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—PATTI CALLAHAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*

the
MASTER
CRAFTSMAN

A NOVEL

KELLI STUART



“*The Master Craftsman* is a fascinating treasure hunt, an atmospheric tale of the Russian Revolution, and a heart-thumping generational story: What more do you want? Kelli Stuart takes us inside the enthralling world of Fabergé while introducing us to deeply felt characters who must put everything on the line to discover the truth. Compelling, exhilarating, and richly imagined, *The Master Craftsman* is historical fiction at its best.”

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“Artfully crafted and constructed, *The Master Craftsman* is the perfect blend of intrigue, suspense, history, and romance. This novel has it all! Lovers of transportive historical fiction will find all their delights met within these pages.”

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“Every so often I want to fall into a story that takes me on an adventure. One with twists and turns that I don’t expect and surprises that keep me engrossed. Kelli Stuart’s *The Master Craftsman* was such a book for me. This novel was a delightful escape from housework, a lovely distraction from daily tasks. More than once I completely lost track of time while reading and took a break only so I could Google pictures of St. Petersburg and the particular Fabergé eggs that Stuart described so well. Grab yourself a copy of this book, then buckle up for an escapade you won’t soon forget!”

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“With in-depth research and a passion for Russia’s unique culture, Stuart delivers a colorful and complex story that’s sure to delight. Part contemporary, part historical, part treasure hunt, part mystery . . . this book is unlike any you’ve ever read. Sit back and enjoy being transported to early-twentieth-century Russia where nothing is what it seems.”

Julie Cantrell, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

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KELLI STUART


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St. Petersburg, Russia, 1917



He walked quickly down the narrow staircase, hand pressed against the cold wall to steady himself. On the last two steps, his foot slipped, and he went careening forward, catching himself just before falling. His hands trembled as he straightened and rushed into the next room. Glancing over his shoulder nervously, he ducked behind the counter and pulled back the rug upon which he'd spent countless hours standing. Beneath it, the wood panels showed only the slightest variation from the rest, expertly hidden, the attention to detail his most defining characteristic.

Slipping his fingertip beneath a slat of wood, he wiggled and pried until it released. The entire panel now sprung loose. He stared into the black space below and drew in a shaky breath. Lowering to his knees, he winced at the pain that nipped his joints, and reached his arm down into the hole. It was cool inside, but dry. He had made sure that the climate of this hidden space was perfect. His fingers brushed the metal box, and he wrapped his hand around it, pulling it up, then quickly replacing the floor panel so that it would be hidden to the untrained eye.

Covering the floor with the rug, he pushed to his feet, wishing that his back and knees would better cooperate.

“Did you get it?”

He gasped and spun around, still clutching the metal box between his hands. He looked in her eyes for a long moment, a thousand needs and instructions swirling through his mind.

“Yes,” he answered quietly.

Outside, a loud bang caused both of them to jump. She put her hand to her chest while he gripped the box even tighter.

“Not here,” she whispered.

“No.”

He juttied his chin toward the room in the back and the two ducked behind the curtain. They slid through the shadows until they reached the small desk next to the wall that faced the alley.

“Dust and shadows,” she murmured as they tucked themselves beneath the window.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s nothing,” she replied.

He set the box on the table and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, mopping at his brow while she watched with tender eyes. He tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket with shaking hands, then slowly reached forward and unlocked the clasp on the box. Opening the top, he turned it toward the thin stream of light coming from the upper window. She drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

“It’s stunning,” she whispered. She leaned forward, studying the detail, the intricacies, her face etched with awe.

“It is my masterpiece,” he said quietly.

“It is the finest you’ve created.” She paused, straightening back up. “Why did you do it?” she asked.

He held her gaze for a brief moment. “I’ve felt it all unravel-

ing for quite some time,” he finally answered, eyes misting over. Another loud bang on the streets followed by angry shouts cut him short. He shook his head. “There isn’t time to explain.” He looked into her eyes with an imploring stare. “They cannot find it now. If they do, they will destroy it and they *will* kill me.”

“I . . . I don’t understand,” she breathed. “Why? This looks so . . . ordinary.”

“You haven’t seen it all.”

“The surprise?”

He nodded. At the sound of glass breaking, he leaned forward and removed the treasure with the hands of a master. Beneath it was a bed of blood-red velvet. He tugged on a small string sticking out from beneath the fabric and pulled out the top to reveal a hidden compartment underneath. Two more objects lay nestled in the hollow space below. She leaned forward and gasped, her hand covering her mouth. Looking up, her eyes met his.

“Bloody Sunday,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

His gaze glassed over as his mind wandered to that horrible morning when peaceful protestors were massacred on Nevsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg’s main street.

