

Writer  
in  
Residence

THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

RHONDA MCKNIGHT



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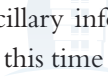
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## A Letter to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I normally include ancillary information in my author's note when I write a novel, but this time I'm sharing some information up front so that my readers won't be bogged down with details that need clarification.  *Since 1798*

First, you should know that the Gullah Geechee people are descendants of Africans who were enslaved on the rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton plantations of the lower Atlantic coast states—North and South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. Many came from the African “Rice Coast,” which encompasses present-day Sierra-Leone, Angola, Ghana, and Nigeria, among other countries. The conditions on the isolated islands where most rice was grown were undesirable for White planters, which left management exclusively to overseers. As a result, the enslaved were able to create a unique culture with deep African retentions that are clearly visible in Gullah Geechee art, crafts, foods, music, customs, rituals, and language. Learn more at [gullahgecheecorridor.org](http://gullahgecheecorridor.org).

## A LETTER TO THE READER

Next, you may wonder why the term *Gullah* is used most often in this novel. Gullah is largely attributed to the people, language, and culture in South Carolina, whereas in Georgia and northern Florida, you may hear *Geechee* more commonly used. Some people, even in South Carolina, refer to themselves as Geechee people who speak Gullah. There's no definitive right or wrong within the community, and because my South Carolinian family uses *Gullah* for everything, I chose *Gullah*.

I've tried not to overwhelm you with Gullah language in this book. However, there are a few characters who are Gullah and speak it. In places where I thought it would be overwhelming, I pared it back and used standard English or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), even though in reality that character may not have made that choice. Most, but not all, of the language can be figured out in context.

Because logistics play a large part in this story, you'll find a map of Charleston on the next page. Charleston County is huge, not so much in land mass, but in pieces. I always say it's a place of distance and closeness. Coastal lowcountry covers a wide stretch of the county with winding rivers, marshland, and barrier islands that reach toward the Atlantic Ocean. The city of Charleston—often called the Peninsula or “the Boot”—sits at the center, surrounded by communities that extend beyond the city limits, such as Ravenel and Hollywood. The barrier islands—James, Johns, Wadmalaw, and Edisto—are a network of land and water connected by bridges.

I hope you enjoy the journey!

Rhonda

## Chapter 1

Nothing could have prepared me for what I was experiencing, because failing as a writer didn't happen all at once.

It came in quiet steps—a missed deadline here, a half-written paragraph there, bad story ideas everywhere—until the silence between words is permanent.

One morning I woke up and realized I'd stopped trusting my own voice. And I wasn't the only one who didn't believe in me.

I stared at the subject line of an email that had turned my life upside down.

### **Re: Your Option Book**

I clicked Open for what had to be the twentieth time and reread it—again—though I could probably quote every single word.

*Hi Alexandra,*

*I'm so sorry, but the team has decided to pass on your proposed ideas. Though interesting, they're not consistent with the direction the line is moving in. We'd love to see something fresher, more rel-*

RHONDA McKNIGHT

*evant for today's market. Please submit a detailed outline and the first hundred pages for consideration.*

*Warmly,  
Sally Grant  
Senior Editor*

Detailed outline!

First hundred pages!

If I hadn't already crashed out about this yesterday, I'd be losing it right now.

I hadn't been asked for sample chapters since I was a new author. Since before the accolades and bestseller lists. Before *Sally*. The one who was taking the line in a different direction.

I wanted to blame her. After all, she was my spokesperson on the team. If she didn't fight for my stories, there was no one to do it. But I couldn't realistically put this on Sally. Publishing was a business. Sally had bosses too.

The first published novelist I ever met told me not to throw my life away writing. I'd attended his book signing with hopes of being inspired. I was a freshman in college. Discovering that an author was speaking at the local bookstore seemed like a gift. I had questions. When I asked what I should do to have a writing career like his, he'd replied, "You're a sweet kid. Find something else to do."

He didn't stop there. He proceeded to say other uninspiring things like:

"This is a tough row to hoe."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"It's feast or famine. More famine than feast, darling."

His cagey, bitter, smoker's voice put his message to music. Any writer talking in that many clichés was not to be taken seriously,

and I hated his book, but my eighteen-year-old self listened. I changed my major from creative writing to education and taught for eight soul-sucking yet rewarding years. If those things could coexist. I wondered if I'd have to go back to it. Back to a life without characters and stories. Sure, I could do both. Most writers worked a full-time job, but I hadn't had to. I sold enough books to pay my bills. But now, as I sat in front of my laptop staring at a blank document, the author's warning picked at the edges of my brain, bringing startling clarity and humbling remorse. Like his words, my career had become a cliché. I couldn't make my muse work. I was out of words.

No words. No story. No story. No contract. No contract. No publisher. No publisher. No career. Failure was in my present. Famine was in my future.

My phone pinged with a text from my mother, Beck. Why she texted me when she was in the next room, who knew? I guess it was her way of respecting the writing time I so righteously protected.

We are leaving in five minutes.

I sighed. The last thing I wanted to do was go out tonight. But Beck threatened to turn off the internet. We lived together, or rather she lived with me, since the house was legally in my name. However, Beck used my heavy dependence on technology to get me to obey. Obey, because at thirty-eight years old, I was still doing most of what she told me.

I protested, though. I grumbled as I changed out of my sweat-pants and then whined and moaned the entire ride, which was forty minutes, ending in the partially full parking lot of the Low-country Literacy Center in Ravenel. I'd heard about this place. My memory went back to a social media announcement about the ribbon cutting . . . a few years ago? I wasn't sure. I couldn't imagine what this outing was about.

*Please tell me she hasn't signed me up for some speaking thing.*

I didn't have the capacity to inspire anyone. Not today.

