it."

I hear a disgruntled reply, and then Charlie says to me, "Sorry, who is this?"

"Alice Everly. I'm staying at John Kalinski's cottage this summer." I try to talk over the ruckus in the background. It sounds like he's on a construction site. "Is this a bad time?"

There's a long pause, raised male voices, and then the noise stops.

"No, I'm good. Apologies for that." Charlie clears his throat. "Hi. Alice, right?" It's a nice voice. Deep with a scrape of sandpaper over his *r*'s.

"Right."

A thing about me: I once broke my wrist in ninth-grade gym class and spent twenty-four hours gritting my teeth against the pain until I finally told my mom I *might* need to see a doctor. I don't like asking for help, or being an inconvenience, or wasting anyone's time. This phone call incorporates all three—Charlie is clearly in the middle of something.

So I rush forward, getting it over with. "John said you might be able to help me out. I have a list of things I need to do at the cottage for my grandmother. She's just had her hip replaced, and I—"

Charlie cuts me off. "How are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"*How are you?*" says Charlie, sounding amused, "is typically what you ask someone after *Hello*."

"I'm fine, thank you," I say, slightly thrown. "Anyway, my grandmother—"

Charlie interrupts me a second time. “I’m good, Alice. Thanks for asking.”

“Right.” My face heats. I can’t remember the last time I was chided. “That’s good. That you’re good. We’re both good.”

Another thing about me: When I’m not holding my camera, I can find it hard to speak up. In my loud, chaotic family, with strangers, with pushy art directors . . . It’s one of the reasons why I love shooting so much—it’s the only time I feel like a certified badass.

I clear my throat, trying to get back on track. “As I was saying, there are a few things I need to have done at the cottage before we arrive, and I was hoping you or someone you know could help. I have a list.” I fetch my notebook and begin reading off the bullet points. “Grab bars, moving furniture, moving out the rugs—”

“Alice.” Charlie interrupts me yet again.

I inhale, annoyance growing. “Yes?”

“Take a breath. I can feel your anxiety all the way in Barry’s Bay.”

“I’m trying to be conscious of your time,” I say, channeling my most professional, together self. The Alice I am behind the camera. “I simply want to ensure everything is suitable for when I arrive with my grandmother. If you’re unable to assist me, that’s quite all right. But perhaps you know someone who can.”

A low chuckle fills my ear. “Don’t worry. I’m *quite* happy to *assist*. John gave me a heads-up about your grandma’s surgery. I’ll take care of everything. Text me that list of yours, and I’ll *ensure* everything is *suitable*.”

I blink. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, but I can hear him smiling. No, not smiling. *Smirking*. Just get yourself up here, Alice. Something tells me you need some time at the lake more than I do.”

The hammering resumes in the background, and Charlie curses.

“See you soon, City Girl.”

And then he’s gone.

The evening before Nan and I leave, I go back to my condo to pack. When the elevator opens at my floor, I find the cardboard box I left in the hallway still sitting there. Trevor keeps making plans to pick up his stuff and then canceling. The remains of a four-year relationship come down to a copy of *The Minimalist Entrepreneur*, wireless headphones, and a stray dress sock. I nudge the box inside with my foot, though I’d rather shove it down the garbage chute.

Not that it would help me forget. Every corner of this place smacks of Trevor. When he moved in, we appointed it in whites and beiges, marble and glass, everything sleek and minimal. It never used to feel so hollow—it used to feel like home. Now everything is a reminder of how much I conceded to him. The pristine white sofa we bought one Sunday after brunch—I wanted something soft and smooshy, but Trevor loved its clean lines. The Carrara tulip dining table with the uncomfortable chairs he picked out. It’s where I was sitting when he broke up with me. He’d made dinner that night. It was six months ago, and I can still smell the coq au vin—I’ll never eat it again.

I don’t know how to make you happy, Alice. Do you?

I’ve just zipped my suitcase when the buzzer trills. Heather arrives in a cloud of strong perfume and carrying a suspicious orange paper bag that she shoves at me.

“For you.”

Heather calls shopping her unguilty pleasure, and she’s al-

ways buying me clothes. The back of my closet is stuffed with bandage dresses and low-cut blouses, courtesy of my big sister.

I peer inside the bag, pushing aside the tissue paper to reveal emerald silk. “What is this?”

“Don’t look so disgusted. It’s a dress.”

