

SURVIVING LOVE

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LOVE
A NOVEL

TONDA B. SOLOMON



NEW YORK

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*“If you can learn a simple trick, Scout,
you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks.
You never really understand a person until you consider things
from his point of view—until you climb into his skin
and walk around in it.”*

Atticus Finch



Chapter One

ALYCE

Alyce flipped onto her stomach and propped a large-brimmed hat over her head. In this position, no one could see, just in case she drooled. The umbrella sheltering the wooden chaise on which she lay provided plenty of shade. Her only wish was to drift away into a dreamless nap.

She willed her mind to focus on the lulling sound of the ocean waves, but all she could hear was the little girl from the condo next to hers. What was her name? Chloe, that was it. The family occupied beach chairs two sets down from hers in the long row of bright blue umbrellas. Apparently, it was Chloe's nap time, and she needed it badly. A tug-of-war was going on as the little girl whined, "I don't want to go inside!"

Alyce remembered those days with her own children, all three now grown. Poor little thing. She was cute as a button and loved being on

the beach, but Alyce was desperate for peace and quiet and, hopefully, some sleep.

Finally, someone took Chloe inside. Now Alyce was confident she was only minutes away from her own much-needed rest. She found it somehow easier to relax out here with the beach sounds as background noise. Her condo was uncommonly quiet, which allowed her mind to wander to places she preferred not go.

Funny how her attempt to escape the chaos at home had landed her in a place she couldn't rest. She should be relishing this time at the beach. Not a soul needed her to prepare lunch or settle a dispute or braid their hair. Now that the children were older, she could enjoy this trip in a different, more relaxing way.

Maybe it was too much change—an empty house, a vacation alone—but it had seemed like a terrific idea to run away. Alyce and her husband, Michael, had been separated for nine months. His affair had been in full swing for a year and a half. She had found every excuse not to sign the divorce papers, but she had brought them with her and would return with them signed. It merely meant wrapping her mind around being single again, a fact her entire being resisted.

For many who found themselves in her situation, divorce was the epitome of freedom. Who fought for a relationship blighted by infidelity? But her heart and soul had belonged to Michael Keriman for almost thirty years now. She did not want to be free. Even if unwillingly tangled in a giant web of his selfishness and deceit, she saw no easy way to extricate herself.

Not that she loved the person Michael had become. Oh, no. But the smart, charming man of her dreams she'd married? That guy had been her world. And even after she finally knew the truth and he had moved out, she believed he was someone she could wait for, no matter how long it took for him to come to his senses. However, with each day that

passed, the likelihood of Michael having some grand revelation seemed more and more improbable.

Now, her aching heart told her she must make a clean break to forge a new path. But her mind—typically levelheaded—spun round in circles, seemingly unwilling to guide one foot in front of the other, much less begin a purposeful march in another direction.

Relaxation would definitely require reprogramming her mind. *Remember, you ran away*, she chided herself. Making a mental note to call her daughter that evening, she closed her eyes.

Alyce wasn't sure how long she slept. She was awakened by something bumping her chair. Pushing up on her elbows, she peeked out from under her cockeyed hat. A Frisbee lay in the sand beside her.

The sun was beginning to lose its strength. What time was it? She flipped her hat aside and stretched her jaw. Man, was she tight. A massage had to be on the agenda for tomorrow. Yawning widely, she rubbed the side of her face and felt the imprint of the rolled towel she had used for a pillow.

Her brain was foggy, but she became aware of two hairy, muscular legs running rapidly toward her. "Hey, sorry about that," the man spoke as he approached. The angle of the umbrella blocked Alyce from seeing his face, but his T-shirt read, "Coconut Joe's."

She maneuvered until she was sitting on the side of the beach chair. "It's fine," she mumbled. She yanked the ponytail holder from her hair and attempted a new one from the mess that tumbled down. Alyce paid him little attention, thinking he would reclaim the disc and return to his game.