A myriad of thoughts skittered through my mind with all the possibilities of what could be going on inside, especially on a Wednesday evening. "Why are we here?"

"Because something cool is happening!" Beck shrieked, turning off the engine. She reached into her bag and removed two red-and-white church mints, handing one to me before putting the other in her mouth.

Beck cocked her head in my direction. "You'll wish you had fresh breath if you meet someone."

I stuck the mint in my pocket. "I'm not going to meet someone. I'm not even interested in meeting anyone."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Beck waved me off. She pulled the sunshade down and frowned in the mirror. I know what she saw, because she ticked off the list all the time—hooded eyelids, laugh lines, and a crepey neck. None of which were pronounced nor made her any less beautiful. At fifty-four, my mother was aging backward. Pretty soon she was going to look younger than me.

More cars filled the parking lot, which made me more curious. "Would you please tell me what's happening here?"

"I told you it's a surprise."

"Whatever it is, it's a horrible one."

"A-le-xan-dra," Beck replied, stretching the syllables of my name like she always did when she was frustrated with or placating me, "fix your attitude." She powdered her nose and dropped the compact back into her bag. "Come on." And with that she was out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

I sighed, which didn't fix my attitude, reached for my bag, and followed her.

By the time I finished the little spin through the revolving door, my aggravation had become anxiety. I should have been the

last person to be uncomfortable in a literacy center. After all, I wrote books for a living. And not just that—during my teaching years, I was a middle grades reading specialist. I loved that job. Until I didn't anymore, until the lure of writing full-time collided with the exhaustion from teaching and trying to meet state testing expectations. I needed a break from education; I took one and never went back. As I stood in this place, a little guilt circled my heart. I had completely walked away from that aspect of my life. I didn't even teach Sunday school.

I walked into the main room where everything was happening. It was full of books and pictures of students, and one wall was decorated with trophies and framed certificates. Although only seconds ahead of me, Beck was already chatting with someone, so I busied myself reading the history of the center under a series of pictures on the wall, which included the ground breaking for construction and the ribbon cutting, as well as framed newspaper articles—the first being the center's receipt of a half million-dollar grant and the second, congratulations for the center's instrumental role in improving high school writing test scores.

Next, I moved on to the trophies, which were for the Reading Bowl—the county, state, and regional contests. The center had accomplished quite a bit in three years.

I scanned the rest of the large conference room, spotting a stack of handsome-looking hardcover books on a table at the far end. I only wore glasses when driving or going to the theater, but my nearsightedness had gotten progressively worse since my last eye exam. I could not make out the title or author's name.

*Is this an author book discussion?*

I groaned. This was the last thing I wanted to do. There were Hallmark movies to watch and ice cream to be eaten. Besides, these days author talks only added to my feelings of failure, especially authors in hardcover.

Not too far from the book table, a man sat on a stool. Head down, he was tapping on his phone. Something about his mess of glossy black curls and the shape of his head looked familiar, I thought, or maybe it was his wide shoulders. Were shoulders that distinct? I didn't know, but my eyes were locked on him, waiting until he raised his head. It wasn't seconds before he did, and then I discovered why he looked familiar.

I knew him.

Kind of.

His name was Gabe, and he was a clerk in a bookstore in Beaufort. Back when I traveled for tour events, I'd had book signings at his store. He'd been passionate about books. It was cool that he was still around them. He stretched, and his silky knit sweater resettled itself nicely around his chest. He did have distinct shoulders—memorably broad and square where they attached to his biceps. We'd chat about working out. He was apparently still in the gym. I was not. Now I really didn't want to be here. I'd gotten as fluffy as my novels.

Like always, Beck found the food. She walked toward me carrying a dessert-sized plate stacked high with little snacks. "You have got to try some of this stuff."

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry."

"Oh, please. It's free," she said, removing a toothpick and pushing it into my face. "This is some kind of grilled meat with artichokes. The garlic sauce on this is to die for."

Garlic? Absolutely not. If I couldn't get out of here, I'd have to talk to Gabe. I reached into my pocket for the peppermint, opened it, and popped it into my mouth. "I said, no."

"You're being a poop head, Alex."

"I told you this was a bad idea. I don't want to be here for some random author's thing."

"You used to love book talks."

There was no point arguing with Beck. We were already here, and she was right. I loved listening to authors share the inspiration for their stories, or at least I did love it, before I entered this losing season.

A projector screen came down behind Gabe. He hopped off the stool and moved it to a corner of the room as a graphic appeared on screen. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was Gabe's headshot, very professionally captured, and a book—like the ones stacked on the table, which I could now read the title of on the screen. *Seasons*.

He wasn't just Gabe the bookseller. He was *the* Gabriel Scott, the Pulitzer finalist. Scott, the winner of the National Book Critics Award for his debut memoir.

I gasped, and the mint slipped down my throat, getting stuck in the wrong pipe. I coughed, fighting to dislodge it. I kept coughing, realizing I was in real trouble now. Heimlich. Does anyone still know how to do it? Gabe's Pulitzer-finalist face showed concern.

My mother popped up, shrieking my name. Our eyes met at the instant my soul left my body. I witnessed my own terror, watched my flailing arms, and then . . . whack! The mint flew out of my mouth like a tiny missile followed by wind, cells, DNA, and everything else inside of me. I'd been slapped on the back—hard. I collapsed into a chair.

Beck's appreciative "Thank you, Jesus" met my ears right before a cup of water appeared in my blurred vision. I accepted it and looked to my left as I raised the cup to my lips. It was Gabe, or was I supposed to think of him as Gabriel now? I blinked a few times, clearing the blurry haze, and focused on his face. I became acutely aware of why he made me so uncomfortable, why an uneasiness settled just below the surface that made my heart speed up a little and my mouth dry—a lot. He was handsome. Fine,

actually, in a he's-too-young-for-me-but-I've-still-got-eyes kind of way. I took a sip of water and lowered the cup.

