


L. MARIE ADELINÉ

S·E·C·R·E·T
SHARED

A NOVEL

A gold-colored metal chain is attached to a gold-colored, scalloped-edged tag. The tag is positioned in the lower right corner of the cover.

ENJOY THE
FIRST THREE
CHAPTERS!



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A NOVEL



DOUBLEDAY CANADA

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To Cathie James, for your wise words, always . . .

TEN STEPS



Step One: Surrender

Step Two: Courage

Step Three: Trust

Step Four: Generosity

Step Five: Fearlessness

Step Six: Confidence

Step Seven: Curiosity

Step Eight: Bravery

Step Nine: Exuberance

Step Ten: Liberation

PROLOGUE



DAUPHINE

laughed. What else was there to do? This was really happening. He was really here. And it seemed like the most natural request in the world, for a handsome man to be standing knee-deep in the warm Abita River, summoning me to get naked for him. The rolled-up cuffs of his jeans were darkened by the water lapping at his muscled calves, his lean torso naked in the hot April sun.

He extended a tanned forearm to me.

“Dauphine, will you accept the Step?”

Instead of giving him an immediate yes and splashing towards him like I wanted to, I froze on the grassy bank in my vintage green sundress, which I had shortened to just above my knees. And now I was regretting it. It was sexy, not like something I'd usually wear. *Do I look terrible in this? What if he isn't attracted to me? What if we get caught? What if I'm no good at this? What if I drown? I am not a good swimmer. In fact, I've always been afraid of water.* We were well hidden behind the swamp roses and pink mallow that sloped towards the riverbank,

yet fear surrounded me. *Control and trust, trust and control. My two competing demons.* Why now? Hadn't I put myself through school? Started a successful vintage clothing business, even before graduating college? Hadn't I made it through recessions and hurricanes, pulling my little store behind me with the ferocity of a war hero rescuing a wounded comrade? I had done all those things—and more—but they required discipline and control and a steady hand on the rudder.

Accepting this compelling stranger's invitation to join him in the rushing water meant inviting my life's current to change directions. It meant allowing myself to enter a new world, one filled with spontaneity and risk, desire and possibly disappointment. It meant giving up control, learning to trust. Still, for all my bravado that day at the Coach House, I was suddenly unwilling to let things unfold as I had been told they would, as I had sworn to myself I'd finally allow.

But goddamn, this man was fine—and much taller than me. Then again, at five foot three, I was shorter than most men. He had smiling eyes, a rakish build, with messy, brown hair that the sun had coated with a copper sheen. I couldn't tell if his eyes were green or blue, but he didn't take them off me. The sun grew hotter on us, making my own hair feel like a long, heavy veil. I slowly slipped off my sandals. The grass felt cool on my feet. Maybe I could wade in. Start slow.

"Will you accept the Step? I can ask only one more time," he said, without a note of impatience.

Now. Go to him. You must. I felt my hands drift up to my shoulders, following the lines of the halter on my dress. My fingers paused at the knot behind my neck. Then my hands worked of their own accord and the straps suddenly fell limp. I peeled down my top and bared my breasts to him. I quickly averted my gaze. I had to move fast before my mind caught up to my terror. *What if my body disappointed? What if I wasn't his type? Stop thinking. Act.* I unzipped the back of the dress and let it drop to the grass. Then I rolled my panties down my legs, and straightened again, standing naked save for the gold chain circling my left wrist.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" he said. "Get in, beautiful. The water's warm."

My heart started pounding. As calmly as possible, I made my way towards him, towards the water. As I moved, I strategically covered myself. I dipped a toe into the edge of the river. It was warmer than I had expected. I placed the rest of my foot into the gentle current, then navigated the path of flat, moss-covered rocks leading to him. And I could see the bottom. I'd be fine.

As I stepped closer, our height difference became nearly hilarious enough to change the mood from sexy to funny; he must have been six-four! But before I burst out laughing, before I even reached him, his hands moved to the button of his jeans, causing me to stop and go quiet. *Do I watch him? Do I not watch him?* My Southern upbringing made me turn around to hide how red I knew I was becoming. I fixed my eyes on a distant oak shading the plantation beyond.

