

Make Her
Wish
Come True



A.L. Brooks



Chapter 1

“OH, ABBY, THERE YOU ARE—THANK goodness!”

Abby whirled around from her perusal of the storage cupboard, heart racing at the urgency in Arlene’s tone.

Her boss stood in the doorway of the small room where they kept spare office equipment along with kitchen and stationery supplies. Arlene’s face was flushed, and one hand was pressed to her sternum.

“Are you okay?” Abby asked, stepping closer, peering into Arlene’s brown eyes with concern.

“Fine, fine. But Chelsea called in sick! And Tiffany will be here any moment.”

“Chelsea is sick? Today?” Abby’s heart dropped to her stomach.

Arlene wrung her hands. “She is. And I know this isn’t fair, but you know I already have that outside appointment at ten, so...”

“Oh God.” Abby swallowed. Then she straightened her spine. Okay, not an ideal way to start a Monday, but she could do this, right? Tiffany Fitzgerald was just a person. Admittedly, the most important person at Ki magazine, the number-one online lifestyle magazine in the US. She was the brainchild behind the concept, the woman with a vision who some said was almost supernatural in her uncanny ability to influence the worlds of fashion and décor. The woman who had zero tolerance for incompetence, and whom Abby had only met once in such cringe-inducing circumstances that she still shuddered at the memory. The coffee she’d spilled down Tiffany’s dress had thankfully not been hot, so the only damage done was to the expensive clothing. But the glare in Tiffany’s eyes had given Abby nightmares for weeks afterwards.

And now with Chelsea, her personal assistant, off sick and Arlene unavailable, the only person left in the administration department who could look after Tiffany on one of her rare visits to the building was Abby. She of the lowest-paid job in the company and the least amount of experience, having only started working at Ki nine months previously.

A cold sweat trickled down her spine, but she gritted her teeth and looked Arlene square in the eye. “Okay, I’ve got this. I swear. Can you show me her calendar?”

Arlene clutched Abby’s forearms. “Bless you!”

Thirty minutes later, Abby waited nervously for the elevator to arrive on their floor. With the heads up she’d requested from Jimmy—on security at the front desk in the lobby eighteen floors below—she was one hundred percent ready to greet the infamous Ms. Fitzgerald. Tablet in one hand with Tiffany’s schedule on screen, she used her other hand to smooth down, for about the tenth time, her skirt.

The elevator announced its arrival with a loud ping and the doors slid open.

Abby swallowed hard.

Tiffany stepped out of the elevator, her poise straight and elegant, aided by her almost six feet of height. Only the smallest of crinkles to her forehead signified that she did, unfortunately, remember exactly who Abby was.

“Good morning, Tiffany,” Abby said brightly, her voice only wobbling a little.

“Hello.” Tiffany brushed past her and down the hallway toward her office.

Abby hurried after her. “Your ten-thirty is here and waiting in the conference room. They have coffee, pastries, and the briefing packs. Your eleven-thirty has asked to rearrange to next week. I told them you had a full schedule already so they will be in contact with Chelsea once she’s back in the office. Your twelve has confirmed, as has your three p.m.”

A part of her brain cringed at the banality of the words. She was a journalist, for Pete’s sake! Well, she had a journalism degree, at least. But here she was organizing coffee and appointments. It sucked.

Tiffany reached the doorway of her office and turned her head to Abby, one eyebrow quirked. “Good. I will eat lunch at two-fifteen here in the office. My usual from Earth Soul.” She reached into her purse and pulled out two twenty-dollar bills. “And right now, I would like a double-shot soy latte, no foam, from Java Me Up. Thank you.”

And with that, she closed the door to her office, leaving Abby staring at the white-painted wood, her nose almost touching it.

Well, it could have been worse. She heaved out a relieved breath, spun on her heel, and headed back down the hallway.

Halfway along, she spied Stacy waiting by her tiny cubicle.

“Hey you!” Stacy waved, a big smile on her face. “Is it true? You’re Tiffany’s bitch for the day?”

Abby laughed then swatted Stacy on the arm. “Hardy har. How was your weekend?”

Stacy’s bright blue eyes sparkled. “Good. Jason and I narrowed down the wedding venues at last. We’re going to visit the shortlisted ones again over the next week or two. How was yours?”

“That’s great! And yeah, mine was pretty good too. Worked a little more on that short story I was telling you about.”

“Oh cool! Maybe one day you’ll let me read something of yours.” Stacy smiled warmly.

Abby’s face heated. She never shared her writing with anyone, even though she was happy to talk about the process. And she certainly couldn’t imagine letting *Stacy* read anything. Stacy was a fantastic writer, and someone Abby admired hugely. She had been the stand-out student when they were in college together, and she’d only improved since then. Abby was in awe of Stacy’s progress in the cutthroat world of journalism. Her award-winning social commentary column, *Our Lives*, was one of the *Ki*’s most-read, week in, week out.