I pull it out and raise a brow. “It’s a *tiny* dress.”

“Minuscule.” Heather grins, and it’s like a camera flash. My sister has always been beautiful, but her smile is so radiant it’s almost startling. “Green’s your color, Turtle, and if you don’t put it in your suitcase, I will.”

One of the ways I revolt against my red hair is to *never* wear green. Most of my clothes are neutral, with a few hints of blue. A rare splash of yellow. I set the bag on the counter, promising nothing.

Heather and I have identical hazel eyes, but our similarities stop there. Heather’s an unrepentant show-off; I prefer going unnoticed. She has our dad’s height, confidence, and coffee-brown hair, which she wears in a sharp-angled bob—part of her courtroom intimidation tactics. I get my library-soft voice and auburn curls from our mom. Heather’s the rebel; I’m the good girl. She’s impulsive; I’m a planner. And, unlike me, she’s completely uninhibited.

Both she and Dad are showboats. Luca and Lavinia are the same. At the last family get-together, my baby brother stripped off his shirt at the table to display a tattoo of a lion, a turtle, a flamingo, and a monkey across his chest, and Lavinia handed out invitations to her Muppets-themed burlesque.

I always thought I took after our levelheaded mom. But in December, when the ink had barely dried on the divorce papers, she moved across the country to British Columbia. We’d grown up hearing stories about the season she spent picking and packing

cherries in the Okanagan Valley in the late eighties. The old VW van. A friend named Cinnamon. Camping in the fields. That version of Mom seemed as far-fetched as bedtime fairy tales. That is, until she announced she'd reconnected with Cinnamon and was going to work at a biodynamic vineyard in Kelowna. Our homemaker, homebody mother now lives two thousand miles away, pouring glasses of pinot noir and viognier in a tasting room overlooking Okanagan Lake.

"How's my niece?" I ask my sister.

Heather got married young. Became pregnant young. Got divorced young, too. I lived with her for a couple of years after the split, when my niece was just a baby. Heather was determined to tackle both law school and a newborn. Bennett is thirteen now.

"Don't use my daughter as a distraction technique," she says, marching to my bedroom with the shopping bag. I hear her open my suitcase. "I'll need photo evidence of you wearing it," she calls.

I scowl at her when she returns.

"What? You'll look hot in that dress."

"Nan will be so appreciative."

Heather squeezes my waist, which is currently covered by a white-and-blue-striped nightshirt, and I swat her hands away.

"What are you doing?"

"Just checking to make sure there's a body under all that cotton. I'd forgotten."

"Ha. Ha."

A line appears between her dark brows. "I'm serious. Don't let yourself disappear just because Trevor's gone."

I flinch at my ex's name, then silently berate myself for being fragile. I wonder if it would be easier if he hadn't moved on so quickly.

Heather's face softens. "Show that dress a good time, Ali. You both deserve it."

“We’ll see.”

She looks at me like I’m hopeless, then kisses my cheek. “I’ve got to go. Bennett’s at a friend’s tonight, and I’m meeting someone.”

“Which one?”

Heather’s too busy to date, but she has a short roster of friends with benefits.

“He’s new. Just in the city for a night.”

“Ah.”

It’s another way Heather and I differ: I’ve never slept with someone I don’t love. I can’t fathom having a one-night stand. But since I have no intention of throwing myself into another relationship for a long time, if ever, I may need to rethink my strategy.

“That sounded like a very judgy *ab*,” Heather says.

“No judgment. Only reasonable sisterly concern. Be careful, okay?”

“Always.” Heather wraps her arms around me, guaranteeing I’ll smell like vetiver for the rest of the night. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“In just a few weeks.” She’s bringing Bennett to the cottage to spend a week with Nan and me. I can’t wait. Three generations of Everly women under one roof is my idea of heaven.

“And you’re coming back to the city for the show, right?” she asks.

I wince.

Elyse is about to open a gallery on Davenport, and *In (Her) Camera* is her first exhibition—it’s also the first major show I’ve been asked to participate in. It was a pinch-me moment: my former photography instructor, a woman I worship, wanting to represent me. Then she told me which photo she wanted to display, and I felt ill. But how could I say no when everyone knows that

Elyse Cho has impeccable taste? It's been many years since she was my teacher, but I have yet to find equal footing in our friendship. I still see her as my superior in all ways.