She was startled when, rather than just reaching in to grab the Frisbee, he actually ducked his head under the umbrella to retrieve it. He glanced up and stared straight at her with clear, blue eyes. A thick head of sand-colored hair was graying and curly. Alyce noticed how it nicely framed his tan face.

“You reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*?” he asked, squatting down as if to stay awhile. Alyce glanced at the book partially sticking out of her beach bag. The combination of being jolted from a deep sleep coupled with the shock of this disarming person in her space caused Alyce to stammer, “Yes. I mean, well, I mean, of course I’ve read it before, but that was way back in high school.” She paused. “I don’t mean *way* back.” She shook the cobwebs and spoke succinctly. “It’s a classic. I decided I needed to read it again when no one was forcing me. Maybe I’ll gain a different appreciation for it.” Did that sound snarky?

Hardly able to focus, she decided she must have been solidly asleep. And this stranger was very nice looking. She glanced to see if he was wearing a ring. *Alyce, stop that!* Since when did she check out a man’s ring finger? Was it the confusion of sleep? Maybe the tumult of emotions from her impending singleness? *Say something!* she chided herself. “Did someone make you read it in high school?” Inwardly, she groaned at her lack of ability to make small talk.

“I’ve actually read it several times, just because I wanted to,” he said with a smile that revealed perfect teeth. “I did my thesis on Harper Lee for my English major at Alabama. Don’t get me started.”

Alyce made notes. Cute. Educated. Suddenly remembering her haphazard hair and the fact that her beach hat was laying beside her rather than on her head, she thought, *I must look ridiculous.*

As the stranger talked on about Harper Lee, Alyce attempted to maintain eye contact while inconspicuously reaching for her hat. In doing so, she knocked over the water bottle propped on the top of her bag. They both reached to grab it, and when their hands touched, Alyce felt somewhat bashful like a schoolgirl. Was she now doomed to view everything involving the opposite sex through the lens of “single woman”? She despised Michael in that moment.

Alyce quickly busied herself with the contents of her bag to avoid him seeing her face, where a mixture of embarrassment and awkwardness

was causing her to blush. She prayed the usual splotches on her chest weren't making an appearance, too. A feeling she'd not had since high school stirred inside. Was she attracted to him? Deep in the recesses of her psyche a nudge of guilt feebly attempted to make its presence known. Alyce dismissed it. She had nothing to feel guilty about.

"I'm afraid your book might be soggy," he said, holding it up and waving the wet pages in the air. Alyce realized she had no cause for concern. He wouldn't have picked up on her silly emotions. Why should he? He had no idea how empty and hollow she had felt for over a year.

"It's okay. I actually finished it just before I fell asleep."

Alyce never wanted to find herself back in the dating scene. It wasn't fun when she was a teenager, and she had no reason to think it would be better this time, especially at fifty.

A rebellion contrary to Alyce's typically subservient personality stirred inside her. Perhaps that was what shushed the guilt that tried to sound the alarm in her brain. She was processing her emotions when he backed out from under the umbrella and stood upright. He stepped back a few paces so he could see her.

"Are you staying here at Pelican Pointe?" she blurted out. Why didn't she just let him walk away? She wasn't sure, but she felt a strong desire to find out more about this stranger. He continued backward until he was in full view from her perch on the chaise.

"I came in on Friday," he said. He raised his voice as he continued stepping haphazardly in the soft sand. "I'm staying with friends on the third floor. Unit 302."

"That's right above me!" she shouted. Alyce cringed. In that moment, she wondered which would be worse, adjusting to life without Michael or the dreaded awareness of her new marital status. It angered her to be forced into such a quandary, but in light of the zombie-like state she'd been in for months, anger was a good thing.

He laughed as he ran away. "Maybe I'll see you around."