“No pressure!” Stacy held up her hands, then her eyes tightened. “God knows there’s enough of that around here,” she muttered. Then she looked back at Abby and smiled once more. “Anyway, gotta run. Catch you at lunch?”

“Sorry, no can do. Have to go get Tiffany’s lunch, and I’m pretty sure she’s going to run me ragged all day. I’ve seen how exhausted Chelsea looks after her visits.”

Stacy leaned in. “I know. Wanna bet Chelsea’s not really sick today but just needed a break from Ms. Demanding?” she whispered.

“I wouldn’t blame her.” Abby shook her head.

“Ms. Baxter, will you be heading out any time soon to get that coffee?” Tiffany’s cutting voice called down the hallway behind them.

Abby froze, met Stacy’s wide eyes, then turned to face Tiffany. “On my way, ma’am!” She held up the money, as if that was some kind of proof.

Behind her, Stacy snickered.

Tiffany stared at Abby for a moment, then shut her door.

Abby groaned. “This day is going to kill me, I know it.”

“You’ll be fine. I have every faith in you.” Stacy patted Abby’s back.

“Easy for you to say! You just have to sit at your desk and create wonderful words, as always.”

Stacy’s smile dropped for a moment, then quickly popped back onto her lips. She mock-saluted. “Then I and my words shall leave you to your coffee excursion.”

Abby sighed. “Thanks a lot.”



Erica had finished wiping down the last three tables when the front door flew open violently behind her. It crashed against the wall, and she whipped around, heart thudding.

“Sorry!” A young white woman, probably about Erica’s own age of twenty-eight, stood in the doorway with her hands held up in apology. Her face was scrunched into a deep frown, marring her otherwise cute features. Long, thick brown hair cascaded over the shoulders of her silky, burgundy-colored shirt. “Are you closing?”

Erica glanced at the big clock behind the counter, which showed the time as two fifteen; they closed at two thirty, which was when she could get out of here and home to Kayla for their precious forty-five minutes together.

She tucked the cloth into the pocket of her apron. “Soon, yes, but I can get you something to go?”

“Great!” The woman rushed over. “I need a piece of the spinach quiche with a side of quinoa salad and an All Aglow juice, and I need

it like five minutes ago because I'm so late and she's so gonna kill me." The words were fired so fast they practically ran into each other in their haste to leave the woman's mouth.

Erica blinked, processing what she'd said. "Ah, sorry, we're all out of the quiche. We've got some of the gluten-free veggie pizza left, or—"

"Noooo!" The woman tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment.

Her dramatic response turned the heads of the few customers left in the café.

The woman shifted the heavy-looking bag on her shoulder. When she looked back at Erica, her lips were set in a grim line. "It has to be the quiche. Don't you have some in the back you can just, you know, heat up or something?"

Erica bristled at the demanding tone and walked over to the counter before answering, if only to give herself time to avoid a snippy response. It had been a long day, what with Kayla waking her up three times in the night with imaginary ills. Never mind the fabulous moment earlier in the morning when Erica had somehow not attached the lid of the blender properly and had spray-painted half the kitchen—and herself—with carrot juice.

"Come on, please," the woman begged. "I'm having a *really* bad day, and I really, *really* need to get this food and get out of here. And, like, fast. So could you please just hurry it up?"

Erica spun on her heels to face the woman, her tolerance heading for the exit at lightning speed. "*You're* having a bad day? I bet half the damn city is, including me! So how about you ditch the attitude if you actually want to get some service here?"

As soon as the words were spoken, she slammed her mouth shut, wishing she could take them back. She was *not* supposed to talk to customers like that. Earth Soul, the vegan café she'd worked at for the last three years, was supposed to be a place of peace and calm, offering nurturing food and drinks to ease their customers' days and lives. God, what had she done? She needed this job and the good money she earned from tips. She opened her mouth to apologize but the other woman spoke first.

“Fine.” The word came from between gritted teeth. “Please, could you possibly check in the back to see if you have any more of the spinach quiche that you would be able to prepare for me?” Her tone was all forced sweetness.

Erica blew out a breath, the puff of air swirling the stray strands of hair that had escaped her loose bun. Okay, apparently not going to lose her job immediately, as the woman’s desperation seemed to take precedent over any offense she may have taken. Clearly the quiche, that particular quiche, was important.

“I’ll see what we’ve got.”

She headed for the kitchen, where Marika was busy cleaning the last of the pans and utensils that didn’t fit in the dishwasher.