"We'll see," I tell Heather. "I'm not sure I'll be able to swing it."

A perk of heading north for the summer is that I have a good reason to avoid the opening night party.

"Turtle," Heather says. "You *have* to come back."

"Sure," I say, ushering her to the door. "Love you, Lion."

"Love you more."

When she's gone, I open the photos from the swimwear shoot on my laptop. They're due tomorrow, and I've already edited them. Twice. In one version, the women have been "smoothed" the way Willa wants. In the other, I've removed a few pimples and tidied the flyaways, but I haven't touched the cellulite.

I love photography. I've been shooting professionally for more than ten years, and I feel lucky to earn a living this way. But I thought if I proved myself, I'd reach the point where I'd be working to achieve my own vision, not someone else's. That's why I took this assignment. Like most magazines, *Swish* doesn't have the big budgets that come with ad campaigns—Willa promised they make up for it by giving contributors more creative runway.

I think about what Elyse would do. She understands the realities of collaborating with photo editors, but she *respects* artistic vision. I sigh and shut my laptop. I still have one more day to decide which photos I'm going to send.

My phone vibrates with a text.

Charlie: Everything's ready for you, City Girl. Keys are in the outhouse.

City Girl? I may not be prepared to take a stand with my work, but I can do something about *that*.

Me: Thank you.

Me: But for the record, my name is Alice Everly.

Charlie: Noted. I look forward to meeting you, Alice Everly.

4

FRIDAY, JUNE 27 FIRST DAY AT THE LAKE

It's the last Friday in June, and Southern Ontario is fleeing to the lakes. Traffic is heavy. It's going to take us well over four hours to get from Toronto to Barry's Bay, a blink-and-you-miss-it town on the north end of Kamaniskeg Lake.

Nan has been quiet since I turned off the 401 and began heading north. With the city, suburbs, and exurbs behind us, her attention is fixed on the view outside. First fields and farmland. Now forests and fresh water. We drive over the Burleigh Falls bridge, and she sighs at the sight of the rapids. We're on a single-lane highway, and traffic is almost at a standstill, so I peel my eyes from the road and take in the cascading white water.

"It's funny how little has changed," Nan murmurs.

She's dressed, as always, in a crisp white collared shirt and trousers, a polite string of pearls adorning her neck, and rose pink Chanel lipstick. Everything about her appears precise, almost stiff, a striking opposition to her playful personality. But my life-loving Nan is still not herself. I get the sense that she's

not here with me but rather lost in past trips to the cottage. It's been a decade since her last visit.

My timer goes off. I took notes at Nan's last doctor's appointment. I've also read an entire internet's worth of postsurgical-care articles. Bed exercises. Short walks. Icing. She isn't supposed to sit for long stretches, so I'm pulling over every hour so she can move around.

"I need to find a spot where we can stop for a bit. Can you do those calf squeezes the physiotherapist showed you until I do?"

I feel her blue eyes on me. "You've got me in these compression socks already. I'm fine, Alice. I'm not going to die of a blood clot in the next ten minutes."

Not on my watch, she won't. "Please just do the calf squeezes, Nan."

She lowers her glasses. "You're not relaxing."

"I am. I'm very relaxed." In truth, I've been up since five, checking and rechecking my packing list.

Nan hums and then turns her head, gazing out the window once more.

We're squarely in cottage country now. Billboards advertise live bait and tackle, campgrounds and cabin rentals, marinas and river rafting. Yellow signs warn drivers of deer and turtle crossings.

We stop at the Kawartha Dairy in Bancroft for ice cream cones. She has orange-pineapple, and I get Bordeaux cherry, and we eat them in the car as we embark on the last leg of the journey. The highway runs through sharp granite rock faces, and rivers and marshes glint under the early summer sun. The farther north we go, the thicker the woods and the lighter the traffic, but we're at the tail end of vehicles. Some pull boats. Others have kayaks or canoes strapped to the roof. These hours stuck in a car are a rite for cottagers—the pilgrimage from city to lake, a ritual passed

from one generation to another, along with a love of fresh air and big skies, and a tolerance for jumping into chilly water.

My family didn't partake in the custom. The summer Nan brought Luca, Lavinia, and me to the lake sixteen years ago was my first taste of life outside of Toronto. I savored every drop. John and Joyce were traveling that year. Dad was tackling one case or another, and my grandmother wanted to give my parents a break. Heather refused to leave the city, so Nan took the twins and me with her to Barry's Bay. I remember the town being small—a world away from the dense neighborhood where we lived.