“You don’t need to turn away.”

“I’m nervous.”

“Dauphine, you’re safe. It’s just us.”

My back still to him, I heard a slight splashing and the sound of cloth against skin. Then he tossed his jeans over my head, where they landed on the riverbank next to his well-worn boots, my sandals and my green dress.

“There. Now I’m naked too,” he said. I heard him moving slowly through the water towards me, until his warm skin pressed hard against my back.

I could feel his chin resting on the top of my head, then his face nuzzling my hair and down the side of my neck. *Jesus.* I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and tilted my head to give him my neck and the skin there. I could feel how much he wanted this, and me. My senses were electrified. My skin, warmed by the water, cooled by the air, soothed by his touch, came tingling alive. The wind carried the smells of the South— cut grass, the river, magnolias. *I want this. I want this. I want him! What’s the hesitation? Why can’t I just turn around and face him? This man is here solely to please me. My only obstacle is my inability to let him.*

Then, as he placed his hands on my hips, I heard that inner voice again, loud, insistent, with my mother’s Tennessee timber. *He thinks you’re too flabby. Too curvy. Too short. He probably doesn’t like redheads.*

I squeezed my eyes shut against the voice. Then I heard a low groan, the kind I recognized as deep male approval. *Okay, he likes what he’s touching.* He placed his mouth by my ear,

his hands tugging my hips backwards, pulling both of us into a deeper current.

“Your skin is incredible,” he murmured, as he walked me farther backwards until I was waist-deep with him. “Like alabaster.”

He’s lying. They told him to say this. I begged my own critical voice to get lost.

“Turn around, Dauphine. I want to look at you.”

My arms slowly fell to my sides, my fingers touching the water. I opened my eyes and turned around to face the expanse of his chest and the unmistakable evidence of his desire for me. *This is happening! Let it!* I tilted my head back to look up at his calm, handsome face. Then *whoosh!* He scooped me right off my feet, so swiftly and deftly that I screamed out of joy, even as my stomach fluttered. By the time I secured an arm around his muscled neck, he was cradling me in the sparkling river, teasing, slowly dipping me in.

“It’s cold!” I gasped, clutching him harder.

“You’ll soon warm up,” he whispered, lowering me all the way into the water. His arms beneath me, I let my body give in to him and to the river. I stretched out, floating, dipping my head back, letting my hair drift inch by inch into the river. *Okay here we go . . .*

“That’s right, just relax into it. I’ve got you.”

I felt marvelously buoyant. The water wasn’t scary at all. I closed my eyes and let my hair spiral out, and for the first time in a long time I knew a real smile was spreading across my face.

“Look at you, Ophelia,” he said.

With one arm holding me up in the middle of my back, he moved the other arm out from beneath me and traced a firm hand up my leg, past my thigh, pausing at the crest, then moving to my stomach where he stooped to kiss the water in the pool my belly button created.

“That tickles.” My eyes were still closed. *You’re weightless and divine. You’re body is beautiful, Dauphine.*

“Does this?” he whispered, letting his hand travel across my curves, cupping a hand beneath me, his fingers exploring my cleft. *Oh god.*

“A little,” I said. My body opened like a starfish, my waving arms keeping me afloat. I loved what the water was doing to me. The chill firmed my skin. My nipples were ripe and hard. I opened my eyes and found his face, and I could see desire there. I watched him stoop to kiss my breasts while his hand below nudged my thighs open.

“How about this?” he asked, slowly sliding one, then two fingers inside me.

“Nope,” I gasped, “that doesn’t tickle.” I felt pulses of hot pleasure course through me. *This could happen so fast,* I thought as his firm fingers warmed my insides. I clenched around him, as he gently teased my opening with this fingers, tentative at first, and then more insistent, deeper. I felt the water ripple across my skin—a combination that quickened my breath. Right then and there, I wanted to come, I could have . . . but I pushed it back to savor the floating feeling. I arched slightly to urge his fingers deeper still, my

hair fully submerged so that it spooled around my head. I imagined it looking like a fiery corona.