“Hey,” Marika said, bobbing her head to the music she constantly listened to in her in-ear pods whenever she was in the kitchen.

“Do you know if we have another spinach quiche in here?” Erica pointed at the refrigerator. “Got a rude customer pleading for a slice.”

Marika rolled her eyes. “Lucky you. And yeah, I think Candace cooked up two or three for tomorrow. You know she won’t mind if you take a slice now.”

Relief washed over her—the last thing she wanted was to have to go back and tell the woman they were all out. She could only imagine the response—and the potential fallout for herself.

Within two minutes, she had a slice of the quiche prepped on a microwave plate and was headed back to her impatient customer.

When she walked back into the room, the woman was pacing the floor, her cell pressed against her ear. The burgundy of her shirt was such a great color for her creamy complexion. Heck, if Erica was honest, despite the attitude, the woman was *very* nice to look at all over. Gorgeous big brown eyes, dark and beautifully sculpted eyebrows, a nose that some might say bordered on a little too big for her face, but framed by high cheekbones that diminished its impact. And full, plump lips that shone with a hint of lipstick and looked like they’d be as soft as—

Erica swallowed hard and tore her gaze away from her overindulgent perusal. It had been a while since she’d allowed herself the time to

look at a woman—or man, for that matter. And now was the worst timing ever. “Do you want it heated up?” she called.

The woman said a couple of words into her phone then rammed it into her pocket. She hurried over to the counter, her eyes wide. “You found some?” Her voice was a squeak. “Oh my God, you are a lifesaver! Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

All this for a piece of quiche? Erica threw her an uncertain smile. “You’re welcome. So, heated or not?”

“Please. Yes. Thank you.”

The woman smiled then, and Erica’s breath caught at the transformation. Her face practically glowed, her eyes radiant.

“You’re welcome.” Her voice came out a little croaky; she cleared her throat. “Remind me again, which juice was it?”

“All Aglow.”

“Small or large?”

The woman bit her bottom lip as she pondered the question. “Large.”

Erica tore her gaze away from her mouth. “Okay. Give me a minute and I’ll have that all done for you.” She turned her back to finish prepping the food and juice—and to force herself not to stare at that beautiful face any longer.

When she’d bagged everything up, she placed the paper sack on the counter, then rang up the total. “That’s twenty-five dollars, please.”

The woman nodded and pulled a battered wallet from her bag. She counted out four tens and handed them over. “Keep the change.”

Erica’s fingers froze on the bills. “That’s too much.”

The woman sighed and smiled ruefully. “You earned it.” She paused. “I’m sorry for being an asshole. The person I’m ordering for... Well, let’s just say she’s demanding, and it seems that’s rubbed off on me, even though I know that’s like the lamest excuse in the book, but, well, it’s true. And so, you know, you deserve the extra-large tip to make up for the fact that I was channeling my inner Tiffany. And hey, it’s her money I’m giving you, and she won’t even notice how much is gone and—” She took a step back, the paper sack in her hand. “You know what, you don’t really need to hear all that. I’m gonna go before my mouth digs me into an even deeper pit. Bye. And thanks.”

And with that, she turned and jog-walked her way out of the café, leaving Erica still trying to unpick everything that had been said by the whirlwind in burgundy.

Chapter 2

“THANKS FOR YESTERDAY,” CHELSEA SAID as soon as Abby joined her at the coffee machine. “I owe you one.”

“You’re welcome. Hope you’re feeling better.” Abby smiled even as her inner voice said, *please don’t ever be sick again*. Tiffany had been relentless in her requests, and by the end of the day Abby didn’t know how she was still standing. Or breathing.

“I am, thanks. Oh, and just so you know, she didn’t leave the city last night. She’s coming in again this morning.” Chelsea grimaced. “Wants to be here for the weekly editorial stand-up.”

“Yikes. That’ll have everyone sweating.”

Chelsea chuckled. “Oh, yeah. Okay, better get back to it. Glad I got to thank you before the day runs away from me.”

Abby smiled, finished making her own coffee then headed back toward her cubicle. She’d only just made it when she heard Theo, the senior editor, calling everyone to the center of the floor. It was a weekly tradition for all the content staff—writers and editors alike, as well as the people responsible for the photos and graphics used in each story—to gather around and throw new ideas into the ring, discuss ideas that were already in production, and generally thrash out any hurdles in their way. Usually it was a fun, quick-fire, easygoing session.

But today, Tiffany was present, and Abby could immediately sense the impact the woman had on the meeting’s atmosphere. She peeked over the partition of her cubicle, gaze roaming over everyone gathered. Tense faces, stiff postures, and shared nervous glances were all she saw.

Off to one side, Stacy looked particularly green around the gills, much to Abby’s surprise.