He said, "Alex Wesley. Wow. It's been a long time."

*Long enough for you to write the book of the century*, I thought, raising the cup to my lips again. I continued to sip so I didn't have to say anything.

"We almost lost you." His eyes crinkled at the corners with his smile, and I reckoned—wrinkles—not so young.

My mother was talking, whispering, "Thank you," to someone other than God. Gabe stood. "You're okay, but no more small pieces of food for you tonight." He smiled again, and this time it was deep enough to reveal his dimples. *Dimples*. Who even still had those other than men in romance novels?

He walked away, or maybe it was a stroll. Which verb would I use if I were writing . . . *strut*, *stride*? Something that conveyed mad swagger.

I was still searching for my word when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned and faced the man whom I instinctively knew had been my savior/assailant. I didn't know if I wanted to thank him or hit him back. He'd probably bruised every bone from my vertebrae to my sternum.

He dropped into the chair next to me. "Sorry I hit you like that, but believe me, the Heimlich hurts worse. I was hoping I could get it out with one hard one."

I nodded and said, "Thank you for—"

"Saving her life," Beck interjected, slipping into the chair behind us.

*Shifting my insides* was on the tip of my tongue. I grinned a little and said, "Yes. Thank you for saving my life." I secretly wanted to press assault charges. My lungs were loose. And where was that mint? He needed it. That garlicky meat on the toothpick was a catering fail.

Beck interjected again, “My daughter is a writer too. She’s written almost thirty romance novels.”

A bristle of irritation ran through me. She knew I hated it when she did that. Through gritted teeth, I said, “Mom, don’t.”

Someone tapped a microphone, and then I was grateful Gabe was being introduced so all eyes were back at the front of the room.

He had a long bio. He looked embarrassed as the introduction went on and on. I knew that feeling. Listening to someone read your credentials was like being eulogized. When asked for my bio, I tried to send over the shortest one I had, but sometimes people rooted around for more info. Had Gabe given someone this long soliloquy, or was he hoping this would end soon? I couldn’t read him.

He took the microphone after prompting from the moderator and started talking about his inspiration for the book, his writing process, themes, and contemporary relevance . . . one deep, impactful story at a time. Then the moderator fielded questions. I know it must have been my imagination, but Gabe seemed to keep finding my eyes in the crowd. When he was finished, applause rang out. The moderator announced that books were for sale and that Gabe would be signing.

Beck popped to her feet. “I’m getting one.”

“Mom,” I whined, protesting because I wanted to get out of here, but she was already gone. I’d trained her well. She always supported an author with a purchase. Even when you were poor and the book had sprayed edges. Even when she would not read it. Beck didn’t read serious literature. She was afraid of feeling strong emotions. Sometimes I think she’d spent her whole life running from her own heart. She doesn’t yell. She doesn’t cry. She doesn’t let herself love out loud. Her strength looks like calm to most people, but I know better. It’s not calm. It’s control. And

I surmised it was the reason she didn't like talking about the past. There was a lot of grief there, including the death of my father months before they were supposed to get married and a complicated relationship with her parents—both now deceased.

I remained seated, feeling some kind of way for not joining everyone in line, but also feeling a way about who Gabe had become as a writer. I wasn't a jealous person, but I couldn't deny feeling envious about all he'd accomplished with his debut book when I was nine years into my career and quickly falling out of love with it. An email requiring a hundred pages wasn't helping my relationship with the business.

The moderator was back, announcing that Gabe would be drawing a winner for a giveaway.

Beck was back at my side. "You should have come for the picture." She held out her phone, showing me their friendly smiles. "By the way, I entered you in the giveaway when I registered."

Luck had zero interest in finding me. I sighed again.

"Alex, do you know how many times you've sighed and groaned tonight? Just sit."

I refused to. "I have to pee."

I left her, moving through the crowd in the direction of the restrooms. I heard the moderator saying something about luxury . . . a cabin . . . a week. Just as I reached the corridor, a different voice boomed from the speakers. A male one. Gabe's. "The winner is Alex Wesley."

Whatever it was, I didn't want it. I pushed the door and disappeared into the restroom.



From the parking lot, the literacy center appeared to be a stand-alone building. It was not. It was one of several buildings on a

forty-acre stretch of land that included income-generating rentals. I'd won a week's stay in one of their cabins. A week in a luxury cabin? Maybe I was wrong about luck, but all I saw around that place was trees. I preferred my luxury on the beach, where there were no ticks.

"Alex, you're stressed. You could use a little getaway." We were back in the car; paper cups full of meat on toothpicks occupied the cupholders between us. "It's probably lovely."

"Then you stay in it."

"Why would I stay in it? You're the one who needs to shake things up." She reached for a toothpick. "Changing your location might help your writing muse. Maybe you'll be inspired to write something different. What about that family saga you started a few years ago? The one with the five sisters who get called home for their mother's funeral."

"You remember that?" I don't even remember. It was a germ, a thought, not a story.

"It had potential," Beck replied.

"I get paid to write romance. I can't just change . . ." I let my words trail off. She thought it was easy to switch genres. Everyone did. It wasn't, but she was caught up in Gabriel Scott's climb to literary stardom.

"It doesn't have to be easy."

"I have to be realistic. We have bills. The taxes and homeowner's insurance are due soon, and you don't exactly make anything with your art projects and classes."

Beck's lips pressed together tightly before she spoke. "I'm aware of what I make or don't make. I also know what's coming due, but we have some savings."

"We can't blow through our savings. It's all we have."