“You’re something to behold, Dauphine,” he murmured, the fingers of one hand gently moving in and out, his other hand keeping me afloat. Then he expertly maneuvered my floating body a quarter-turn, positioning himself between my legs. But before I could wrap around him to pull him into me, he bent down, his mouth meeting the water trickling over the inside of my thighs, now glistening in the sun, his other hand still beneath me. The heat of his lips married with the rushing water and his urgent fingers created a feeling so intense I slapped at the current to gain purchase. Then he slung my knees, one, then the other, over his shoulders, his strong arms underneath me, supporting my back, keeping me afloat. Both hands now beneath me, he brought his tongue to my soft groove, where my thigh curved into my short, red curls, and I watched as he nuzzled, the water like a million fingers across my body. For a second, I couldn’t tell the difference between the river lapping at my skin and his eager mouth, until his tongue, warm and insistent, found my perfect place, isolating it with a few talented strokes of his fingers. *Abb . . .* I lifted my pelvis, my thighs opening wider, instinctively, hungrily, keeping my face above the gentle flow, my ears below the water. The rush of the current intensified the build as he drew circles on me, around and around, thrusting a finger in and out and . . . *oh god*. I felt his other hand, his wide palm spread across the middle of my back while his mouth and

fingers did their dance. Then he reached up to tease my nipples. His mouth was liquid and warm, his tongue fluttering, lapping at me, drinking the whole of me in. I think he felt it before I did, the tension seizing my body, my knees clenching, my arms extending out at my sides, palms to the sun. *Yes . . .*

The first wave was warm and familiar. *Ab this*, I thought, *I remember this*. Then it intensified to something more, something deeper, with an urgency that made me cry out loud into the vivid sky. His fingers explored me deeper as his tongue traced faster and faster circles, and I was laughing when it happened, when I finally came, once, twice, in wave after wave of pleasure. I writhed, the backs of my knees clasp his shoulders, and we were, for a moment, one body. Then, after this blissful, floating moment, my breasts heaving in the sun, my own fingers on my cool skin, I came back to myself.

“So, so good,” he whispered. He moved me gently on the surface of the water like a paper boat, as I subsided.

“But . . . it’s not over, is it?” I asked, my thighs quivering, my legs now straddling his waist.

Nearer to the shore, I slid my legs off him, my feet finding stones to stabilize me in the shallower part of the river. I stood waist-deep as the water fell down my breasts in rivulets, my nipples still hard. I pushed the hair off my face, feeling dizzy, exhausted, satisfied.

“This is as far as I get to take you on this step, Dauphine. I don’t want to, but I have to give you back.”

He walked towards the pebbly beach where we had entered the river. Near our clothes was a pile of bright white towels. He released my hand and climbed the bank, the water shining off his back. Then he turned to pull me onto the grass. I shivered as he plucked a towel from the pile and swaddled me, pressing me to him, squeezing warmth back into my body, rubbing my arms hard.

“I feel so . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. The pleasure was all mine.” He turned to dry himself off.

I pulled the towel tightly around me, watching as he tugged his jeans over his muscled thighs and pulled on a crisp white T-shirt, which clung to his damp torso. He stepped towards me again, this time placing his big hands on either side of my face, pulling me into a lingering kiss.

When he pulled away, he said, “I mean it. The pleasure was mine, Dauphine.”

After planting a final kiss in the middle of my forehead, he walked backwards for a few steps. Then he turned to head towards the plantation, finally disappearing around an ivy-covered corner.

I wanted to scream a thank you for leaving me so beautifully shipwrecked. But the words were still underwater with parts of the old me, the parts that were afraid of surrendering, of wanting this, of simply receiving pleasure and trusting it was possible. Instead, I laughed out loud again, this time thinking, *I did it. Something happened and I let it!*

I turned to my dress and pulled it up over my damp, quivering legs. Smoothing it down over my hips, I felt something in my pocket and took it out. A small purple box. Inside, nestled in a cotton cloud, was a gold charm, pale and rough-edged. I picked it up. It had a Roman numeral on one side—I— and the word *Surrender* engraved on the other side. My heart leapt as I took the charm out of its nest, squeezing it tight in my palm. It felt like a warm, flat stone. It was mine. I secured it to my chain, the one I'd been wearing for three weeks.