Theo cleared his throat. A tall, always impeccably dressed Black man with hair beginning to gray at the temples, he was wearing one of his trademark vests, this one blue with big yellow sunflowers on it.

“Welcome everyone. Today we’re particularly lucky to have Tiffany with us.” He turned to the magazine’s chief. “Lovely to see you, Tiffany. Do you want to kick things off?”

Tiffany stepped forward. “Thank you, Theo. Yes, I do.” She took a moment to look at everyone around her.

Abby sat enthralled as Tiffany’s mere presence, and that silent gaze, seemed to hook everyone into her immediate sphere. No one blinked. She was pretty sure everyone was holding their breath. The charisma of the woman was phenomenal.

“You have given our readership some good content recently. It’s varied, thought-provoking, and exactly the kind of quality I want this magazine to instill in everything it produces. However, not all of it is up to that standard. I won’t name names, but I think those of you who are lagging behind know exactly who you are. You will find your way out of your slumps, I’m sure. Please make sure you call on your colleagues to help you with that. We are, after all, one entity here at Ki. There is no ‘I’ in team, remember.”

Although she was careful not to look at anyone in particular, Abby noticed three or four people awkwardly shuffling their feet or pulling at their collars.

Including Stacy.

Abby blinked. Stacy was lagging? How was that possible? She was one of the magazine’s top stars. Although, Abby realized now, the ratings for *Our Lives* had been a little lower lately. Hmm.

When Tiffany made no move to say more, Theo threw her a wan smile. “Thank you, Tiffany. Okay, who’s up first?”

Over the next ten minutes, various people stepped forward with ideas, some more confident than others. No one dared look at Tiffany as they spoke. She kept her own counsel, her face revealing nothing of her thoughts.

Silence fell after Margaret, who focused on political content, had said her piece.

“Anyone else?” Tiffany looked pointedly at Stacy, and Ricardo, who was in charge of the fashion desk.

Abby glanced at Stacy, who muttered what looked like a prayer, then raised her head and looked directly at Tiffany. She stepped forward, her luxurious black hair, untied today so it hung halfway down her back, swinging gently with each step.

“Well, I’m happy to announce that I’ve secured us a product placement deal that will bring a significant amount of money our way. And it fits perfectly with the next idea I have for a fantastic photo story series under the *Our Lives* banner.”

There were some oohs from around the room, and for once, Tiffany did show a reaction; the faintest of movements twitched her lips.

Seemingly emboldened, Stacy plunged on. “The hospitality company Bennett’s runs multiple chains of restaurants and bars across the US. They’re looking to revamp their brands, wanting to appeal to a younger, hipper, more diverse crowd. The story I have in mind will be a way to showcase the company’s assets while also putting Ki front and center of what Bennett’s vision is for the future of hospitality.”

Theo was nodding and smiling. Even Tiffany’s lips had widened into something that could definitely be called a smile.

Abby’s chest filled with admiration.

The meeting broke up shortly after, with a few people stopping to congratulate Stacy in particular. Once she’d extricated herself from the last one, she strode over to Abby’s cubicle.

“Hey, you!” Abby said. “That was incred—” She gasped when Stacy grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her out of her chair. “What the—?”

Stacy said nothing, simply dragged Abby across the hallway and into her small but beautifully decorated office. She pushed the door closed and leaned against it, breathing heavily, her eyes wild.

“Abby, you have to help me!”

“Are you okay?” Abby took hold of her arms. “Are you having an anxiety attack or something?” Her heart thumped at the distress emanating off Stacy.

Stacy gave a strangled laugh. “Something like that.” She pulled out of Abby’s grasp and clutched her head. “Oh sweet baby Jesus, what have I done?”

Abby stared at her. “Stacy? What the hell is going on? You’re scaring me.”

“Give me...a minute...” Stacy took a few more deep breaths, then finally looked back up. “I, um, didn’t exactly tell the truth out there.”

Shock turned Abby’s blood to ice. “Wh-what?”

“I am in deep shit.” It looked as if it cost a lot for Stacy to say those words. “I need your help.”

“Let’s sit down, and you can start at the beginning.”

Stacy grinned weakly. “Okay. Good idea.”

They sat, Stacy behind her desk, leaning on her arms, and Abby opposite, hands clutching at the armrests of her chair. Why was the normally cool, totally in control Stacy melting down right in front of her?

“The placement deal *is* on the table. That bit was true. But, well, I might have told a white lie to get Bennett’s on board, and now I’ve told an even bigger one.” Stacy bit her lip. “I don’t have a story idea. I haven’t had a new story idea for ages. I’ve hit a wall. The dreaded writer’s block.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yep.” Stacy blew out an extended breath. “It’s never happened to me before. I’ve been faking it, rehashing old ideas into things that sound new but really aren’t. But people are smart, and they’re picking up on it. Did you see my ratings last week?” At Abby’s quick nod, Stacy continued. “Not good. Not good at all. I was on such a high, you know? Really flying, and now...now I’m not. And now I’ve promised this killer story series, and I literally have no idea how to deliver it.”