“I was there.” His words were a mist. He closed his eyes, trying in vain to chase away the images of the bodies and the sounds of the wailing. That was the moment when his allegiance had fissured. And this—he looked back down into the box that contained his secret—this had been his act of defiance.

“You have to take it,” he said. His voice was stronger now, more sure and determined. He resettled the top shelf, covering the rebellion, then gently laid the treasure onto the velvet. Closing the lid, he clicked it shut, the sound echoing off the

walls around them. “You must take it with you and go. And my dear girl . . .” He paused, searching her face. “You cannot tell a soul what you have until the time is right.”

She was quiet for a long moment. “I will do this for you,” she finally said.

The two held one another’s gaze. Outside, angry shouts grew louder. They were getting closer.

“The tsar has abdicated,” she whispered.

He nodded, then reached down and picked up the box that housed his masterpiece. He let the weight of it rest in his hands for the briefest of moments, like a father cradling his child for the last time.

“It’s only a matter of time before it all disappears,” he said. “All of the pieces, all of the beauty.”

He reached over and put the box in her hands. “But not this one.” He looked at her tenderly. “You must guard it well. It could be the only one left.”

The sound of shouting grew closer. She pulled the box to her chest and looked back at him, her eyes widening.

“What do I do with it?” she asked.

He shifted his stare back to the box. “This will be my legacy, but they aren’t ready for it now. I trust that you will know what to do when the time is right, and by that time I will be only a memory.”

She shook her head, blinking back tears. “What will you do?” she asked, eyes shining. She reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Don’t worry about me,” he replied. “I’ll be okay.” He pulled her hand to his chest and gave it a quick squeeze before turning her toward the back door. “You must leave now. Find a place to hide it until you can get out of the country.”

He looked around at the shop where he’d spent the last

years bent over his own worktable encouraging his employees and making his fortune.

“Not much longer now,” he said quietly.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she said, blinking back tears.

He nodded, leaning forward and placing a soft kiss on her cheek. “Until we meet again, my dear girl,” he said. “And, Alma . . .”

She looked up and met his steady gaze.

“Don’t ever forget the things I told you.”

He turned and walked quickly through the room, disappearing behind the curtain.



Alma heard him going back up the stairs to the flat he shared with his wife. His entire family was in danger now, angry rioters coming after anyone with a connection to the royal family.

She turned to the back door and flung it open, catching her breath as the icy wind smacked her in the face. Tucking the box beneath her coat and pulling it tight around her, she pushed out into the back alley. The metal burned against her chest, the weight of the secret thick. She would do what he asked. She would escape, and she would hide his masterpiece.

She turned the corner and ducked her head, pressing into the wind and walking quickly past the front of the shop on 24 Bolshaya Morskaya. The Gothic Revival façade of the building that had once been a source of pride now screamed of excess and begged to be targeted by the Bolsheviks. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the gray Finnish granite of the outside of the building, and she pushed past the display windows that had once gleamed invitingly, but which now sat dark and despondent.

The noise of the crowd swelled in the distance, and she looked down at the ground, walking as quickly as she could without breaking into a panicked run. She didn't look up when she passed the door she'd walked by a thousand times before, and she didn't see the wisps of snow falling over the sign hanging just above her head. The sign that read K. FABERGÉ.

Present Day

A light gray illustration of a plant with several flowers and leaves, positioned to the left of the first paragraph.

Ava dropped to her feet from the rope and put her hands on her hips, her chest heaving as sweat dripped off her forehead. She squatted down and rested her elbows on her knees.

“Nice workout.”

Ava looked up and nodded at Joe. She offered a fist bump to her workout partner and jutted her chin forward.

“You too,” she said. She pushed herself up and shook out her arms. “That was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be,” she added with a grimace.

Joe snorted. “They always are.” He grinned. “If it’s not hard, then you aren’t doing it right.”

She smiled back. “Word.”

She walked to her bag, grabbed her towel, and mopped her face while offering reluctant fist bumps to everyone else in the class. She’d rather only talk with Joe, but it was an unwritten rule of CrossFit that you had to be best buds with the entire group of fitness buffs in each workout you attended. Ava much preferred anonymity.

Walking outside, she pulled her sunglasses from her bag and slid them on. The watch on her wrist buzzed, and she glanced down to see who was calling.

MOM

Ava reached into her bag and pulled out her phone and her keys at the same time. She hit the answer button.

“Hey, Mom,” she said, fumbling with her keys and dropping them. She cursed under her breath as they slid beneath the car.

“Ava?”

“Hang on,” Ava said, gingerly lowering on shaky legs to her knees.

“Ava?” Carol’s voice called again through the phone’s speaker.

“Coming!” Ava said, reaching under the car and grabbing her keys. She pushed back to her feet and put the phone against her ear. “Yes, hi, Mom.” She unlocked the front door and slid into her car. “I’m here.”