“Maybe,” she answered as Coconut Joe turned and ran toward the water and his waiting friends. *Wait, now you’ve given him a nickname? There’s no hope for you, girl. Remember all those friends you walked with through divorces? They were hopeless and distraught until the papers were signed, and then they blew you away when they immediately started dating. Get yourself together!*

Alyce reached for a portion of her towel to fold over her legs. Would she always be self-conscious about her appearance? As quickly as the hint of a flirt had appeared, relaxed Alyce vanished into thin air, replaced by the sad, awkward woman who had arrived just the day before. That woman had come to the beach to process life. Broken and beaten down, she was suddenly weary again and thought maybe she’d best head inside.

Late afternoon had always been her favorite time on the beach, although she rarely had the chance to enjoy it. Her husband preferred dinners out whenever they vacationed. She was happy to cook or order pizza so they could linger, but Michael always chose the lines at the restaurants, forcing her to abandon her chair early to ready herself and the children for dinner.

Over the years, Alyce had gradually adopted a beach style of minimal makeup and a ponytail. Fortunately, she was attractive and able to pull it off. Besides, she loved for her girls to shine, and making sure they were the prettiest left little time for herself. Alyce had to admit she wished occasionally to get dolled up in a cute dress and heels, even if it was at the beach. Who knew if there would ever be a reason to do that again?

She wasn’t sure why she favored the beach in late afternoon, but the tranquility of the ocean at that time of day was particularly appealing, forever strong and sure and faithful with its recurring rhythm of waves. And as evening glided in, almost unnoticed, the sun danced differently upon the water, and fewer people crowded the air with their noise.

With resolve, Alyce forced herself to lean back in her chair and stay. She could learn a new life, though it would take time. To begin,

she could allow herself to follow a different routine while at the beach, starting with staying right where she was until the sun had set. Besides, she had a Frisbee game to enjoy.



When Alyce finally went inside, she found she was sleepy and contemplated showering and going to bed. She wasn't yet ready to brave dinner alone, even though she had noticed a great little beachside cabana where the burgers smelled delicious and an outdoor restaurant with a menu board that advertised fresh red snapper with a kale and quinoa salad. "Maybe tomorrow night," she told herself.

Alyce was thankful she finally had an appetite for real food after weeks of poor eating. She wished she was one of those women who never ate when they were heartbroken, but sadly, she chose to eat her sorrow away. She could finish half of a pound bag of peanut M&Ms before she even realized she was feeding misery with misery. Often, she stopped for a hot caramel sundae at Sonic on the way home from her daughter's house at night. Not a great choice, even if it was all she ate in a day.

She eyed the deep tub in the bathroom and a wild idea crossed her mind. How long had it been since she had soaked in a hot bath? She could light some candles and maybe turn on some quiet music. No agenda and no interruptions—a grand idea.

As water ran into the tub, she added a few drops of lavender for relaxation and some baby oil to soften her skin. Alyce wrapped her hair in a towel, then slipped under the warmth of the water. Admittedly, she liked the temperature exceptionally hot, and this bath did not disappoint. At first, her body tensed against the extreme heat, then slowly relaxed as tension oozed from her like the hot caramel running down her sundae. She smelled the coconut sunscreen mingling with the lavender, not at all unpleasant.

Once she was cocooned in her liquid therapy, she allowed her mind to revisit the encounter with Coconut Joe on the beach. *Will I even bother to date?* she wondered. Again, she felt oddly bashful when she recalled his wave as he left the beach with his friends. Was it her imagination, or did he go slightly out of his way to pass close by so he could yell, “See you tomorrow!” It had to be coincidence.

She frowned a little and scolded herself for thinking negatively. Why wouldn’t he want to be friendly? She was very attractive for her age, at least on her better days, though no man had actually told her she was beautiful in quite a long time.

That led her thoughts toward an all-too-familiar path of sadness where she took several steps before turning her thoughts around by saying her latest scripture prayer: “Lord, will You take every one of my thoughts captive to Your glory and Your honor? I know I am Yours, and You make me valuable, even priceless. Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable—if there is anything worth praise—I choose to set up camp on those things. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

She hummed a favorite hymn she’d known since her teenage years. When she reached the chorus, she sang softly as tears slid down her cheeks and plopped into the water around her, *Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.*

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and imagined God plucking the horrid thoughts from her mind like weeds. All He left behind were vibrant flowers that represented the good that had come from her twenty-six-year marriage. Her two sweet girls, Maggie and Lillian, and delightful son, Harrison, swayed freely in her garden.