Beck released a tired sigh. Her gaze bounced between me and the road. "I'm not saying, blow through anything. I'm just say-

ing . . . breathe, sweetheart. Spend a little time exploring a passion project.”

“I can’t. I need a new contract.”

She flicked her wrist as if to say, *Go on with that*. “You are a broken record about that contract.”

“Shrug it off if you want. I can’t play in these people’s faces.” Beck did not understand. If I didn’t get a project approved soon, I wouldn’t have a publisher.

We rode the rest of the way in silence with only the sound of light traffic and a gentle breeze outside the car’s windows. Once we reached our street, Beck spoke again. “What did I teach you about time, honey?”

I remembered the lesson well. I’d lived my life making lists and plans because of the words she’d drilled into me. “It’s always going to keep its promise.”

“And that promise is that it’s going to keep going. It won’t wait for us.” She pulled the car into the carport and cut the engine. “You’re old enough to know that change happens—good and bad. You never know when it’s going to be too late to do something you want to do.”

A frown settled into my brows and my heart. “Are you being a fatalist right now?”

“No, but you see what happened to that woman down the street.” Beck wagged a finger between us.

Beck was not good with neighbors’ actual names. She referred to them by what they did: Flower Lady had a yard that looked right out of *House & Garden*, Hat was the man who always wore a baseball cap. Thinking she’d be impressed, he told Beck he had five hundred hats. She was not. My minimalist mother was turned off. There was Neighborhood Watch—a pest who needed to find some business of her own—and Pam was the woman down the street. Beck had previously called her Red Car for obvious rea-

sons but no longer did because it was disrespectful at this point. Her red car hadn't moved in months because she'd had a stroke. Pam was younger than me. Beck *was* a fatalist.

"I don't mean to bring that up. It's not exactly where I was going. Honestly, I'm hopeful that you'll get married and maybe have some—"

I cut my eyes at her, and Beck let the word *children* slide back down her throat. I should have cut her off at marriage. I didn't even have a boyfriend or a date or anyone looking at me like he wanted to ask me on a date. I had nothing.

"You won this thing for a reason. You know that, so set yourself up in that cabin and let God give you some fresh wind and fresh fire."

We ended the conversation about the topic. Beck wanted to bring it up again. She struggled to keep her comments inside her mouth, and I was glad, because I'd already decided I wasn't going to the cabin. That is, until I received an email from my agent. I clicked on it and read the worst news I'd received since the day they announced Borders Books was closing all its stores.

*Alex,*

*How are you doing?*

*Call me. I'd like to talk about Sally's email. Your other ideas.*

*I need to get you set up as soon as possible. I've decided to retire.*

*Dana*

And right there my mother's words came back to me. Change—sudden and bad. Time had kept its promise.

## Chapter 2

My subdivision was nestled between the salt marsh—interwoven with creeks edged in sweetgrass—and a village shopping center. The water offered a quiet that moved with the tide, while the shopping center offered the best bookstore and lattes a writer could ask for. There were a few other stores, but none mattered more than the coffee shop right now. My anxiety was on ten, and that required caffeine, sugar, and oat milk.

I reached for my cup and took a sip. It was lukewarm already. Could nothing be perfect right now?

I picked up my pen and wrote:

Hero inherits his mother's coffee shop on James Island. He hires a barista, a single mother who, no matter how hard he tries to teach her, can't seem to make the coffee right, but he's attracted to her, so he doesn't fire her. Will he choose love or his mother's legacy?

I cocked my head, considering my note. Was this dumb, or did it have potential? I honestly didn't know anymore.

I needed an idea. A smart one.

Just then, someone jostled my table, rattling my latte dangerously close to my open laptop.

"My bad," a man said, rushing past with a to-go tray packed with four coffees. I pressed a napkin against the splash on the table. This was the story of my life—barely hanging on, about to spill over.

I leaned back in my chair and tried to focus, but the hum of the coffee shop wrapped around me like static, so I did what most writers do—eavesdrop.

Two women sat at the table in front of me, one sharing the highlights of a heated conversation, her voice sharp as espresso. "I told him if he doesn't fix that ramp, I'm not going to the boat again."

At the table to my right, a college-age kid announced into her phone, "Mom, I've decided. I can't stand statistics." She paused a beat and then added, "I told you I want to be a poet." Her words hung in the air, equal parts brave and naive.

And then behind me, from the group of yoga moms (or women who loved yoga clothing), came a laugh that shook the walls after one squawked out her pain. "You don't know how tired you can actually be until you've had your third child!"

I scribbled phrases in my notebook:

Couple in conflict over a boat.

A statistics professor needs the help of an English professor to write his dissertation.

I was lost on the tired-mom thing. I had no idea what that looked like. Either way, the other two did not rouse my muse, but they were words. Germs of ideas I'd let swirl around in my head.

My table jolted again, and this time I looked up, ready to glare. My best friend, writing soul sister, and former college roommate, Patricia Cheves, slipped into the chair across from me. “You’re here,” she said, as if I were the one who had kept her waiting.

“I said I’d meet you.”

She arched a brow. “Doesn’t mean you would. You’ve got a touch of agoraphobia.”

I pursed my lips before correcting her. “Agoraphobia is fear of leaving the house. I’m not afraid to go out.”

Trish leaned in. “And how do you think it starts, hon?” She was already on her feet, fishing her wallet out of the enormous sack she called a handbag. “I’m going to get a drink. Don’t go diagnosing yourself as normal while I’m gone.”

She joined the line of customers.

Trish was not wrong about me. I was becoming increasingly antisocial. I started therapy two years ago, the catalyst being my ex-boyfriend’s exit from my life and concern that I was just two ticks past homebody, not going out with my small friend group because of the shame of it. The shame being that he got married three months after we broke up. I needed to reconcile how I had chosen him and why I had put up with him for so long. Therapy helped with that.