“Ava, honey.”

Ava paused, her key over the ignition. Her mom’s voice sounded tight.

“I’ve just heard some . . . news.”

“News?” Ava asked.

Carol took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Ava shook her head and started the car. It was her mother’s calling card to draw things out longer than necessary.

Ava’s car sputtered to life and the radio began blaring, causing her to jump and drop her phone again.

“Agh!” She hit the button to turn off the radio and grabbed her phone once more. “Sorry again.”

“Good grief, honey, are you okay?”

Ava snorted. “Define okay.”

“You didn’t get fired again, did you?”

“Uh, no, Mom,” Ava replied. “But thanks for the vote of confidence.” She glanced in the rearview mirror as she slowly backed out of her parking space. “And I didn’t get fired from my last job. I left willingly.”

“After you argued with your boss.”

“Didn’t you say you had news?” Ava asked.

A heavy pause lengthened between them. “It isn’t good news,” her mom said, her voice strained.

“Mom, you’re killing me. Can you just tell me why you called, please?”

“It’s about your father, Ava.”

Silence engulfed them both as Ava ingested her mom’s words.

“My father?”

“His sister sent me an email this morning. You remember your Aunt Sylvie? She met you when you were little. She came for dinner after Christmas when you were . . . oh, I don’t know. I guess you were nine or ten? Maybe you were seven. Anyway, she came and ate with us because she wanted to meet you, but . . .”

“Mom!” Ava threw up a hand in exasperation. “If I tell you that I do remember Aunt Sylvie, will you move on please?”

“Well, honey . . .” Her mom paused. “It seems your dad is dying.”

Ava slowed to a stop at a traffic light. She sat silent, watching as cars crossed the road in opposite directions. She hadn’t seen her father in ten years. She had been sixteen, and it was only the fifth or sixth time she’d ever been alone with him at all. Nick Laine wasn’t a man for commitments, and his understanding of fatherhood was extremely limited. On that final visit, he’d spent most of their morning together tinkering with his motorcycle

and avoiding eye contact with Ava. She told her mom later that day that she'd rather not go back to see him again.

"Ava?"

A car behind her honked its horn, and Ava jumped. She hit the gas pedal, her wheels spinning briefly before fishtailing her across the road.

"I'm here," she said.

"I'm sorry, honey," her mom said.

"Why? I hardly know the man."

"I know. But he's still your dad."

"No. He's my father. There's a difference."

It was silent for a moment before Carol continued. "In any case, I think it would be a good idea if you went to see him. We should both go together."

Ava hit her blinker and slowed as she rounded the corner toward her apartment. The Florida sun above dimmed as a gray cloud moved over, a typical afternoon storm rolling over the palm-lined road leading to her home.

"I don't know, Mom," Ava said with a sigh.

"Ava—"

"I know, I know. He's my father," she muttered.

"Well . . . yes. And he's the only link you have to that side of your heritage. There are things that you should ask—things you may want to know so you can tell your children someday."

"I'm not having children, remember," Ava said. There was a beat, and Ava could almost see her mother pinching the bridge of her nose—something she always did in an effort to control her frustration.

"I don't believe that."

Ava turned the car off and leaned her head back, staring at the stairwell that led up to her second-floor apartment.

“Why do you want to go see him, Mom?” she asked. “He left us, remember? He left you alone to raise me. Why do you care about him?”

There was no answer at first. Ava could picture her mother staring off in the distance the way she did when she was trying to formulate a thought. Where Ava was quick and impulsive with her words, her mother was careful and deliberate—a quality Ava appreciated, even if it drove her crazy.

“I loved him, Ava,” she finally answered.

“Right, Mom. Loved. Past tense. But this is the present.”

“We had a child together. My love for him now is different, but . . . well . . .” She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I can’t let him die without at least thanking him for giving me you.”

Ava shook her head and blinked back tears that pricked at her eyes. “Well, when you put it that way,” she mumbled.

She shoved open her door and stepped outside just as thunder began rolling from the sky—a low, steady rumble that grew in intensity as it pushed over her head.

“Fine, I’ll go with you,” she said, tucking her phone between her ear and shoulder as she reached in the car for her bag.

“That’s my girl.”

Ava heard her mother’s satisfied smile in her reply. She rolled her eyes as she slammed the car door, then rushed to her apartment stairwell, dashing upstairs just before the sky opened up and a sheet of rain dropped from above.

“I have to go, Mom,” she said. “I have to get ready for work.”

“So, you promise you haven’t lost your job?”

“Mother!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll email Sylvie and tell her we’d like to stop by and see him on Saturday morning.”

“Fine.” Ava drew in a breath. “Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, honey,” Carol replied gently.