Two days before Alyce had left for the beach, Maggie and her husband, Jackson, brought over a basket of goodies for her trip, along with the joyous news that she was going to be a grandmother. Alyce had

only seven months to prepare. She imagined a lovely cluster of daisies signifying that innocent new life.

She marveled that her chatty Maggie had kept this secret for as long as she had. It seemed she and Jackson had only just married, but much had changed in two years. The memory of Maggie and Jackson's wedding swayed softly in her garden.

Alyce focused on the good things in the past and the tranquility of this present moment. She would not allow her mind to venture to the future. Her vision blurred when she tried to think forward. It was just as well. Worry, doubt, and the unknown lived there. Whenever she tried to "go there," she imagined Jesus stepping in front of her. The words, "Look full in his wonderful face," reminded her that she must remain fixed on him to maintain her sanity. She inhaled the aroma of the lavender and coconut and relaxed.

When the water cooled and her fingers and toes resembled raisins, Alyce stepped from the tub. Careful not to slip in the baby oil that lingered as the water drained, she patted herself dry and studied her faint tan lines. She slathered on her favorite lotion, with no one to comment about the smell as Michael sometimes would. It had always been delightful to her. She shimmied into brand new pajamas she'd bought to treat herself. To say she was relaxed did not do justice to the mellifluous mood Alyce found herself in.

She padded into the living room to the comfy chair and ottoman by the balcony door, where she'd deposited her Bible, her journal, and the two latest books she was reading. With so many titles on her list, she had a lot of catching up to do.

With a view of the ocean and sky, she had an ideal spot to spend time with the LORD. The edge of eternity stretched before her: the sun on the water by day and the moon by night.

Alyce slid open the door to receive the full orchestration of the nighttime concert the ocean offered. The roar of the deep seemed

louder at night. She liked thinking God turned up the volume to remind her that in the darkest places of life, His grace was greater. She called this beautiful arrangement *I AM*, written and arranged and conducted by Creator God. Standing in the doorway, the music washed over her with the warmth of the breeze, and she sensed His invitation to sit a while.

Alyce tucked her feet underneath and cozied into the chair. She whispered, “Thank You,” suddenly keenly aware of the blessing and comfort of where she was. How incredible to be in that place at that time, a respite and a refuge for her weary soul. She had brought such a burden with her. The magnitude of her gratitude caused her to close her eyes and simply be still. There were no words, just a heart of praise.

Alyce wasn't sure how long she sat. The banter of a group of kids passing on the beach below jolted her from her reverie. She picked up her Bible and journal and spread them before her on the ottoman.

Journaling was new for her. Never short on words, Alyce had learned the value of writing out her feelings. Now she kept a journal of her prayers, her most intimate and personal conversations with her heavenly Father. Journaling had made Him more real to her in recent months than ever before. Whatever she wrote on those pages was safe with Him. There she gave voice to her darkest fears, truest desires, and deepest hurts, all laid before the one who made her and knew her well.

She opened her journal and began with praise. She hadn't always done that but learned during a study of the Lord's Prayer how effective praise was in centering her thoughts. She found it made her prayers bigger and bolder to acknowledge His holiness and His power before anything else. So, she began with praise.

Sometimes the words to a song would flow from her pen. More often, random thoughts to describe Him would flood her mind, and she

would write them as a greeting. She felt silly at first, but then it became a challenge to think of new and different words to describe Him.

One day she was journaling and realized this was similar to the way she'd greeted her kids in the mornings when they were growing up. They would wander into the kitchen for breakfast, and she'd greet them with many different names.

“Morning, Sunshine!”

“Hello, Captain Amazing!”

“Welcome to Monday, your Majesty!”