I made my way slowly up the sloping hill towards the waiting car. As I passed a high stone wall covered with bougainvillea, I caressed the tiny pink petals. *You did it. You gave up control. Now it's time to take the rest of the Steps, however tentative, towards your new life—and away from those voices, away from that heartbreak, away from your sad past.*



CASSIE

Three thoughts occurred to me that morning while stretching awake across my bed in Marigny.

One, it had been six weeks since that incredible night with Will.

Two, I had fallen asleep with my S.E.C.R.E.T. bracelet on again, which hadn't been a problem when it had only one or two charms on it. But there were ten now, so the gold pressed into the tender flesh of my wrists, leaving marks.

And three, it was my birthday. My cat, Dixie, blinked at me from the foot of the bed. I reached down and pulled her into an embrace, where she purred herself back to sleep, a skill I wish I had.

"I am thirty-six years old today, Dixie," I said, scratching her ears.

Another year had snuck up on me like a bratty prankster. I hadn't been paying attention to time passing until after my night with Will. Time had begun to slow. Some days ached past, work at the Café Rose being both a major

comfort and the salt in the very wound I needed to heal. How could I get over Will when I saw him every day? How could I continue acting like nothing had happened between us the night I'd danced in *Les Filles de Frenchmen Revue* and we'd kissed our way back to the Café, up the stairs to that dusty room, where he tore off my burlesque outfit and tossed me backwards on a mattress lit by moonlight? Though he didn't know it, I had chosen him that night as my final fantasy. He knew only how badly I wanted him.

For me the lines between fact and fantasy had dissolved and he became real to me. His skin felt like home. We kissed like we'd been doing it for decades. We fit, our bodies perfectly molded for the things we did to each other naturally, wordlessly. It was beyond fantasy. And to think that all this time he had been right under my nose and I hadn't seen him, couldn't see him. But after a year of S.E.C.R.E.T., after a year of pushing myself past self-imposed boundaries, I had unleashed something very real inside of myself. And when Will told me he and Tracina had broken up, I felt the universe finally aligning in my favor. The morning after our magical night, I thought Will was my reward for coming back to life.

I was wrong.

More than any other memory from that night, it's Tracina's face that haunts me—ashen yet hopeful, her steady voice delivering the kind of hard facts that kill fantasies. She told me she was pregnant with Will's baby, and that he was thrilled when he found out.

What do you do with that very real information just when you think you've found the love of your life? You feel the final bubble burst around your fantasy and you walk away. That's what I did. All the way across the city to the Coach House, where Matilda dried my tears. There she reminded me that embedded in every fantasy is reality.

"People love the fantasy," she said. "But they ignore the facts to their detriment. And there's a price to pay when you do that. Always."

Fact number one: Will and I were finally together.

Fact number two: I was quite possibly in love with him.

Fact number three: His ex-girlfriend was pregnant.

Fact number four: When she told him, they got back together.

Fact number five: Will and I cannot be together.

Because Will was my boss, I had planned to quit my job right away, but Matilda urged me never to let heartbreak get in the way of very practical concerns, like work, paying rent, being responsible and fulfilling obligations.

"Don't give men that much power, Cassie. Get on with the task of living. You've had a lot of practice this past year."

I was such a tear-stained mess that morning. I wasn't certain whether joining S.E.C.R.E.T. was the right decision. But at least I was making *a* decision. That was new for me. Prior to S.E.C.R.E.T., I always went with the most powerful force governing my life at any given time, usually my late husband Scott's. He had brought us to New Orleans almost eight years ago, but his drinking erased any notion that we'd

made a fresh start. We were separated when he died in a car wreck; he was sober at the time, but still a broken man. I was broken as well. And for five years after, I worked hard and slept fitfully, falling into a pattern of isolation and self-pity, until one day I found a diary detailing one woman's journey through a mysterious set of steps that seemed to have a lot to do with sex—a journey that was transformative, to say the least.