Ava unlocked her door and pushed into her apartment. She dropped her keys on the entry table and kicked off her shoes, then padded to the kitchen. She yanked open the refrigerator and sighed. There were a couple of apples, some soggy spinach that needed to be tossed, a jar of peanut butter, and an empty carton of milk.

After grabbing an apple, Ava shut the fridge and turned around, leaning back against the countertop.

“So, Nick is dying,” she murmured. She let the thought sink in for a little while, trying to dissect how she felt about it. She’d given up on the idea of having a dad a long time ago. She hadn’t even missed him. But now, with the knowledge that he’d soon be permanently gone, she felt a new emotion swelling inside her chest.

Pushing away from the counter, Ava walked to her closet and pulled down a box from the shelf. She wiped the layer of dust from the top and sat on the floor, took the lid off the box, and sifted through the contents inside.

She pulled out a news article that she’d found when she was thirteen. She’d paid fifty cents to have the local librarian print it for her on their computer so that her mom wouldn’t know what she’d been looking for.

“Oh, are you researching treasure hunts?” the librarian had asked her, and Ava had nodded, because in a way she was doing just that—only she was really researching a specific treasure hunter named Nick Laine.

She’d discovered her father’s infamous treasure hunts quite by accident. She’d been snooping around in her mom’s dresser, looking for a pair of socks, when she saw a letter her father wrote

to her mom explaining how sorry he was that he'd had to leave her and Ava, but he needed to find what he was looking for.

Treasure hunting is my passion, Carol, the letter read. It's what I do. I can't be the guy that stays home and provides for his family. I'm not that guy. I wanted to be him, but I just couldn't.

The letter led Ava to the library the next day to search the internet for the father she'd seen only a few times in her life. She held up the news article and read the headline.

TREASURE HUNTER NICK LAINE UNCOVERS
ANCIENT AZTEC ARTIFACTS

Beneath the article was a picture of her dad standing proudly at the top of a large hill, crumbled ruins behind him. He had one booted foot up on a stone and his hands on his hips, a wide grin spread across his handsome face. Ava had never seen her dad look like that—happy and relaxed. Every time she had seen him, his eyes flitted from side to side nervously, and he rarely smiled.

She dropped the article and pulled out another, this time hailing her father's accidental discovery of an emerald mine in Zambia. The one below that showed her father standing in front of the Smithsonian, the headline announcing an upcoming presentation by the famous Nick Laine detailing all his many adventures in seeking out lost treasures.

Ava leaned back against the wall and thought about all the dreams she'd had in her teens of someday reconnecting with her dad and joining him on his famous expeditions around the world. Together, they'd become an unstoppable force in treasure hunting.

“I can’t believe I wasted all those years without you,” she imagined him telling her as the two of them stood at the mouth of a cave, preparing to hike deep into its belly and unearth its secrets.

Ava would lie awake at night imagining all the places she’d finally get to see, an itch for exploration working its way into her heart. She and her mom never went anywhere besides a yearly trip to see her grandparents in Miami, and one time her mom managed to save up enough money to take her to a little cabin in the Smoky Mountains during spring break. But the weather was unseasonably cold while they were there, and as Floridians they were unprepared to handle it, so they mostly sat by the fire and tried to stay warm.

Ava wanted to travel, to see the world and discover new people and places. But she’d long given up on that dream. She let it go around the time she realized that Nick Laine was never going to change, and he was never going to invite her to be a part of his team. Still, as she stared at the articles she’d read so many times, she felt that familiar stirring wiggle its way back in. The longing for adventure was always there, bubbling beneath the surface, tempting her to let down her guard and tap into it.

She glanced back into the box. At the bottom, beneath all the news clippings, was a picture of her and her dad together. It was the only picture she had of the two of them. She was about two years old, and the photo was taken shortly before he left. Ava sat in her dad’s lap, a large grin splitting wide her face. Her wispy blond hair had been pulled into two crooked pigtails, and she clutched under her arm a stuffed giraffe that her mom told her Nick had brought back from one of his business trips. Nick had his arms around her waist, and he was looking at the camera with a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Ava studied the picture closely. “Why did you leave?”

She dropped the photo back in the box, stood up, and pushed the box into place on top of the closet shelf. She glanced at her watch and winced, running to the bathroom to shower quickly. She hadn’t lost her job yet, but her boss had told her that if she showed up late one more time, she’d have to start looking for new employment.

Ten minutes later, Ava dashed out the door, hair dripping wet and still trying to tuck her white shirt into her black pants as she yanked open her car door. With a twenty-five-minute drive to her job at a restaurant in Tampa’s Hyde Park Village, she was cutting it close. She slid into the seat, jammed the key in the ignition and turned it. Nothing. She turned again and let out a frustrated growl as the engine sputtered and coughed but wouldn’t turn over. She pumped the gas pedal a few times and turned the key again, this time the car making only a few clicking noises. She banged her fist on the steering wheel, then leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes.