Abby sat back, stunned. Stacy, the rising star of lifestyle journalism, suffering from writer’s block? It was unthinkable. “So, how can I help?”

“Thank you,” Stacy said quietly.

“I haven’t done anything yet.” Abby gave her a small smile.

“Yes you have. You haven’t judged me for what I’ve just told you.”

Abby shook her head. “There’s nothing to judge. We all tell little white lies all the time.”

Stacy snorted indelicately. “I’m not sure that one just now was so little.”

They looked at each other and Abby couldn’t help the laugh that burst from her lips. “Yeah, maybe not.” She paused, gathering her thoughts. “So, you need that killer story, right?”

“I do. Otherwise this all blows up in my face and I’m probably out of a job. Or even a career.” Stacy ran her hands down her face.

“All right, so let’s get thinking,” Abby said. “Let’s pretend we’re back in Professor Lindstrom’s class. Remember how he used to make us do those intense brainstorming sessions based off one trigger word?”

Stacy’s expression brightened. “Hey, yeah! That’s not a bad idea.” She reached across the desk and held out her hand.

Abby took it and gave it a squeeze.

“I’m glad it’s you who’s here,” Stacy said. “I know I couldn’t get you a journalism job here, and being the office admin is so far from what you wanted, but—”

“Hey, no! No buts. You got my foot in the door. No other paper or magazine would even talk to me. I’ll always be grateful for what you did. I’m here. I work for one of the best magazines in the country. You never know what might happen, who I might impress, who might give me a chance.”

“You know if it was up to me, you’d be writing, right? It kills me that there’s been no vacancies. I’m keeping my ear to the ground all the time, though, okay?”

“I know you are, and I love you for it. But hey, we’re not focusing on me right now, are we? Thinking caps on, as that windbag Lindstrom used to say.”

Stacy grinned and steepled her fingers in front of her face. “Okay. What’s our trigger?”

Abby pondered that for a moment. “You said Bennett’s wanted to reach a more diverse crowd?”

“Yeah. In particular, the queer market.”

“Okay, so they want to appeal to us queers.” Abby grinned. “I can’t speak for all my people”—Stacy snorted—“but for me a bar or

restaurant has to have a certain feel. Like, is it somewhere I could go on a date with someone special, or somewhere I could hang out with my friends? Or it could be both, if it's the right place. If I saw an ad with queer couples enjoying a romantic night at one of Bennett's bars, that would definitely make me sit up and pay attention."

"Hm, so a little romance mixed in, huh?" Stacy waggled her eyebrows. "I haven't written a romance in my column since I featured that couple in their seventies who had been high school sweethearts but both married other people after her family moved away. Then found each other again when their spouses both died and picked up again right from where they'd left off when they were seventeen."

"Aw, yeah, that was a gorgeous story!" Abby smiled at the memory. "And one of your most popular, right?"

Stacy's eyes gleamed. "Yes, it was, actually." She reached for her laptop. "Okay, okay, this is a good start. I need a queer romance angle, something equally cute."

Abby thought about her friends, how they'd gotten together, but although nice stories, nothing particularly grabbed her heartstrings.

"Puppies always make things cuter," Abby said.

"I guess..." Stacy tapped her chin. "Or kids."

Abby groaned. "Ugh, no, not children."

"Just because you don't want children." Stacy grinned. "You know loads of lesbians do though."

"True." Abby shook her head. "If only they knew."

"Hey, come on, it wasn't *all* awful." Stacy caught her eye. "You know that."

Abby exhaled loudly. "Yeah, I know. But never again."

"I know, I know." Stacy's eyes narrowed, a sure sign the cogs were turning. "Something's nagging at the back of my brain. Something about having two mommies..." She snapped her fingers. "That letter!"

"What letter?"

"The letter from the kid! Last Christmas, remember? The Dear Santa thing that Marcus and his desk ran in conjunction with Holland's department store?"

Abby sat up, suddenly remembering exactly what Stacy was referring to. "Oh my God, yes!"

Make Her Wish Come True

She'd been responsible for reading all the Dear Santa letters they'd received as part of a competition for a kid to win a visit to Holland's after hours, including a private meeting with Santa himself and a sack full of gifts to take home. There'd been some amazing letters, written by kids from all situations for whom that kind of prize would have made such a difference.

The one Stacy was referring to was from a girl, aged seven, who had asked Santa to bring her a second mom.