Of course my therapist, now ex-therapist, wanted to dig into my past. It was a place that included a series of other broken relationships and a deceased father I barely got the chance to know. I’d been raised not to dwell in the past, my mother’s other mantra being “There’s nothing to see there.” But still I wondered if I needed to start sessions again. I was shrinking into my soul, personally and clearly professionally.

I tapped the space bar and opened a browser and typed, *Causes of severe writer’s block.*

I hit Enter, scrolled until I found a title that interested me, and read. By the time I reached the end of the article, the writer determined she was blocked due to depression. I frowned. Maybe I was depressed too.

Google would tell me, in that scary you're-likely-about-to-die kind of way Google always did. I searched for a reputable site, because of course writers know how to do proper research. The first line stated, "People don't always know they're depressed."

It listed the signs as persistent sadness, feelings of failure, hopelessness, and irritability. Then there are the more severe indicators like not wanting to go outside, a loss of interest in activities, and difficulty concentrating.

I had all these things and more. The signs that hadn't manifested yet were likely simmering below the surface. But weren't these signs of perimenopause too? I'd googled that last week when I thought I had a hot flash. One peek at the thermostat, which was set on *roast* by my mother, and I realized Peri was still where she belonged—in the future. cc 1798

I sighed and clicked out of the browser. The internet was a dangerous place when you were self-diagnosing, which of course Trish just told me not to do. Lamenting over my mental health wasn't necessary. A good idea could fix most of my problems.

A ping signaled a new email. I clicked on the tab to bring it forward. It was from Ancestry. The subject line read:

**DNA Match. Possible First Cousin**

*Ancestry.* I hadn't received an email from them in a good while. I clicked before I could stop myself. The message was from a woman named Joy Murray. Her profile picture was obscured by a large summer hat—straw, bright yellow, festive and light—so I couldn't make out her features.

*Hi Alexandra,*

*I think we might be related. According to Ancestry, we've matched as first cousins. I'd love to compare notes.*

*Joy Murray*

“Valerie.” Trish’s voice cut through my thoughts. I looked up, and the bookstore manager was approaching the table just as Trish was returning.

I closed my laptop.

Trish, ever the toucher, placed a hand on Valerie’s shoulder. “I got your text about the order.”

“Good,” Valerie said. “I increased the order to two cases. I need the books signed when they come in.”

Trish put her cup down on the table and clapped like a child at a parade. “Signing books. My favorite thing to do.”

Valerie dropped her eyes to mine, and I greeted her. “Did you ladies get an email from Friends about the book sales?” she asked.

I had to search my brain for a quick second to remember what she was talking about, and then I recalled the event I was doing with Charleston Friends of the Library. Anything that had landed in my box after Sally’s email remained unopened.

Trish retrieved her phone from her jacket pocket and swiped the screen. “I have it.”

Valerie did what reading would have accomplished. She filled us in. “It’s about the sales. I’ll be carrying both your books for the event.”

“Cool,” I said. Trish added her own version of acknowledgment. We liked working with Valerie. Selling through independent stores was important to us.

Valerie’s phone rang and she answered, waving goodbye as she rushed to the counter with it at her ear.

Trish sat. She removed the lid from her cup and stirred. “It’s noisy in here. Are you getting any work done?”

“No, but I have been ear hustling.”

Trish did a quick scan of the surrounding tables. “Anything interesting?”

I shrugged. “It’s hard to say. My brain is locked. All I can think about is Sally’s email.”

Trish pulled her laptop out of her bag. She was undoubtedly thinking of words to tamp down my despair.

Just in case she was trying to read me, trying to pinpoint where my head was at so she could find the right best-friendism for all that ailed me, I helped her with my exact thought. “I feel like a failure.”

Trish picked up her coffee, which appeared to be steaming hot—lucky her—and took a sip before speaking. “You’re not a failure.”

Our eyes locked, mine speaking sardonically louder than hers with no dial back. *I said what I said.*

Trish tapped a finger against her mug, watching me the way only a best friend can. “Do you remember the gift you gave me for graduation?”

I sighed. She was about to go deep. “Of course. A book by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *A Brighter Coming Day*.”

Trish nodded. “And in it there was a quote you tabbed from a speech she gave in 1875. Shall I read?”

“I remember it—”

Before I could get my words out, Trish turned her laptop around. Her screensaver was that quote. I read the words of the woman I considered to be my elder literary ancestor: “Apparent failure may hold in its rough shell the germs of a success that will blossom in time, and bear fruit throughout eternity.” And then I swallowed something I couldn’t quite name—part shame, part

relief.

Trish raised her cup and deadpanned, “You’ve written twenty-nine books. That’s not failure. You’ve got more books than folks have excuses. You just need a new story, not a new career.”

The thing about having a best friend who is a writer like me is that she knows my backstory and she’s good at editing until she finds the best version of the words my heart needs. The cagey, bitter author’s advice wasn’t the one I was supposed to be remembering. Frances Harper did not give up. She had the big-main-character legacy I needed to focus on.

Trish’s eyes swept the room. “When did this place get so busy?” She was not one to belabor a point. My heart had received her message, and she was ready to move on.

I didn’t fight the little smile that split my lips. “It’s almost summer.”

Trish nodded and took a sip of her coffee as if she’d forgotten where I lived. She resided in downtown Charleston, which was bustling with activity all the time. With the harbor around the corner and the beach less than two miles away, warm weather turned every nick and cranny of James Island into a parking lot.

“So, show me,” I said, reaching toward her with grabby hands.

Expressing pure joy, Trish pulled a book from her bag. It was an advance review copy of her novel that was set to release in January.