A tap on the window startled her. Ava yelped and turned.

“Hey, sorry!”

She shoved open the door and shook her head as her neighbor Zak stepped back. Ava stood up and slammed the door behind her.

“You okay?” he asked. His jet-black hair was slicked to the side as though he were ready to have a school yearbook photo taken. Tall and lanky, Zak made up for his lack of girth in personality. His bright blue collared shirt was tucked into a pair of slim khaki pants that only made him look like a skinny Clark Kent. Zak pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up on his face and smiled.

“I’m fine,” Ava muttered.

“You don’t look fine,” Zak said. “You look frustrated.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I am.” She kicked the side of her car. “Stupid car won’t start, which means I can’t get to work, which means I’m probably getting fired today. So that’s awesome.”

“I can take you to work,” Zak said.

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’s totally out of your way.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m working from home today, so I have the time. Let me help you.”

Ava considered his offer for a moment. It was no secret that Zak had a crush on her. Their apartments were right next door to one another, which offered a lot of opportunity for interaction. Their complex was forever throwing mixers and parties where she and Zak would make small talk. Several times, they’d joined up with a few of their neighbors to volunteer at the local homeless shelter, where Ava noticed Zak had an especially endearing way of conversing with people who were struggling with the hardships of life. His attention hadn’t bothered her at first. Zak was quirky and funny in his own strange kind of way, and Ava had enjoyed talking with him, until it became apparent that he enjoyed talking with her for different reasons. Eventually, the attention began to annoy her, and she had purposely been putting distance between the two of them, but Zak wasn’t easily swayed. He’d made it quite clear that he would like nothing more than to spend quality time with her. He was sweet, and he could definitely pass as handsome with a little bit of work, but not wanting to lead him on, Ava had turned him down as gently as she possibly could several times.

She glanced at her watch and then sighed. “I guess if it’s not too much trouble, that would be fine,” she finally answered.

Zak grinned. “Splendid!”

Ava fought to suppress a smile. It was one of Zak's calling cards to talk like a ninety-year-old grandmother. What guy said things like "splendid"? She reached into her car and grabbed her purse, then followed Zak across the parking lot to his little black Audi and slid into the passenger seat.

"Dude"—she looked around at the spotless interior—"your car is freakishly clean. Is it new?"

"Oh, no. I've had this car for five years now. This is the same car you rode in with me a few months ago when we volunteered."

"Yeah, I thought it was new then too." Ava laughed. "It even smells new! How do you do that?"

"How do I do what?"

"Keep it looking and smelling like you just drove it off the car lot!" Ava said, shaking her head in amusement.

Zak shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I don't eat in it, and I vacuum it out every couple of days. And I wash it every Saturday morning."

Ava gaped at him.

"What?" Zak asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"So, do you like working at that restaurant?" he asked after a brief minute of silence.

Ava shrugged. "No. But it covers the bills, and it's all I've got right now."

Zak merged onto the highway and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "But you have a college degree, yes?"

Ava sighed. "Yeah, I've got one. I majored in world history with a minor in sociology."

"Well, that sounds very interesting."

"It is! I just can't do anything with it. My mom tried to warn

me, but if I was going to suffer through college classes, I wanted to at least be interested in what I was learning.” She shrugged.

Zak nodded. “I understand that. I did not want to study business statistics and computer sciences, but my father insisted. It was terribly boring.”

Ava turned to look at Zak. “I know you’re in IT or something, but I don’t know what that means. What do you actually *do*?”

“I do data analysis and statistical reconfiguration for a local marketing firm.”

Ava snorted. “Uh, I don’t even know what you just said.”

Zak smiled. “It’s okay. It is as boring as it sounds like it would be. On the side, I do web design, which I actually enjoy. I want to start my own business at some point, but right now I must pay the bills. You understand.”

“Too well,” Ava murmured.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Zak pulled up to Ava’s restaurant seven minutes before she was due to clock in, and she offered him a quick thanks.

“I’ll get someone from the restaurant to drive me home tonight, so you don’t have to come back,” she said, pushing open the door.

“Oh, I don’t mind! I can come get you, and maybe we could go grab a bite to eat.” His eyes lit up, and for a brief moment Ava considered taking him up on it only because he looked like an eager puppy dog longing for a pat on the head. But she swallowed hard and shook her head.

“Thanks, but I’m usually wiped after work, so not tonight. But I really do appreciate the lift, Zak!”

His face fell, but he quickly recovered. “No problem, Ava. Anytime.”