She was now doing this with the King of the Universe, and it gave her so much joy to think of new ways to acknowledge His presence. Alyce felt a little thrill to think that soon she would be doing something similar for her grandchild—another cause for praise. She knew just how to open her journal entry on this evening. “Greetings, Giver of ‘Grand Life!’” she scribbled in her journal.

Then she moved on to confession. When she'd first started journaling, this part was hard for her. She wasn't a thief or a murderer. She didn't habitually lie, and she certainly wasn't the adulterer. One in the family was more than enough, and he was quite adept.

But that declaration led her to something more sinister. She was prideful. She had to admit that she could be pretty smug at times about all she *hadn't* done. Truth was, she had been unfaithful to the Most Faithful, and it wasn't a one-time thing. When she acknowledged her pride, it opened her eyes to more ways she had sinned beyond violating a simple list of commandments.

Alyce laid down her pen and leaned back into the chair. Her thoughts drifted to her husband. She wondered where Michael was at that moment and what he was doing. She breathed a simple prayer of protection for him and that God would guard his heart and mind in Christ Jesus. She'd done that many times since he had left their home. How long would those prayers continue? Even after the divorce was

final? Alyce drew in a deep breath and smiled a little as the trace smell of coconut and lavender teased. In her spirit, something whispered, “Child, everything is going to be okay.”



Chapter Two

MICHAEL

Michael loved the fuss he created when he arrived at his favorite restaurant. The shiny, black sports car was a valet magnet, and two young men in red vests raced toward him as he pulled to the curb. Handing over the keys, he stepped into the slightly darker interior of the restaurant and allowed his eyes a moment to adjust as he scanned the tables.

He spotted her, sitting in his usual booth. She was much younger than he and a little too eager, waving to him like a schoolgirl across a playground. He rushed over in hopes to squelch the enthusiasm before it drew attention. He struggled with how to explain his new life if challenged, but his uncertainty was juxtaposed with indignance; he owed no one an explanation for his actions.

Michael had specifically instructed the hostess to never seat him in that booth. Although the best in the house, he and Alyce had spent too many evenings there together. Michael didn't like the reminder of her.

He would have stopped coming to this restaurant altogether, but his ego loved the notoriety of being "known" by staff and wouldn't sacrifice the prestige of instant seating when others waited weeks for a reservation. Besides, the food was incomparable, and he was eating out a lot these days.

The corner booth was a semicircle that faced outward into the restaurant. Michael liked being able to see everyone. No surprises if a friend or client approached his table. It also lent him an air of celebrity, if only in his imagination. Michael was highly successful, and he liked to think everyone knew it. Whenever he ate there, he was certain others noticed the preferential treatment he received. But there were memories attached to it, too. He didn't like to admit that it bothered him to sit in "their booth," but it did.

When the owner came around, as usual, to chat, he would remind him that he had requested no longer to be seated there. As he slid into the booth, Michael could have sworn he smelled that crazy lotion Alyce always wore. He liked to complain about it, but in that moment, he found it absurdly nostalgic. *Must be my imagination*, he mused.

He looked over at Cassidy, the motivation for stepping out of his marriage and into his dreams of a more exciting life. He relished the memory of Alyce's angry smirk when she found out the name of her nemesis.

Though out of character for her, she shrieked, "Cassidy? Seriously? Isn't that a stripper's name? Or, actually worse, I think that's the name of one of Harrison's friends!" Harrison was their nineteen-year-old son, and the dig about her age was not lost on him. Michael didn't actually know for certain—and really didn't care—how old Cassidy was. She was

captivated by him and made him feel something Alyce hadn't in quite some time.

She was beautiful and seemed to be smart, too. She scooted closer to him and gave him a long, welcoming look from her big, brown eyes. She had come from work but had removed her suit jacket and strategically unbuttoned the top button, giving him a hint of lace underneath. He never remembered Alyce wearing anything with lace. She was only straight-laced and buttoned up all the time. *Prim* and *proper* were adjectives Michael would use for his wife.