"There it is," she says as we round the edge of a cliff. "The big end of Kamanisseg Lake. We're almost there."

I gasp at the massive expanse of blue and the small islands dotting its surface.

As we approach Barry's Bay, water shines on one side of my car; the bustling Pine Grove Motel stands at the other. Ten minutes later, we're on Bare Rock Lane, a bumpy stretch of road surrounded by dense forest. Slices of lake flicker between branch and bush out the window. There's a KALINSKI sign nailed to a maple at the end of the driveway, a dirt path that leads to a dark brown log cabin.

Nan sighs when it comes into view. It's a classic cottage, built in the twenties, set on a wooded hill over Kamanisseg. It has a stone chimney and a merry red tin roof with matching shutters. The window boxes are planted with poppy-colored impatiens. It looks like the kind of place where only good things happen. I park next to a neatly stacked row of firewood.

"Would you like me to help you out?" I ask Nan, noticing her hands are folded tight in her lap.

She shakes her head, her eyes not leaving the cottage. "I think I'll just sit here while you find the keys."

I climb out of the car and breathe it all in. Sun on cedar. Moss on rock. The unpolluted freshness of country air. The sounds of lake life. Waves lapping against the shore. A chain saw in the distance. A chipmunk scampering through a patch of wild strawberries.

Twigs and dry pine needles crunch under my feet as I walk to the rear of the house, looking for the outhouse, where Charlie said I'd find the key. Seeing no sign of it, I make my way around the other side of the cottage. I'm greeted with a view of the lake. It's an overwhelmingly large pool of clear water, so spectacular I stop to marvel for a moment. But I don't see any sort of shed.

I return to the car. "Any idea where the outhouse is?"

Nan frowns. "I didn't think there was one—not that I can remember, anyway."

I circle the building and still can't find it. "Crap," I say to the blue jay observing me from the limbs of a birch. "Crap," I say to the spruce and maple.

I pull my phone from my pocket and call Charlie. He answers on the first ring.

"Hello, Alice Everly," he says, drawing my name out slowly, roughing up the *r* in Everly. It sends a pleasant zing down my spine.

"Charlie, hi. We just got to the cottage, but I can't seem to find the outhouse."

"I'm good, Alice. How are you?"

"Magnificent," I say flatly. What's with this guy? "And you?"

"Better now that I've heard from you."

I roll my eyes.

"Where are you right now?" he asks.

"Beside the woodpile."

"And what are you wearing?"

My cheeks flash hot with anger. "Are you serious?"

He chuckles. “Not usually. Though in this case, I’m asking about your footwear. The trail to the outhouse is pretty overgrown.”

I glance down at my sandals. “I’ll be fine.”

“Walk to the back door—the one facing the bush.”

I do as Charlie says. “All right.”

“Look up the hill.”

The slope is covered in brambles and leggy saplings. Through the thicket, I spot a small wooden shed with a thatched roof just a few meters away. No wonder I couldn’t see it—it’s practically camouflaged. It probably hasn’t been used in half a century.

“You could have picked an easier spot for the key,” I say.

“There have been a couple of break-ins around the lake—kids looking for booze, probably. I didn’t want to leave the key under the mat. But if you need assistance, I can be there in five.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I say.

“Your call. See you soon, Alice Everly.”

“What do you mean by *soon*?” I ask, but he’s hung up.

I stare at the outhouse, hands on my hips. Despite what Charlie thinks, I’m not the kind of city person who can’t cope without a doorman and a Starbucks within a one-block radius. I pride myself on being self-sufficient. A problem solver—never the problem. The friend you’d call if you needed help moving or fashioning a seahorse piñata for your niece’s sixth birthday. I’m *that* friend. Competent. Reliable. And I can cope with anything, including being dumped by the man I thought I’d marry. Including his getting engaged two months after that. And I can certainly fetch a key from a shed, even one that looks like a prop in a horror movie.

So I climb the hill. The trail isn’t overgrown; it’s nonexistent. I push aside branches, ignoring the sting of something scratch-

ing my shins. There's a wood latch on the outhouse door, and when I turn it, it swings open, almost knocking me to the ground.