"What was it she said?" Stacy asked, as if reading Abby's thoughts.

"She said her mom works two jobs, and they live with her grandma. It sounded like things were really tight, and she thought having a second mom would mean they'd have more time together because her birth mom would only have to work one job and wouldn't be tired all the time."

It was weird how that letter had lodged in her brain somewhere.

Stacy's eyes held a faraway look, and she was nodding. "I wonder if the kid ever got her wish. Whether the mom did find a partner." She focused back on Abby. "This could be it," she said quietly. There was a tremor in her voice. Then she grinned. "This could really be it!"

"Okay..." Abby dragged the word out, not sure where Stacy was going with the idea.

"Please tell me you kept that letter?"

Abby thought for a moment. "I think the originals were all shredded, but I know we scanned the top ones. They might still be on the shared drive somewhere?"

Stacy spun her laptop around and motioned for Abby to find it.

Laughing at her exuberance, Abby opened the shared drive and began navigating while Stacy drummed her fingertips on the desk.

"Not helping, you know." She stared pointedly at Stacy's fingers.

"Oh! Sorry." Stacy grinned sheepishly.

Abby clicked through the various folder structures. Nope. Nope. Nope. Yes! "Found it!"

Chapter 3

“MOM, THERE WAS SOMETHING IN the mailbox for me!” Kayla said as soon as Erica opened the front door.

It was the end of another long Thursday toward the end of June, and Kayla was now on summer break, her time split between Molly’s house and home. Molly’s mom and Kayla’s grandma were sharing care of the girls throughout the summer, as they had done the previous two years. Today Kayla had been at Molly’s, and, as usual, was still buzzing after a full day of fun with her best friend.

She was already in her shortie pajamas, the ones with the kittens, and she held an envelope tightly in her hand.

“Hi, sweetie.” Erica opened her arms, and Kayla rushed into them, the envelope crunching as she clasped hold.

“Hi, Mom. How was your day?”

Erica grinned. It was so cute how her kid asked her that every day. “It was okay. That cat Arthur adopted spent the whole shift wrapped around my ankles. Every time I moved I nearly tripped over it.”

Kayla laughed as she pulled out of their hug. “Does it have a name yet?”

“Nope. Arthur insists on just calling it Cat. He says you can come visit it soon.”

“Yay!” Kayla’s smile was huge.

Erica hung her jacket on the hook by the front door. “So, what’s this about a letter?”

Kayla hopped from foot to foot. “Look!” She thrust the envelope into Erica’s hand.

Erica's mom came through from the kitchen, drying her hands on a small towel. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Mom. What's this?" She held up the letter.

Virginia smiled, but there was a wariness in her eyes. "Seems like Kayla's Dear Santa letter last year made a mark."

"Huh?"

"They want to interview me, Mom!" Kayla's eyes were as wide as plates.

"They... What?" Erica looked between her mom and her daughter.

Then she pulled the contents out of the envelope, a single sheet of paper with the letterhead of a magazine called *Ki*. She skimmed it quickly, discovering that her daughter had summed it up quite nicely—the magazine wanted to interview a few of the kids who had written especially memorable Dear Santa letters for their competition last year. They wanted to find out a little more about why the kids had made their requests, if any of them had come true, and what they hoped for this year from Santa.

And they'd chosen Kayla as one of them. *And* there was a hint that although the magazine couldn't, obviously, make Kayla's wishes to Santa come true, there would be a small thank you gift.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Virginia said, when Erica looked up at her.

"I..." Erica exhaled slowly. She looked down at Kayla, whose shining eyes stared up at her. While the thought of being interviewed by a magazine wasn't high on Erica's list of things to achieve in her lifetime, how could she say no to that adorable face? For Kayla, this was one of the biggest things that had ever happened to her. "It's amazing," she said eventually, hugging Kayla once more.

She looked at her mom over Kayla's head and mouthed, "What's going on?"

"Later," Virginia mouthed back, not meeting her eye.

Hmm.

"Okay, sweet pea," Virginia said to Kayla, clapping her hands together. "Let your mom get into her comfy clothes. Then it's one episode of *Curious George* before bedtime."

Kayla pouted. "But I'm not tired. Can I watch two?"

“One episode,” Erica said firmly before her mom could give in to Kayla’s wheedling tone. “But then two stories when you’re in bed. Deal?”

Kayla pondered this for a moment, finger poised on her chin, head tilted to the side. “Okay, deal.”

They shook hands, grinned at each other, and then Kayla scampered off to the living room.

“She’s all legs at the moment,” Virginia said, watching her go.

“I know, right? I’m so glad I got her those new jeans. She’ll be needing them sooner than we think.”

“I guess she’s getting that from her daddy. She’s going to be tall, I think.”