“Oh, and Zak,” she said, leaning down to look at him across

the seat. “Try eating some french fries in here. It won’t kill you.” She gave him a wink, and he smiled.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

She laughed and shut the door, then turned and rushed into the restaurant. She tugged open the door and turned back to see Zak lingering at the curb. He gave her a big smile, waved, and eased his car onto the street.



Saturday morning came more quickly than Ava would have preferred. She had spent the week juggling rides to and from work, several times opting to call an Uber rather than ask Zak for help again, even though she knew he would drop everything he was doing in a heartbeat and help her out. Ava stepped out of her apartment and locked the door, then turned and walked down the stairs. She glanced at her car and let out a frustrated sigh. She’d finally had someone come out and look at it yesterday only to learn she needed new spark plugs and a host of other small things that added up to a bigger price tag than she could afford. She was going to have to ask her mother for money.

Ava leaned against the trunk of her car and waited for her mom to arrive. They’d planned to ride together to see Nick and her Aunt Sylvie. Apparently, her father had gone to live with his sister in Lakeland a few months back when the cancer had begun advancing beyond what the doctors could control.

Ava jumped at the sound of a car horn and looked up to see her mom turning into the parking lot. She pulled up, and Ava opened the door and slid in.

“You look nice,” Ava said, taking in her mother’s perfectly styled hair and made-up face. “Red lipstick?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, I just freshened up a little bit this morning,” her mom said with a sheepish wave of the hand.

Ava tossed her a skeptical look. She reached out to close her car door, glancing up just in time to see Zak stepping out of his apartment. He made eye contact and waved enthusiastically.

“Good morning, Ava!” he called out. He wore a different polo today, once again tucked into pants that were just a little too tight.

“Hey, Zak,” Ava said.

“Oh, is this your mother?” he asked, peering into the car.

“Yeah,” Ava said with an impatient sigh. “This is my mom, Carol.”

Zak quickly crossed over to their car and leaned forward, offering an awkward wave to Carol, who waved back with an amused grin.

“Well, hello there, Miss Carol. It is a pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“And you as well. Zak, is it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He thrust his arm across the seat over Ava and shook Carol’s hand. “So, what are you all up to today?” Zak asked, looking back and forth between the two.

“Oh, not much,” Ava said. “You know, this and that. Girl stuff.”

Zak nodded knowingly. “I get it.” He stood up and stepped away from the car. “Well, have a lovely day, ladies! And Ava, if you need a ride anywhere at all this week, let me know. I’m always happy to help.”

“Thanks, Zak,” Ava muttered. She shut the door and leaned back against the seat as Carol snickered beside her.

“Well, he was . . . pleasant,” Carol said. “And clearly smitten with you.”

Ava groaned. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her mom laughed out loud. “What a peculiar young man. Does he always talk like that?”

Ava tossed her the side-eye and pursed her lips. Carol laughed again and pulled up to the stop sign, checking her hair in the rearview mirror briefly before looking back at the road and pulling out of the parking lot.

“So . . . ,” she finally said. “Why would you need a ride anywhere this week?”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about that either.”

“How much do you need to fix it?” Carol asked with a sideways glance.

“Seriously, Mom. We don’t have to talk about this right now, okay?”

For a long time, the two sat in silence as the tension worked its way through the car.

Finally, Carol spoke up. “Are you nervous?”

Ava shrugged. “Are you?”

“A little,” Carol said. “It’s going to be difficult to see him this way. Sylvie said he’s very weak and frail. We need to prepare ourselves for that.”

They lapsed into silence again until Ava spoke. “How come you never talked to me about what Nick did for a living, Mom? How come you didn’t tell me about the treasure hunting and the traveling?”

Carol was quiet for a long time. “It was . . . complicated,” she finally said.

“How?”

“Well . . . you are so much like your father,” she said. “You have the same itch that he did, and the same tendency to flit from one thing to another without settling down and being

responsible. I didn't want to fill your head with some romantic idea of a life of adventure, when practically that's not how life really works."

"It worked for him," Ava said pointedly.

"Yes, but at our expense," Carol answered, her voice quiet. "He got to do all the things he wanted, but it cost him his family. It cost you your father. It cost me the love of my life."

Ava was quiet for a long time. "I've followed his adventures for a while now."

Carol nodded. "I know. I suppose that was right—you should have known about him and his work all along. I wasn't open about all this with you. Looking back, I could have done things differently. I'm sorry for that."

Ava glanced at her mom and watched as she swiped a few tears from her eyes. "It's okay, Mom," she said. "It wouldn't have changed anything. I know who Nick is professionally, and I know who he is personally. I get it."

Carol nodded. They drove a long way in silence, lost in thought, mulling over the past they couldn't change and the future that loomed before them without the possibility of Nick Laine being a part of it.

Finally, Carol pulled off the highway and glanced at her phone for directions. "We're almost there," she said softly.