Then I met Matilda Greene, the woman who became my Guide. She said she had come to the Café Rose for the diary her friend had dropped, but really she came for me, to introduce me to S.E.C.R.E.T., an underground group dedicated to helping women liberate themselves sexually, by granting them sexual fantasies of their choice. Joining the group, letting these women arrange fantasies for me, and finding the courage to go through with them, she said, would pull me out of my malaise. She told me she'd help me, guide me and support me. Finally, after a week of turning the idea over in my head, I said yes. It was a reluctant yes, but it was a yes nonetheless. After which my life changed completely.

Over the course of a year, I had done fantastical things with unbelievably attractive men, things I would never have thought possible. I let a gorgeous masseur pleasure me without asking for a thing in return. I met a sexy British man in a dark bar who secretly brought me to orgasm in the middle of a boisterous jazz show. I was taken by surprise, in many ways, by a tattooed bad-boy chef, who stole a bit

of my heart while ravaging me on a prep table in the Café's kitchen. I learned to give the most mind-blowing orgasm to a famous hip hop artist, who enthusiastically returned the favor, the memory of which still makes me tingle when I hear his songs on the radio. I took a helicopter to a yacht, then went overboard in a storm with the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes on. Not only did he rescue me, but his whole (incredible) body restored my faith in mine. Then the Bayou Billionaire himself, Pierre Castille, took me in the back of a limousine, after making me feel like the most beautiful girl at the ball. I skied the risky black diamond runs with Theo, the adorable Frenchman who pushed my sexual limits further than anyone had before. Then I went into sensory overload with a man I could only feel, not see, during a night that was blindingly sexy in more ways than one.

Then came my final fantasy, when I chose my beloved Will. I chose Will over S.E.C.R.E.T. and couldn't have had a happier night, or a more glorious morning after.

Now, six weeks later, there was no Will waking me up on my birthday with a thousand kisses. Instead, he was probably sleeping soundly next to Tracina, maybe even spooning her, his arms wrapped around her growing belly. She was just shy of three months pregnant, but yesterday afternoon she suddenly began lumbering around the Café like she was about to give birth at any moment. She kept one hand in the middle of her back while pouring refills, groaning and stretching between serving tables. She hadn't cut down on her shifts yet; she wasn't at the point of asking for help.

Still, I wasn't the only one rolling my eyes at her exaggerated discomfort. Dell wiped down tables while I refilled the salt and pepper shakers. When Tracina made a show of bending down to pick up a dishrag, Dell let out a long, slow whistle.

"That girl's making an Academy Award-winning performance out of a regular baby growing in her. I had overdue twins and it wasn't such a burden."

We watched Tracina meander from the kitchen to her customers to the cash register, making everyone around her look like they were in fast-forward. She even made Dell—at age sixty—look spry. During a lull, she lumbered over to where Dell and I were clearing a large table. Her belly barely protruded through her tight T-shirt.

"Oh, let me help, Dell," Tracina said, waving her away from a tray of half-filled ketchup bottles. "My legs are sore. You take the next tables. I don't mind losing the tips. I just don't want to push things while I can still work. 'Cause soon I'll be all 'feet up watching TV,' right?"

"Why *thank* you, Tracina," Dell said, hoisting herself off the chair. "Nothing like the pregnant one giving the old one more to do."

"I'm just saying . . ." Tracina began, but Dell threw up a hand and followed the bell to the kitchen to fetch ready plates.

After the lunch rush, almost on cue, the hammering began. Will needed to make more money from the Café and the only way to do that was to expand to fine dining upstairs.

After finally securing the proper permits and a business improvement loan, Will had started renovating. And now, with the baby on the way, the work was more urgent. The loan covered materials, but not much extra labor, so Will was doing the renovations himself, one wall, one window, one beam at a time.