Erica turned to her mom. “So, what’s going on? How come the magazine wants to talk to Kayla about a letter she sent last year, and how come you have a shifty look in your eyes right now?”

Virginia scoffed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Mom.” Erica folded her arms.

“Oh, all right, I’ll tell you. But not until after she’s gone to sleep. Want some tea? Or something stronger?”

Knowing she was right, and that grown-up talks had to wait until little ears were fast asleep, Erica sighed and nodded. Then she focused on her mom’s last two words.

“We have something stronger?” Wine was a rarity in their money-starved household and would be the perfect treat this evening. She’d made it through four fifths of her week. That deserved a reward, didn’t it?

“Actually, we do. Mrs. Soldatti’s son got it for her, but she’s on another health kick and being all saintly about not drinking. So she asked if I wanted it and I wasn’t going to say no. Of course, I’ve no idea if it’s any good, but it says wine on the label and that’s good enough for me.” Virginia shrugged, then pulled two mismatched glasses from the cupboard next to the oven.

Erica grinned. “Works for me too. Thanks, Mom.”

The three of them watched the show, then Erica read Kayla the promised two stories as she got settled into bed. She fell asleep as the second story came to an end, her blonde curls a mess on her pillow. As

always, she slept flat on her back, both arms held up above her head on the pillow, surrounded by what looked like every one of her stuffed animals. The zoo animal night-light highlighted her features, her lips slightly parted, her entire face relaxed and calm. So much better than the night before, when she'd kept Erica awake with complaints of a stomachache. Erica suspected bad dreams, but Kayla had clearly not wanted to talk about them, and Erica wasn't going to push, even though she hated the thought of those dreams tormenting her.

"Sleep well, my angel," she whispered, and blew Kayla a kiss before pulling the door closed once more and turning away from the room.

Virginia gave her a long look as she slumped back down on the couch.

"So, how was your day? Another bad one?"

"Not really. Just... Both my jobs, as you know, involve interacting with people all day. And sometimes I can't do people." Erica sipped her wine. She was pacing out her one glass, making it last the evening.

Her mom gave her a wry smile. "I get that. And how was Arthur?"

Erica smiled. She'd often wondered if her mom had a tiny crush on Erica's boss at the dry cleaner. She supposed she could see the attraction—he still had all his hair, at least. She chided herself; Arthur was more than that. He was a stand-up guy, honest and hardworking. Her mom could do far worse if she ever felt like venturing out there again. She'd been a widow for ten years, and Erica realized she'd never thought to ask if she would consider dating again.

"Arthur was good. Asked about you, of course."

Virginia blushed.

Erica chuckled and sipped some more wine. "This is perfect." She pointed at her glass. "Thanks."

"You're very welcome."

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on with this Dear Santa letter?"

Her mom squirmed in her seat and wouldn't meet Erica's eye.

"Mom, what did you do?" Erica moved until her mom had no choice but to look at her.

Virginia threw up her hands. "Fine, fine, but I meant well, okay?"

"Why do I think I'm not going to like this?"

Her mom took a moment. “Okay, so last year, as you know, Kayla wanted that night-light that we ended up getting her.”

“I know. And that’s what she wrote in the letter.”

“That’s what she wrote in her *first* letter.” Virginia rolled her bottom lip. “The second letter, the one she actually sent, we worked on together.”

Erica blinked, her mind trying to keep up. “What second letter?”

“So, um, one day, I heard Kayla and Molly talking about the new girl, Riley. Molly asked if Kayla had seen Riley’s parents picking her up after school. It turns out Riley has two moms, which Kayla knew but Molly didn’t.” Virginia quickly took another sip of wine before continuing. “Molly said, ‘I love my daddy, but I think having another mom would be so cool. You’d get extra cake and stuff all the time.’”

Erica chuckled. “That girl’s got her priorities right.”

“She sure has.” Her mom’s face fell. “Kayla went all quiet after that. Then she said, ‘I’d really like that.’ And then Molly said, ‘Why don’t you write Santa and ask him.’ And Kayla thought that was a great idea.” Her mom swallowed. “And so did I.”

Erica, who had at that precise moment taken another mouthful of wine, had to clap her hand over her mouth to avoid spraying it all over the couch. Half choking, she managed to swallow the liquid, then took a few seconds to clear her throat. “What?”

Virginia’s mouth quirked up in that little one-sided smile she used when she was feeling super sure of herself. “You heard me. A good woman by your side would do wonders for you. And Kayla.”

Erica stared at her. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“I thought I was pretty clear?” Her mom looked quizzically at her. “I mean, you are bi, aren’t you? So me suggesting a female partner isn’t way off base, is it?” Her face scrunched in confusion.