It's so dark inside all I can make out is a white plastic toilet seat set on a raised platform. I squint into the black, and then I see a magazine rack fixed to the wall and a stack of old issues of *Cottage Life* on the ledge beneath. I feel around until my fingers hit a small piece of metal. But then I hear something behind me. I look up, and four sets of beady eyes stare back at me. Racoons.

If there's one thing a Torontonionian knows about wildlife, it's to never get in the way of a mama raccoon and her babies. The big one begins making a low growling noise and I spin on my heel, losing my balance and falling out the door. With an *oof*, I land on a rock.

I brush myself off, hissing, and limp back to the cottage, cursing Charlie's name.

"Everything all right?" Nan calls from the car.

"Just a minor run-in with some furry neighbors. I'm okay."

"You're bleeding."

I inspect my legs, and sure enough, I'm bleeding. My shins are covered in red welts, and burs have attached themselves to my nice linen shorts.

Effing Charlie Florek.

Inside, the cottage is almost exactly as I remember. The knotted wood walls are stained a deep honey brown, and the furniture is mismatched—a two-seater sofa, a floral armchair, and a leather recliner I remember sinking into when I was a teen. Strangely there's no coffee table—I swear it used to be a trunk with puzzles and games inside. There's a gorgeous stone fireplace, iron tools standing on a rack beside a box of kindling and newspaper,

and Joyce's bookshelf, still filled with her paperback drugstore romances. The cottage is perched just above the water, and the entire front of the space is glass. I stand there, shaking my head at how beautiful it is.

And just like that, I'm seventeen again, dressed in a terry cloth bathing suit cover-up with a camera strapped around my neck. I'm free from Trevor, from *suggestions of cellulite*, from the sense that I haven't taken a photo that feels like *me* in months. I stare out the window, and I can see eight-year-old Luca and Lavinia leaping off the dock and a yellow speedboat ripping across the water.

But then I blink, and I'm returned to my thirty-two-year-old body. I stare at the empty bay, wondering if there's a way to go back.

I help Nan navigate the walker into the cottage, ignoring her request to do it on her own. She looks around the living room, eyes fluttering. I squeeze her hand.

"Think we can manage two months here together?" I ask.

She nods but says nothing. Her eyes land on the bookshelf, and I watch her swallow.

"I think I need a tea," Nan says, moving toward the kitchen. She drinks a cup of orange pekoe (one milk, one sugar) every afternoon around three. It's almost four now.

"Let me do that," I offer.

She swats at me. "I'm not incapacitated, Alice. I can put the kettle on. And I'm supposed to do as much as I can independently. Doctor's orders."

"Okay." I eye the giant rug in the living room. It's a tripping hazard and sure to give Nan's walker issues. So much for Charlie

taking care of everything. “I’ll get the rug out. Let me know if you need anything.”

The cottage faces south, and the sun has turned it into a sauna. My hair is curling at the nape of my neck once I’ve pushed the couch and chair off the rug. I kneel at one end so I can roll it up, but the thing is fixed in place.

“Alice?” Nan calls.

“What’s wrong?” I spring to my feet and rush into the kitchen to find her holding a sheet of paper.

“Have you seen this?”

She passes me the page.

“It was on the fridge,” Nan says.

The edge is frayed, ripped from a spiral-bound notebook, and both sides are covered in black ink. When I’ve finished reading it, my ears are ringing.

I’ve been dreaming of spending a quiet summer on the water. I’ve pictured long walks and sunrises, midafternoon swims and cozy nights with a book. I’ve imagined peace and rest and catching up on work.

But I didn’t anticipate Charlie Florek.

5

Alice Everly (not City Girl),

I know you appreciate a list, so here's what I've taken care of to ensure the cottage is suitable:

- *All area rugs and runners have been removed, except for the big one in the living room. I've taped it down and it shouldn't give your grandma any trouble. I've also shifted the furniture, so she has clear paths to the kitchen, porch, bathroom, and bedroom.*
- *I've taken out the trunk that John uses as a coffee table so there's more space for her walker. You can find the games, puzzles, and a deck of cards on the shelf in the closet of the second bedroom. I'll bring you a couple of small end tables soon.*
- *I've added grab bars to the bathroom and anti-slip strips to the shower stall. Did you bring a seat for her to use in the shower? They sell them at the drugstore in town, if not. I've also installed a raised toilet seat. John insisted on covering the cost of all this stuff, so no need to pay me back.*

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