In those six weeks since Will and I had been together, I had done everything in my power to avoid small talk with Tracina, because it felt littered with landmines of truth. So I avoided Will and work topics as best I could, switching to Dell, or the baby, or gossip on the street. I still couldn't tell how much she knew about what had happened that night between Will and me. Everyone at the Blue Nile saw us leave together, and half of Frenchmen Street saw us kiss, so she knew something had occurred. And even though she hadn't participated in the burlesque show on account of the pregnancy, she had hung out afterwards with Angela and Kit, both of whom were S.E.C.R.E.T. members, and both of whom danced in the Revue. Now, sitting side by side at the big round table, we gave each other matching high-eyebrowed, tight-lipped smiles.

"So, uh, things are good then? With the baby and everything? You seem good," I said, nodding like an idiot.

"Yeah, I'm, like, sooo good. Amaaazing really. Doctor says the baby's suuuuper healthy, though Will and I both agreed we don't want to know the sex. But I swear I'm carrying a boy. Probably a linebacker. Will wants a little girl," she cooed, her hand circling her belly.

The sound of Will's band saw coming from upstairs caused her to jump, nearly sending her off her chair. I grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Oh my god! Has he been upstairs all morning?" she asked, trying to hide the real question buried beneath. *Have you been alone with him today?* Since reconciling over the baby, Tracina had moved back in with Will, so I assumed she knew where he was all day.

"I have no idea," I said, lying. I had seen him that morning. We had said our awkward hellos to each other when he walked by me in the dining room and bounded up the stairs, wearing his stiff leather construction belt, shiny new tools hanging off it.

"He brought some big spools of wire upstairs yesterday. But at least he's saving the loud work until the breakfast and lunch crowds die down."

Tracina slapped her hand on the table to brace herself, then, without another word, headed up the stairs.

If avoiding small talk with Tracina was a hobby, avoiding alone time with Will was becoming an art form. The last few words he'd spoken to me in six weeks, or the last few words I'd given him the opportunity to speak to me, were "We need to talk, Cassie." It was a harsh whisper delivered in the corridor between his office and the staff washroom.

"There's nothing to say," I replied. Our eyes darted around, making sure Dell and Tracina weren't nearby.

"You realize that right now, I can't—"

“I realize more than you know, Will,” I said. We heard the trill of Tracina’s voice as she cashed out a customer.

“I’m sorry.” He couldn’t even look me in the eye as he said it, and the agonizing moment made it all the more clear that I couldn’t stay.

“Maybe we shouldn’t work together, Will. Actually, it’s probably best if I quit.”

“NO!” he said, a little too loudly, then, more quietly, “No. Don’t quit. Please. I need you. I mean, as an employee. Dell is . . . mature, and Tracina’s not going to be much help soon. If you leave, I’m sunk. Please.”

He clasped his hands into a fist beneath his chin, begging me. How could I leave this man in a bind, when his hiring me so many years ago had plucked me out of mine?

“Okay, but there have to be boundaries. We can’t be whispering in the halls like this,” I said.

Hands on hips, he waited a beat to contemplate the condition, then nodded at his shoes. The chemicals were still coursing through my system, ones awakened by the sex we’d had. We needed rules until they subsided.

Maybe Will wasn’t happy about the baby at first, maybe it had come as a complete surprise and he was as gutted about our truncated relationship as I was, but over the past six weeks, you’d never have known it. I watched him go from pinched attentiveness towards Tracina to textbook superpartner, never missing a doctor’s appointment, reading the books that only pregnant women seemed to dog-ear, and helping Tracina in and out of his truck, though she

still hardly showed. This seemed to bring out a new sweetness in Tracina as well, even if it was in service of making her life easier and the lives of others a little harder.

Just before the end of my shift, I made a last-minute assist, helping Dell deliver food for a party of six. I was already cashed out, refilling my condiments and wiping down the counters. I had plans to go for a run and to have an early night, when Tracina came bounding back down the stairs, rubbing her neck. She did look pale, so when she told us she was leaving early, Dell wasn't surprised.

"I'm just so sick. I feel like I'm going to throw up. Will told me to go home. Sorry, guys. It's going to be like this for a little bit, I guess. Second trimester is supposed to get easier."