Ten minutes later, they turned down a quiet street. Trees lined both sides, with Spanish moss hanging down and brushing the top of the car as they drove by. Down the hill, at the end of the road, a giant lake gleamed in the morning sun, the ripples dancing in the light like diamonds.

"It's pretty here," Ava said.

Carol didn't answer. She simply gripped the steering wheel and kept her eyes forward. Moments later, she turned onto a

narrow driveway leading to a white house, its picket fence surrounding a perfectly manicured lawn. A giant oak tree stood proudly in the front yard, and bright flowers lined the walkway to the door. An American flag hung from the side of the house, waving in the gentle breeze.

“Sylvie was always good at making things look pretty and inviting,” Carol murmured.

“I only met her the one time, right?” Ava asked.

“She came and visited several times when you were little, before Nick left. But yes, only once that you would probably remember.”

“Why?” Ava watched as Carol checked her reflection in the mirror, fluffing her hair nervously.

“Sylvie is . . . different.”

Ava turned to face her mom and raised an eyebrow. “Mom, I’m twenty-six now. You can stop sugarcoating things for me.”

Carol smiled. “Well, I guess that’s true. Sylvie didn’t like me. She thought I was simpleminded, and she believed I would hold Nick back in life.”

“So, she was a b—” Ava stopped under her mom’s withering stare. “Female dog,” she finished with an innocent smile.

Carol suppressed a smile in return. “I suppose you could put it that way. Sylvie is just a little . . . rough around the edges. She’s six years older than Nick, and she has always felt a strong, motherly protection for him.”

“Why? Where was their mother?”

“I never really got the full story. I actually didn’t meet my mother-in-law. She died shortly after Nick and I began dating. All he said was that she was a woman who’d been disappointed in how her life turned out. I don’t fully understand why.”

“And my grandfather?”

“He died when Nick was young, but he’d been a treasure hunter as well. I don’t think he was around much when your dad was growing up.” Carol glanced at Ava. “Sometimes we turn out like our parents without even really trying.”

Ava looked back at the house. “That side of the family is from Finland, right?”

“Yes,” Carol answered. “Your grandmother moved to the States as a teenager and met and married your grandfather before she turned twenty. Your great-grandparents lived in Finland their whole lives. Your dad always said he wanted to take me to Finland.” Carol sighed wistfully. “He said I would love it there.”

Ava looked at her mother for a long moment, silently taking in the strong woman who raised her without ever complaining about having to do it alone.

Carol shifted her gaze to Ava and offered a thin smile. “Well,” she said. “I guess it’s now or never.”

Ava was feeling particularly drawn to the option of never, but instead, she pushed her door open and followed her mom up the front walk and onto the porch. Carol knocked lightly on the door, then the two stepped back and waited for it to open.

Soft footsteps padded across the room inside the house. Ava swallowed hard as the front door swung open and she found herself face-to-face with a woman who looked to be in her sixties. She was short and stout, with thick, gray hair that had been pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a floor-length dress that made her look wider than Ava suspected she actually was. Her mouth was turned up in a forced smile, but her eyes remained skeptical as she took in the sight of the two women.

“Hello, Carol,” Sylvie finally said. She pulled the door open wider and let them step inside.

“Hi, Sylvie.” Carol leaned forward and offered her ex-sister-in-law an awkward hug.

Sylvie pulled back and turned her gaze to Ava. “Well, you’ve grown into quite a lovely young woman.”

Ava thought she sensed a note of gentleness in her aunt’s voice, but she couldn’t be sure, so she just offered a smile in return. “Hey, Aunt Sylvie,” she murmured.

Sylvie closed the door and gestured them inside. “Nicky is resting right now,” she said. “He wanted me to wake him when you got here, but I’m not going to do that just yet.” She led them into the kitchen, a small room that was so neat and clean and white that it almost made Ava’s eyes hurt. There were tones of black here and there in the cabinet hardware, two tea towels hung over the oven door, and green plants spilled from flower boxes under the windows, but otherwise, the entire kitchen was white. It looked like it came straight from a magazine.

“Lovely kitchen, Sylvie,” Carol said. She sat down at the table and looked around admiringly.

Ava knew that her mother always wished she had a cute, picture-perfect home. “But I don’t have a decorator’s bone in my body,” Carol used to say in frustration when the two of them would walk through home decorating stores looking for knickknacks to spruce up their space. Inevitably, they always left with nothing and went to get coffee instead.

“Thank you,” Sylvie replied. She opened the fridge and pulled out a bowl of fruit, setting it on the counter in front of them. “I’ve made some scones, as well,” she said. “And I have coffee or green tea. Which would you prefer?”