Michael shook his head. Why in the world was he thinking about Alyce? That had been happening more frequently, and it had to stop. It ruined his day, her barging into his thoughts unwelcome and unbidden. He motioned to their server, who hurried over with Michael's standard gin mule and asked, "Shall we begin with the usual appetizer, sir?" Michael took a sip and nodded his approval. Then he motioned the server back with the flourish of his hand and said, "Wait a minute. Let's change it up a bit tonight."

Wasn't that why he and Alyce had drifted apart? Everything was just "the usual"? Michael was growing angry. She was ruining everything, and she wasn't even there.

"Let me see a menu."

As the server stepped away, Michael looked up to see his and Alyce's friends Allen and Kristen Jozwik approaching the table. Michael had only seen Allen once since he'd moved out of the house, and he hadn't seen Kristen at all before now. He braced himself for the awkwardness he felt certain was coming.

Michael and Alyce had shared evenings out with Allen and Kristen, and this initial encounter was going to be difficult. They had raised their kids together at church, the baseball field, and dance recitals. This was one of those moments for which he had rehearsed countless times.

To his surprise, both Allen and Kristen spoke warmly. He was floored when Kristen extended her hand to Cassidy and introduced herself. He noticed she did seem to have an odd stare, but who would blame her? Women were protective of each other, and Kristen would definitely be on the defense in Alyce's stead. This warm greeting, however, wasn't the response he expected. Maybe transitioning wouldn't be so hard after all, sort of like changing a tire.

Even Michael flinched at that thought. *Whoa, buddy! Surely you're not that crass.* As quickly as the thought arrived, it disappeared. Michael's flagrant ego allowed no room for abasement. This was something he'd been dreaming of his whole life: a thriving legal practice, a fine sports car, and a beautiful girl on his arm. What guy didn't long for that? Too bad Alyce had to be cut out of the picture.

His reverie was broken when he heard Kristen say, "It's nice you guys could have a business dinner while Alyce is at the beach. I wondered how you were faring all alone, Michael."

So that explained Kristen's hospitality toward Cassidy. She assumed she was a business associate. Hadn't Alyce told Kristen anything at all about their separation? He had moved out nine months prior. He assumed that Alyce had let friends know of their pending divorce by this point. He did not want to be the one to do the deed and certainly not here under these circumstances.

With no time to ponder that thought, he felt, rather than saw, Cassidy's raised eyebrow and piercing gaze. She awaited his explanation as to who exactly she was.

"Cassidy is one of my junior associates at the firm." Michael smiled rather largely while looking back and forth between Allen and Kristen's faces. He chose to ignore Cassidy's face, but the kick under the table was unavoidable.

Suddenly aware of the heat rising in his cheeks—and even more aware that she was sitting awfully close for an associate—he shifted

uncomfortably. This was not going as he had anticipated. He was prepared for a cool exchange with their friends. He did not expect to be the one to break the news that his marriage was over and had been for some time.

Kristen seemed to be cluing in because her gaze hardened slightly.

“I’m happy that Alyce has taken time for herself at the beach. She does so much for others. I’m sure she’s getting ready for that new grandbaby.”

Grandbaby? Michael’s thought screamed.

He was instantly furious. He knew nothing about a grandbaby, but he would never let them know that. The kids were angry and upset over their parents’ separation, but to not tell him about his first grandchild? This was absurd. He was going to excuse himself the minute they left and get to the bottom of this.

Maintaining his composure, Michael realized that he didn’t even know Alyce was at the beach. How dare they all make plans and keep secrets behind his back? The irony of that thought passed right by him. He was too self-absorbed, and all his energy was focused on keeping his cool. He was in charge, and he would survive this encounter.

“There certainly are a lot of changes going on around the Keriman household,” Michael said as he nodded and put on his best lawyer smile. *Gotta keep it together, Michael.* Thankfully, Kristen and Allen’s server appeared and asked if she could start some drinks for them. They took the cue and headed toward their table.