There was no way Dell could handle dinner on her own. I pretended to stifle my exasperation, but truth be told I wanted to stay. I needed the money and I had nothing better to do. Plus, there was that awful, painful, marvelous chance I'd accidentally be alone with Will, something I longed for despite all my genuine attempts to avoid it. And sure enough, an hour later, after business died down and a few minutes into the post-dinner hammering, his plaintive voice called from upstairs.

"Can someone come up here, please? I need a hand. Cassie? You there?"

Instead of heading up, I waited for Dell to garnish the final platters for our last customers.

"Please! It won't take long!"

“Are you hearing that man? Or is it just me hearing that man?” Dell muttered, handing me the hot turkey specials.

“I hear him.”

“Good, ‘cause he’s not talking to me.”

“I’m coming!” I yelled over my shoulder, thinking to myself, *No pun intended*. I’d preserved an internal sense of humor even while nursing my wounds.

I dropped off the plates and headed towards the stairs. I had a flashback to the fake tumble Kit DeMarco had taken on the floor, the one that secured my spot next to Angela Rejean in the burlesque show six weeks earlier. I had had no idea they belonged to S.E.C.R.E.T. too. As I stood now looking up the stairs, more flashbacks played out in my mind’s eye: Will’s face contorted in ecstasy above me, the light from the street illuminating his features. *I’ve wanted this since the day we met*, he whispered, while I lay beneath him. *I wanted you too, Will. I just didn’t know how much.*

When does this stop? When do memories quit hurting so much?

If he were to say, *We need to talk, Cassie*, one more time, I would say, *No, we don’t, Will*. I would add, *I told you we should not be alone*, and I would say this while lifting my shirt over my head, tossing it into the corner along with all the unwanted memories stored in that room up there. Will would say, *You’re right, Cassie, we shouldn’t be alone*. Stepping towards him, I would place my hand on his bare chest, letting him reach behind me and undo my bra. *This is such a bad idea*, I would say, pressing my skin to his, kissing his mouth, pushing him back until the window ledge stopped us. There,

with his thighs straddling mine, his hands on my body, unsure where to touch first, his fingers finally traveling up to entwine my hair, his hands pulling my head back, opening my neck to his hungry mouth, I'd say, *See? We don't need to talk. We need this. We need to make each other moan and sweat. We need to fuck each other again, well, and often. And then, I need to decide what I'm going to do, because I can't be alone with you, because look what we're doing to each other, because everything pointed to me and you and now there is no me and you.*

And then the words would stop and we'd be just hands and mouths and breath and skin . . . and awful consequences.

As I took the steps up to the second floor, that delicious, piercing pain went through me again, the one that caused me to throb in places that had once been dormant but now came awake every time I was near him. At the top of the stairs, I stepped around a sawhorse and over an empty roll of cables. The hallway was lined with the detritus of recent renovations—empty pails of plaster, stray nails, remnants of two-by-fours. Behind a roughed-out wall where the new bathrooms extended, Will stood atop a stepladder, framed against the exposed brick between two windows. He was shirtless and covered in white dust. There was no furniture in the room, no evidence of the night a dozen giggly women got ready for an amateur burlesque show—no chair, no storm-tossed bed. He was holding the end of an iron curtain rod with one hand, a screw gun with the other, his T-shirt tucked into his belt.

“Thanks for coming up here. Can you eyeball this for me, Cass?”

Cass. When had he ever called me that? It made me sound like a pal.

“How’s this?” he asked, balancing the rod.

“A little higher.”

He jerked the rod a few inches too high.

“Nope, lower . . . lower.”

He had it nearly perfectly positioned, and then he bratily dropped the rod way below the window line, at an awkward angle.

“How’s this? Is this good?” he asked, throwing a goofy smile over his shoulder at me.

“I don’t have time for this. I have customers.”

He brought the rod even. When I gave him the go-ahead, he quickly drilled a screw to hold it in place and stomped down the ladder.

“Okay. Are you going to stay mad at me forever?” he asked, stepping towards me. “I’m just trying to do the right thing, Cassie. But I’m at a loss when it comes to you.”

“*You’re* at a loss?” I hissed. “Let’s talk about loss, shall we? You lost nothing. Me? I lost everything.”