I read the title aloud like I hadn’t said or heard it a thousand times. “*The War Between Them*.” My heart warmed. Trish had eighteen novels under her belt, but this one was special. “A sweeping story of two women surviving wars on two continents whose worlds collide.” I flipped through the pages and then read the back cover copy as if it were new. It was not. Trish and I shared everything. Approved all our copy, stories, covers, and other details. We did not a thing without each other. And I’d

watched her unboxing video on social media, but still it was nice to hold the copy. “Only you could so beautifully intertwine the French and Haitian revolutions.”

Trish sucked in a dramatic breath. “I’m already getting nervous.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. The marketing budget is huge.”

Trish sighed and dropped her head in her hands before lifting it again to meet my eyes. “It is today. They could change their minds and put my money in someone else’s budget.”

“They won’t,” I said, reassuring her. Although I had no idea what that looked like in practice. I didn’t write epic historical fiction novels. My novels were romances. The kind readers picked up mostly in the supermarket or Walmart in paperback for less than seven dollars. One of my books stayed on the shelves for exactly a month. After that, a new book of the same substance replaced it. “The hardcover of this is going to be beautiful.”

Trish raised a hand to her heart and closed her eyes. “I found out today that it’s going to have sprayed edges.”

I raised my hand to high-five hers, and she met my palm. “You’ve arrived.” I handed the ARC back to her.

“Keep it. I need you to do a giveaway on your page for me.”

Of course. I would help her promote. That’s what we did for each other.

Trish took another sip of her drink. “Enough about me. Let’s hear the ideas.”

We could have done this on the phone, but she had to pass my neighborhood this afternoon on the way to a speaking engagement. I opened my notebook—slowly, resigned to face-to-face failure. “Okay, but none of them are good.”

Trish rolled her eyes. “Just run them down.”

I sighed and read the story loglines for each of the three ideas I’d come up with.

She nodded. “Tell me the rest. GMC.”

GMC was goal, motivation, and conflict. Every fiction project had to have it, or the book would fall flat.

There wasn’t much to my notes, but I shared.

“No way you’re this unenthusiastic about these ideas. They all sound solid to me.”

“They all sound familiar, like something I’ve already written.”

Now it was Trish’s turn to sigh. “Alex, if you can’t get something done for Heartware right now, maybe you should try another genre.”

*Try another genre.*

Trish and Beck must be in cahoots. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were talking to each other. My phone pinged, and I picked it up. “Saved from this awful conversation by a text,” I said, looking at the screen. “Valerie reminding me to share that event on my social media.”

“You forget to put everything on your socials.” Trish turned her phone around. She’d already posted pics of us sitting in front of our laptops with the hashtags #writerswriting, #writingbut-firstcoffee, and #plottingapaperturner, and then she included both our latest book titles.

I was shocked. “How did you do that so fast?”

“I took a picture and posted some saved hashtags.” She sighed, “Girl, it’s not that hard.”

Not that hard? She had a dancing avatar on the post, trending music, and some other animated thingy happening. “I’m glad you tagged me. Now I don’t have to spend an hour trying to get my own post right.”

Trish rolled her eyes. “Hopeless.” She reached for the ARC she’d given me and handed me her phone. “Take a pic for me.”

I took one with my phone and hers, and then, because I looked halfway decent, allowed her to take one of me pretending to read

it. When we were done with the social media stuff, Trish asked, “So, when do you go to the cabin?”

“I’m not sure I’m going.”

“What? Why not?”

I yawned, bored with the cabin conversation. “I have a comfortable setup at home.”

Trish rested her chin in her hand, eyes soft but saying what they had to say. “Home hasn’t exactly been working for you, friend.”

“I know, but I’m feeling lazy about packing.”

“It’s one week. You need like four outfits, underwear, and your toiletries, which are probably half packed from the last time you traveled. I’m sure there’s a washer and dryer in the spot if it’s ‘luxury.’” She made quotes with her fingers around the word *luxury*. “That’s barely a pack.”

I didn’t respond to her sensible words, and my silence was not to be ignored. “What’s really going on, Alex? It’s a free trip. Who turns that down?”

I thought about the depression stuff I’d read a little while ago. It was me. They were talking about me. I steepled my hands in front of my lips. Water burned the back of my eyes.

Trish reached for my hands and squeezed.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re stressed, honey.”

“Everyone has stress, Trish.”

“It’s been a rough couple of years.” Again, Trish knew my backstory, so she was an expert on my business—slightly declining book sales, the dirty details about my breakup. She continued, “There’s no downside to changing your location for a week.”

I squeezed her hands and leaned forward. “I’ll think about it. If I do, you want to come with?”

Trish pulled her hands from mine and scowled. “It’s adjacent to Caw Caw. Too much marsh and too many bugs and maybe

some ghosts.”

I laughed. “You’re silly. How is your writing?”

Trish’s shoulders slumped. “These last ten chapters are wrecking my spirit.” She flipped her wrist and looked at her watch. “I have to go. Come to the car. I have something for you.”

We packed our things, went out to the parking lot, and slipped into Trish’s SUV. The smooth sound of jazz blasted out through her elevated speakers before she pushed a button to turn the music off. I always felt like I was at a concert when I was in Trish’s car. I wished her luxury items came from her book sales. It would give me something to aspire to, but like most authors, her advances and royalties would never amount to BMW money. Trish’s income was supplemented by her family’s wealth.

She reached into the back seat for a large shopping bag and handed it to me. I looked in, and my heart swelled. It was a keyboard that was shaped like an old-fashioned typewriter. She knew I wanted one of these.

“Girl, you are the best.” I held it out, studying the box. “Where did you get this?”

“My mother picked it up . . . for me. But you know I love the one I have.”

I flipped it over and inspected the back of the box. “She’ll be upset you gave it away.”