“Let’s have lunch soon,” Allen turned back and casually said. “It’s been too long.”

I bet you’d like that, Michael thought. “Sure thing,” he smiled and lied. He had no intention of having lunch with and getting drilled by someone who would never understand, let alone approve, of his decisions.

As soon as they were safely out of distance, Michael grabbed his phone and searched the call history. To his amazement, he saw three missed calls from Maggie and one from Lillian, all from the evening before and roughly within the span of a half hour. How had he missed these? Michael scooted quickly out of the booth and tossed Cassidy a quick, “Be right back.”

Before she could respond, he was walking away and dialing Maggie. He threaded his way through the tables and noticed another friend at a table in the corner. He nodded a greeting as he backed through the side door that led to a small patio. No one would be seated out there, as spring was still too cool for outdoor dining in Nashville. He found a chair as he waited for Maggie to answer her phone. He hung up and dialed it again, willing her to answer.

When nothing came of his attempts, he called Lillian instead. She picked up on the second ring, but before he could even begin, she launched her own tirade.

“Where have you been?” she demanded. “And why wouldn’t you take Maggie’s calls?”

She drew in a breath, considering all she wanted to say, but made herself stop. Not expecting such a response, he hastily decided to take a different approach. He loved his children and could not afford to exasperate them more than he already had. They were squarely on Alyce’s team these days.

“Hello to you, too!” he replied as lightheartedly as possible.

With a pause on the other end, Lillian seemed to gather herself. “Hello, Father,” she finally said tritely. That was it. No “how are you” or “what’s going on” in Lillian’s typically chipper voice. And what was up with *Father*? What happened to *Dad* or, better yet, *Daddy*?

Michael softened his tone, took a deep breath, and began again. “Hey, Lilli-girl,” using his pet name for her since she was a baby.

“Apparently a lot has been happening, and I’ve been AWOL. I tried to call Maggie, but she didn’t answer. What’s going on with everyone?”

Lillian’s voice showed little emotion.

“Maggie needs to tell you something very important, and you wouldn’t take her call.”

“I don’t know how I missed it!” he said. “I was at home all last night and just now saw that I missed calls from you both.”

“She left a voicemail,” was the only response he got.

Michael had left his glasses on the table, so he held his phone at arm’s length and squinted to see the screen. A tiny number in a red circle indicated he had a message to which he’d not listened. This was totally uncharacteristic of him.

He felt a twinge of anxiety as he noted how Alyce had always been his connection to the kids, keeping him informed of what they were up to. This was especially true since they’d all left home for college and beyond. He would have to up his game because his kids were his world. When did life get so complicated?

“I see you’re right,” Michael replied calmly. “I will try her again and leave my own voicemail. And how have you been?”

“Daddy, where are you?” came the reply. He sensed a quiver in Lillian’s voice as he searched his mind to try and recall anything particular that was going on. His instincts were telling him he was supposed to remember something, but for the life of him, he couldn’t recall it. Mild panic ensued as he suddenly wondered if he was supposed to be somewhere.

“I was grabbing a little dinner. What are you up to?” he queried, silently praying that the answer would be simple and not involve anything he should be doing right at that moment.

He heard Lillian taking a deep breath and could visualize her pushing her tongue between her teeth and her front lip in an effort

to control her tears. She'd learned that from her mother. For some reason, it was cute when Lillian did it but had become annoying in Alyce.

"I'm at the school," came the reply. "I've been in the studio for twelve hours trying to get the rest of the photos ready for my show." That was it! Lillian was an art major at Belmont. Her senior exhibit was coming up. What was that date?

"You sound exhausted," Michael soothed. "Have you been eating?"

"I had a stale bagel around eleven, and I've been drinking coffee all day." Lillian sniffed. Michael smiled as he pictured his grown little girl twirling a piece of her hair as she always did when she was tired. "I think I saw some leftover pizza in the fridge. I can eat that when I get back to the apartment."