“Oh, um . . .” Ava let out a nervous cough as Sylvie stared

at her through narrowed eyes. “Coffee. I’ll take coffee,” she finally answered.

Sylvie shifted her gaze to Carol, who nodded that she’d have the same, and they both watched as Sylvie prepared two cups of coffee and set it before them, along with a plate of orange scones, lemon curd, and the fruit. They each got a dainty plate, and Sylvie led the way by piling fruit on top of her scones, then gesturing to Carol and Ava to do the same.

Ava had never eaten a scone, and anything with the name “curd” sounded questionable and disgusting, but because she found her aunt moderately intimidating, she grabbed a little of everything and took small bites in between gulps of coffee.

“How have you been, Sylvie?” Carol asked.

“I suppose I’ve been alright,” Sylvie replied. Awkward silence hung between them for a beat.

“I heard about Hank,” Carol finally said, hands gripped around her coffee mug. “I’m terribly sorry.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Sylvie said with a wave of her hand.

Ava noticed the way her fingers trembled, and she got the distinct impression that it actually wasn’t fine.

“Hank died four years ago, and both kids left the state, so I’ve spent most of my time pouring into my home decorating business.”

“Where do your kids live now?” Carol asked.

Ava watched her mom take a sip of her coffee and noticed the concealed grimace. Her mother hated coffee unless it was swimming in sugar and cream and looked more like a milkshake than anything else.

“Sarah and her husband are in South Carolina. They have three kids, so they’re too busy to call, but they come down once a year for a quick visit and a trip to the beach.”

“Sarah has three children?” Carol shot Ava a look. “How old is she now?”

“She’s twenty-eight,” Sylvie replied.

Ava shifted her eyes to her plate and refused to meet her mother’s pointed gaze. So what if she had a cousin who was only two years older than her and already had a husband and kids? Ava took a large bite of her scone and busied herself chewing.

“And Jason . . .,” Sylvie continued. “Well, who knows what Jason is up to these days. That child can barely get his head screwed on straight. Last I heard he was living in Colorado and working at a ski resort. He can’t ski, mind you. I think he’s serving coffee in a lodge on the side of a mountain.” She rolled her eyes and took a sip of coffee.

Ava smiled and instantly decided that she and Jason would probably have gotten along quite well growing up.

“And what do you do, Ava?” Sylvie asked.

“Me?” Ava swallowed hard, trying not to choke on the scone that she was struggling to swallow. “Oh, you know,” she said. “I’m just working hard to pay bills and enjoying my twenties.” She offered a tight-lipped smile, and Sylvie narrowed her eyes slightly.

“Well, then,” Sylvie said. “Good for you.”

Ava blushed and shifted her gaze away from her aunt again. “So . . . how is my father doing?”

Sylvie sighed and set her cup down gently. “He has good days and bad days. We’ve set up hospice care. They said he could have anywhere from a few weeks to a few months to live.” She glanced at the door just off the kitchen, where Ava suspected Nick was staying, then shifted her gaze back to the two women. “That man is stubborn,” she said, her voice lowered, “and he’s got his mind wrapped around one last hunt that he says he

must complete before he passes, so I wouldn't be surprised if he lasts a little bit longer."

"He thinks he's going on another hunt?" Carol asked.

"Oh, he's not going anywhere." Sylvie leaned back and crossed her arms. "He'll have to leave this house over my dead body."

Carol smiled as Ava's eyes widened.

"So how does he think he's going to hunt?" Ava asked.

"He's hoping to find someone to go in his place. He's looking for . . . oh, what's the word he used. It was a strange one from that *Star Wars* movie."

"He wants a padawan?" Ava asked.

"Yes! That's the word he used!" Sylvie threw her arms up over her head. "I don't even know what that means!"

"It's like an apprentice," Ava said with a smile.

Carol looked at her daughter with an amused expression. "How do you know that?"

"It's *Star Wars*!" Ava exclaimed. "How do you *not* know that?"

Sylvie shook her head. "Well, at any rate, Nicky thinks he is going on a remote expedition with a young pada-whatcha-call-it leading the charge."

"What is he looking for?" Ava leaned forward toward her aunt.

"He won't tell me," Sylvie grumbled. "Says I wouldn't understand."

A bell rang from behind the door off the kitchen, and all three women sat up.

"That's Nicky." Sylvie pushed to a stand. "Let me go tell him that you all are here. He's . . . he's anxious to see you." Her eyes settled on Ava when she spoke.

Sylvie left quietly. Carol and Ava watched her tuck into the room and close the door behind her.

“I haven’t seen Nick in such a long time,” Carol murmured.

“It’s gonna be okay, Mom,” Ava said, grabbing her hand.

Carol squeezed and offered Ava a tight smile.

A moment later, Sylvie opened the door. “Okay,” she said. “Nicky will see you now.”