Matilda would have slapped my mouth shut. *Have you learned nothing?* she’d have said. *Why do you paint yourself as the loser?*

“You didn’t *lose* anything,” Will whispered. His eyes met mine, and my heart stopped beating for three whole seconds. *I picked you and you picked me.* “I am still here. We are still *us*.”

“There is no *us*, Will.”

“Cassie, we were friends for years. I miss that so much.”

“Me too, but . . . I’m just your employee now. That’s how it’s got to be. I will come to work and I will do my job and I will go home,” I said, avoiding his eyes. “I can’t be your friend, Will. And I can’t be *that* girl either, the one who . . . who hovers on the sidelines, waiting like some buzzard circling overhead, to see if your relationship with Tracina dies and turns cold.”

“Wow. Is that what you think I’m asking you to do?”

He brought the back of hand to his forehead and wiped his brow with it. His face was lined with sadness, exhaustion and maybe even resignation. A tense silence fell between us, one that made me question whether I could continue to work at the Café while my heart’s pain still existed. But I also knew this was my problem, not his.

“Cassie. I’m sorry for everything.”

Our eyes met, seemingly for the first time in weeks.

“For everything?” I asked.

“No. Not everything,” he said, quietly placing the hammer on the sawhorse and tugging his T-shirt from his belt to wipe his whole face. The sun began setting over Frenchman Street, urging me to get back downstairs and close up shop.

“Okay. You’re busy. So am I. Curtain rod looks good. My job here is done,” I said. “I’ll be downstairs cashing out if you need anything from me.”

“It’s not a matter of *if* I need you. You know I do.”

I’ll never know what my face looked like in that exact

moment, but I imagine the flash of hope was impossible to conceal.

I went home and made a solid set of promises to myself. No more pining. No more pouting. That was yesterday.

Today was my birthday. I was meeting Matilda to talk about my new role in S.E.C.R.E.T. When you're fresh off your own fantasies, it's a tricky year. You're not on the Committee. Not yet. You have to earn your spot. But you're given a choice of three roles, and I was eager to plunge in, to have something else to do, someplace else to be, someone to think about other than Will or myself.

One of the roles was Fantasy Facilitator, a S.E.C.R.E.T. member who helped make fantasies happen, by booking travel, acting as a background player or participating in scenarios like Kit and Angela had the night of the burlesque show. Without Kit faking her injury, I wouldn't have danced on that stage. And without Angela's help with the sexy choreography, I would have made a complete fool of myself up there. This year they were becoming full Committee members, so those two slots were open.

I could also be a Recruiter like Pauline, the woman whose misplaced diary had originally led me to S.E.C.R.E.T. She was married, but her husband wasn't threatened by her role as a recruiter of the men who'd participate in the fantasies, because, well, he'd once been one of them. Recruiting men for S.E.C.R.E.T. was different from training them; Pauline merely enticed them into the fold. Full-on training, or fine-tuning a recruit's

sexual skills, *that* was reserved for full Committee members, as was participating sexually in the fantasies—not that I was ready for that anyway. The third role was Guide, providing encouragement and support to a new S.E.C.R.E.T. candidate. There was no way I could have navigated the strange terrain of my crazy, sexy year without my Guide, Matilda. So I chose Guide, the least daunting of the three roles, though Matilda’s advice was to keep an open mind. “The most surprising opportunities could come up,” she said. Last thing left was to sign my S.E.C.R.E.T. pledge and bring it to our lunch.

I, Cassie Robichaud, pledge to serve S.E.C.R.E.T as a Guide for one term, doing whatever is within my power to ensure that all sexual fantasies are:

Safe

Erotic

Compelling

Romantic

Ecstatic

Transformative

I vow to uphold the anonymity of all members and participants of S.E.C.R.E.T., and to uphold the principles of “No Judgment, No Limits and No Shame” during my term, and forever after.

Cassie Robichaud

I signed it with a little flourish, while Dixie pawed at the reflections cast across the bedspread from the charms on my bracelet. It was time. Time to take a whole new set of steps—away from Will and my past and towards a new future, whatever it held.



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