“She won’t care that I gave it to you.”

My heart smiled. She was right. Her mother loved me, even if I was a writer. She was not a fan of it for her daughter. “I’ll treasure it always.”

“Leave it in the box until you arrive at the cabin. Make the whole experience new. A complete fresh start might surprise you.”

I nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“No thinking!” Trish exclaimed. “That’s part of your problem.

"You're overthinking."

She was putting her foot down, and she didn't often do that. "Okay, I won't think about it."

Trish smirked. "Get out of my car."

I slid off Trish's buttery seats and back into my own car with not-so-buttery seats. The comfort of my car closed in around me and appreciation swelled instantly. This ride was neat and paid for.

Before pulling off, Trish lowered her window. "You wanna get on Zoom and sprint later?"

"Yep. I need all the accountability I can get."

She nodded and drove off with me exiting behind her.



I pulled the lid up on my laptop, and the website pages I had opened earlier were still there. The article about writer's block reminded me that I was broken. A funny, but not actually humorous, thing is that I don't even believe in writer's block. People had been asking me questions on panels and in podcast interviews about my writing process my entire career. Writer's block always made the list. Up until now, my answer had always been, "I don't believe in writer's block. I believe low productivity is due to health issues or being unprepared or unmotivated." Now I was eating my words like I'd ordered them off a menu.

Beck entered my office wearing a headscarf and holding a feather duster. Both gave me pause. Beck never covered her hair, not even when she slept, claiming menopause had turned her into the Heat Miser, plus it was Saturday. Having to give up her Saturday morning cartoons because her mother made the kids clean the house from top to bottom during her childhood had traumatized her.

*"It was a burden placed on many of the children during that time."*

She was always overly dramatic about it. *“What was the purpose of having special cartoons on Saturday mornings if you couldn’t watch them?”*

So, Beck cleaned on Mondays, which didn’t always include dusting. Disrupting her cleaning schedule with a feather duster could only mean one thing—someone was coming to visit. “When did they say you could check into the cabin?”

“I haven’t had a conversation with ‘they.’” I clicked off the writer’s block article. I wasn’t looking at her, but I could feel Beck’s eyebrows hike.

“When are you going to find out?”

I asked a bothered, “Why?”

“Because I thought you’d be more excited about it.”

“You’re acting like I’ve never been anywhere. I’m not even sure I’m going.”

Beck stomped her foot, and I respectfully gave her my attention. “Alexandra, how many times have you talked about getting away to write like the big-shot authors do?”

I didn’t have anything but the stank face for all this drama. “Apparently, more than I should have since you’re bringing it up.”

“Why wouldn’t you take advantage of this? It’s free. Even the big authors pay for retreats.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “It’s not a retreat.”

Beck clutched the handle of the feather duster to her chest. “Is it because you almost choked?”

“I had a mint stuck in my throat. I did not choke.”

“Ya kind of did.” Beck turned her back and swept the duster across the top of a bookcase, adding, “You would have if it wasn’t for Walter.”

I cocked an eyebrow but said nothing.

Beck sang, “Your rescuuuer.”

“You’re on a first-name basis with him?”

I willed her to look at me, and she complied, teleporting herself in front of my desk. “He’s nice, and I was grateful.” Beck’s shoulders dropped and her face contorted. “Are you scared?”

Mothers knew everything. At least mine did. Still, I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of being right. “No. I’m lazy. I don’t want to pack.” I told stories, but lying never worked for me. Everything I was feeling rounded my shoulders. “What if . . .” I paused on the thought, the real reason I’d been hesitating. “What if changing my location doesn’t work?”

She fisted a hand on her hip. “It’ll work. Lots of writers get away and take sabbaticals.”

Beck continued to hover. She wanted to win. She usually did win, but I was grown. I didn’t have to let her. This was my work. My choice. My home. She continued, “They go for inspiration, right?”

I’d never been on a writer retreat thingy, so I had no idea, but still I protested. “Mostly in movies.”

“There’s the peace and quiet,” Beck added.

“When you’re not standing over me, it’s plenty peaceful and quiet here.”

“It’s usually quiet, but . . .” Beck inserted a long pause. “Leah is coming for a visit.”

I raised my head. The dusting made sense. I asked my first question, “Why?” and followed with the most important one, “When?”

Beck waved the feather duster and then continued to move it over items she’d already touched. “Because she wants to. I thought you were leaving. She bought one of those fancy vans you can live in. She’ll be here on Wednesday.”

“Of next week?” I hoped the lift in my question hid my disappointment.

Beck nodded.

My aunt Leah was one of my favorite people in the world when I didn't have anything important to do. Leah was like Beck on steroids. Fun, lively, a great cook, and the best storyteller. But that all meant she was also as hyper as a toddler, intrusive, and loud.

I looked down at my unproductive scribble in the composition book I used for plotting my stories. Without reading them, I was aware that there wasn't anything exciting on the pages. I'd written down a story idea for a novel that I'd written five years ago—actually used the same name for the hero and everything. My writer muscle memory was strong—stronger than the genes that fueled the creativity Beck swore I inherited from her.

“And . . .” Beck inserted another alarming pause. “She's bringing Henry, of course.”

I cut my eyes at her back. She'd added that little tidbit to drive the nail in the stake of my heart. Henry was Leah's hopelessly spoiled, barky Yorkie. If a dog could be narcissistic, Henry had the unofficial diagnosis.

“Well,” I said, acquiescing, “cozy little cabin, here I come.”

Beck squealed like I'd announced I was going to Ghana. “This is good, Alex. You know I don't believe in coincidences. You're meant to be at that center. Something wonderful is going to begin there.”