"Well, you'd better take care of my girl. I'd hate for her to miss her own show." He winced as he then asked, "And what is the date for that again?"

"Dad!"

"What? I'm not looking at my calendar," he fibbed again. He had been doing far too much of that lately. Dishonesty wasn't a character quality he tolerated in others. Funny how adept at it he'd become.

"It is May twenty-third at the Schoenberg Gallery," Lillian announced. "I hope you can come for the evening. It begins at seven."

"I would not miss it, even if they'd just pulled all of my teeth!"

"Ewww, Daddy, why do you have to say something like that?" Lillian giggled in spite of herself. Then she remembered she was supposed to be angry and played it cool. "Please do call Maggie right away."

Michael missed his time with his girls. They had always been his universe until they did what all children do and had to grow up. He was still figuring out how to balance so much change.

"I love you, Lilli-girl. I'll talk to you soon."

"Love you, Daddy. Bye now."

Michael made one last attempt to reach Maggie before heading back inside. Still no answer. He rubbed his hands together to warm them. Though chilly on the patio, he imagined it was nothing compared to the chill he would encounter at the table with Cassidy.

Making his way back across the restaurant, he realized she wasn't sitting where he'd left her. He glanced around the room, making eye contact with Allen and Kristen, who were watching him. Once in the booth, he looked back at his phone to check voicemails. Sure enough, Maggie had left one last night at 8:27 p.m.

"Hey, Dad. I have a bit of news to share with you and wondered if we could have lunch tomorrow. Guess you're busy right now. I really need to talk to you. I tried to call a couple of times. Hope you're doing well. I miss you." A pause. "Anyway, call me when you can."

As Michael listened to the voicemail a second time, he watched Cassidy make her way across the restaurant. She was certainly a beautiful young woman, but at that moment, something in Michael's spirit felt very old. He was tired and not at all feeling like the successful guy in the Maserati who arrived just thirty minutes before.

Was it his imagination, or did she not seem quite as upset as he thought she would? She slid around to get cozier with him, but he caught himself keeping a distance. Whatever made Michael feel invincible, as if he answered to no one, had gone out the window. He didn't dare look around. Suddenly he felt that all eyes were on them—not a good thing.

"Is everything okay?"

Cassidy coyly slid her toe up his leg. He *wanted* it to make him feel good, but at that moment, it did nothing.

"Yeah, I just missed several calls from my girls last night. That's odd because I was right there the entire time."

Cassidy leaned in and purred, "Except when you took that long shower. You had a couple of calls from Maggie, but I sent them to voicemail."

Michael had had enough for one day. How dare she intercept calls from his daughters? The evening was ruined. He tossed her a hundred-dollar bill. “Enjoy your meal. I’m out. See you at the apartment.” He didn’t slow down, and he didn’t look back.

“Leaving so soon, sir?” the valet asked.

“There’s an extra fifty for you if my car is here in less than a minute.”

He turned to look the valet in the eye, but he was gone, heading off to retrieve one black Maserati.

Michael planned to drive around a bit to clear his head. He tried Maggie again and left a voicemail this time. His stomach growled, reminding him that he had worked through lunch and had only a protein shake for breakfast. He was honestly starving. He had a brilliant idea.



Lillian looked up from her laptop. She was perched behind a long table in the art building. The table was one of three that formed a U-shape with stools lining the outside. The low-slung fluorescent lights above the tables didn’t seem to provide enough illumination to reach the corners of the large room, making it appear dark. Partially sculpted lumps of clay, easels with canvases and paints strewn about, and other evidences of promising genius made a creative trail around the room. A few other students worked diligently on projects of their own, oblivious to whatever was transpiring around them.

It took her a second to recognize the striking older gentleman walking across the room carrying a pizza box and two giant drinks from her favorite place with the crushed ice. He stopped directly in front of her. Lillian looked up into a familiar face that was also someone she hardly recognized anymore. He sat one of the drinks beside her with a look so weary she melted.

“Hello, Daddy.”