“I... You know I’m bi?” Erica’s heart thudded. They’d never talked about this. She’d gone through all of her late teens and into her twenties never having felt the need to spell it out and assuming her mom had no clue.

Virginia let out a scoff of a breath. “Well, of course! I saw the way you hung off every word from Harper all through senior year.”

“Oh.” And Erica had thought she’d been so subtle.

Virginia wrapped her fingers around Erica's and tugged her hand closer so she could squeeze it. "I always respected your decision not to tell me, but I wasn't blind. And I know you and Travis tried to make it work that first year after Kayla was born, but I'm not sorry he's out of the picture now." She sighed. "So, anyway, that conversation I overheard got me thinking, and I talked with Kayla about it, and we sat down and wrote the letter. I thought it might get some attention, get her some good stuff for Christmas. I mean, I made it clear it was a big ask of Santa, and she shouldn't be disappointed if it didn't happen."

"Mom." Erica pushed her hands through her hair. "You had no right to get her hopes up like that!"

"She's a smart kid. She knew it was just for fun. It cheered her up, and look where it's got us—she's going to be in the magazine, and she'll get a nice new toy too!"

Erica's mind whirled. Her mom knew she was bi. Her kid wanted a second mom. And they'd written a stupid letter to Santa to ask for one.

"I think I need to break my one glass rule," she said, standing.

"Well if you are, I will too." Virginia held out her own empty glass, a tentative smile on her face.

"I'm not sure you deserve it." Erica wagged her finger, then relented. "But sure."

She returned with the two topped-up glasses and sank back onto the couch next to her mom.

"Listen," Virginia said, her tone gentle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Kayla's fine, okay? I bet she even forgot about it until the magazine wrote to her today."

Erica grunted. "I guess so."

"And I want you to know that I would not have a problem, at all, with you bringing home some lovely woman as your partner. Especially if she was good with Kayla, and treated you the way you deserve and—"

"Okay, Mom, I get it. Stop already." Erica's face was hot, but her heart beat out a happier little rhythm.

Well, okay. Her mom knew she was bi and it was all good. Not that Erica had a prospective candidate lined up, nor was she likely to

for some time yet, but at least all options were on the table. And it certainly sounded as if her daughter was down with the idea too.

“So what about the interview? You’re not happy about it, are you?”

Erica looked at her and sighed. “I know Kayla’s excited, and it’s a great experience for her, but...” She bit her lip. “What are they gonna ask? Are they gonna want to know about her daddy, or lack of one, and about my dating life, about how she’d actually feel if I brought a woman home to introduce to her? Just how personal is it all gonna get?”

Virginia pursed her lips. “Well, I don’t think it’d be that personal, would it? I mean, it’s her they’re interviewing. How much could they really ask a seven-year-old about that kind of stuff anyway?”

Erica took small comfort in the fact that her mom now looked as worried as she herself felt. “Mom, you know how journalists are.”

“Well, then I guess it’s good you’re going to be there. You can cut off anything inappropriate, right?”

“I suppose so. I don’t suppose I can refuse to go, can I? She’s too excited.”

Virginia nodded. “She is. She’s been bouncing around like a kangaroo ever since she found that letter waiting for her in the mailbox. Besides, it sounds like she’s going to get something pretty nice from them. If nothing else, it’s worth it to get her something special, isn’t it?”

Erica nodded slowly, her stomach twisting with a combination of nerves over the interview and the constant ache that she could never afford all the things she’d like to give Kayla. “You’re right. And I’ll be sure to speak up if I think they’re overstepping.”

She’d have no qualms about that. If there was one thing she didn’t lack, it was the ability to stand up for herself and her daughter. Becoming a mom at twenty had given her a choice—be strong and deal with whatever happened, or crumple. And Erica didn’t do crumpled.

Virginia gave her a quick hug. “You’ll do what you’ve always done, ever since you found out you were pregnant.” She looked into Erica’s eyes. “Protect her.”

Erica swallowed down a lump in her throat. “Always.”

“Good.”

Make Her Wish Come True

They finished their wine and soon headed to their rooms for the night. Erica removed her make-up, and then took out her clothes for work tomorrow, hanging them off the handles of her wardrobe as she did every night. Organization and planning ahead were key, had been ever since she'd had to completely up-end her life to accommodate a child. Dropping out of college, becoming a waitress and working behind the counter of a dry cleaner, living back at home with her mom—none of these things had been in her original plan. But she'd done what had to be done, and she would continue to do so for another ten years at least. Whatever she might dream of having for herself, deep down, had been on the back burner all this time, and would be for the foreseeable future.

No matter how empty that made her feel sometimes.

TO CONTINUE READING,
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MAKE HER WISH COME TRUE

BY A.L. BROOKS

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