Based on how my life had been going, I was hoping Beck was right. I picked up the phone and called the contact number to get the details about my stay. As adorable as Henry was, I was not going to listen to him bark for a week.

With Beck standing over my shoulder, I made a reservation to check in on Monday.

## Chapter 3

It shouldn't have taken so much back-and-forth to get me out of the house, because now that I was headed to the cabin, I was sort of getting excited about it. It was only a week, but a week could unlock something.

Just as I pulled out of the driveway, my phone pinged an email notification. When I came to a stoplight, I stole a peek at the screen. It was from Dana. Her biweekly newsletter, *Encouraging the Writer*, had come through. I'd miss it when she was gone. She'd been with me from the beginning of my career. I'd never worked with anyone else, but I should have considered that she was in her sixties when she signed me, so that meant if I lasted in this business, I'd likely outlast her, but this wasn't the time for shifting.

The ride to the campus of the literacy center took almost an hour. Getting in was easy. I'd received a text message with two codes—one to enter the main gate behind the center and the second for the lockbox on my cabin doorknob.

I'd been told on the phone that I would not miss the cabin.

Once I came through the gate, it was a half mile down the road on the left. A carved wood sign was posted outside that read: Writer in Residence.

*Isn't that cozy.*

I pulled my car onto the parking pad. Luxurious was accurate. Very accurate for the outside. It exuded rustic charm and cozy elegance at the same time. The weathered oak exterior blended seamlessly with the surrounding trees, while large, mullioned windows offered a peek into the warm glow of the interior. A screened porch. My favorite thing. This one was adorned with a rocking chair and a small wooden table. I couldn't wait to sit and sip tea while soaking in the symphony of birdsong and other wildlife. Screened porches were a must for me in the summer, lest the bugs feast on my flesh. If the blood-type thing for mosquitoes was true, I had the type they wanted.

I slipped out of the car and removed my suitcase and laptop bag from the trunk. Balancing both along with my purse and the latte I picked up during the drive wasn't easy, but I managed to make one trip without sloshing coffee.

Inside, the cabin was even more inviting than the outside. Vaulted wooden ceilings, exposed beams, and walls lined with filled bookshelves were the first things I saw. A large desk sat near a picture window that looked out at a breathtaking view of the woods, complete with a stream in the distance that glistened in the sunlight. I parked my suitcase and put everything down on the foyer table.

I took a moment to soak in the inviting living room before venturing farther inside. The polished hardwood floors felt solid beneath my feet, and the air smelled faintly of something clean, like freshly laundered linens. A throw blanket, soft and nubby, had been staged over the arm of a plush leather armchair beside a fashionable wheelbarrow table, which had a pile of coffee ta-

ble books doing what they do best—draw the eye. There were thoughtful details: a handwoven rug, a vase of fresh wildflowers, and an antique typewriter tucked in one corner.

*Cute. Cute. Cute.*

I could imagine myself sinking into that chair with my laptop or a good book, completely losing track of time.

From the living room, my eyes were drawn to the wall that separated the space from the kitchen. It was adorned with framed quotes—powerful words from some of the greatest writers to ever put pen to paper. The first one spoke to my soul. My literary hero's words on the wall. Maybe Beck was right about this place being where I was supposed to be.

A room to myself is a luxury that I do not always enjoy.

—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



The prerequisite for writing is having something to say.

Since 1798

—Langston Hughes

The remarkable thing about this gift of ours is that it has its rise, I am convinced, in the very woes which beset us . . . It is our emotional salvation.

—Jessie Redmon Fauset

I stepped closer, trailing my fingers along the smooth edges of the frames. Each quote felt like a personal message, a quiet encouragement to let go of whatever had been stifling my creativity and just *write*. My insides fluttered, a flicker of hope sparking where there had only been frustration for weeks. Maybe this place *would* be the inspiration I needed. I stood there for a mo-

ment, pondering. Could I finally shake off this creative funk? My lips twitched into a small, cautious smile. Maybe. Hopefully.

Past the wall of wisdom, the kitchen came into view, and it didn't disappoint. Compact but thoughtfully designed, it had a vintage charm with its farmhouse sink, open shelving, and a stove that looked like something out of a dream Pinterest board. A small basket of fresh fruit sat on the counter alongside a handwritten note that read:

We hope this lovingly designed space sparks your creativity!

I smiled, suddenly grateful to whoever had curated this little piece of paradise and to Beck for believing it could be mine.

Before I reached the bedroom, the chime of my phone startled me out of my thoughts. I dashed back to the living room and fished it out of my purse. *Mom.*

I hit Accept and answered what I knew would be Beck's first question. "I'm here."

"How is it?"

"Beautiful."

Beck squealed, and the sound of her slapping her hands together was loud. "Oh goody. I've been praying it wasn't some campground fit for the Boy Scouts or something."

I walked over to the wall of inspiration. "It's not that. I kind of hate that you're not here."

Whenever I traveled anywhere remotely nice, I took Beck with me. Some of the writers' conferences and events were little vacations for my mother. She'd never had one when I was growing up. It was my way of giving her a night or two in a nice hotel with a meal neither of us cooked.

"I wouldn't invade your space for anything in the world right

now. Once you have a big bestseller, we can go on the road again.”

My chest tightened. The pressure was returning, finding my fear. I needed to get off the phone with her before all the hope I'd been feeling evaporated. “Let me settle in and get all my stuff put up. I'll call later.”

“Don't call,” Beck said. “Stay focused. Text me your word count. That way I'll know a bear hasn't eaten you.”

“I don't think there are bears in this part of Charleston.”

“Well, avoid the gators. That land is a swamp.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I said dryly, but I couldn't help smiling back.

After hanging up, I set the phone down and glanced around the room one more time. Maybe Beck was right. Maybe this little cabin in the woods really could work its magic.



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798