



THE CUL-DE-SAC WAR

Book Club Kit

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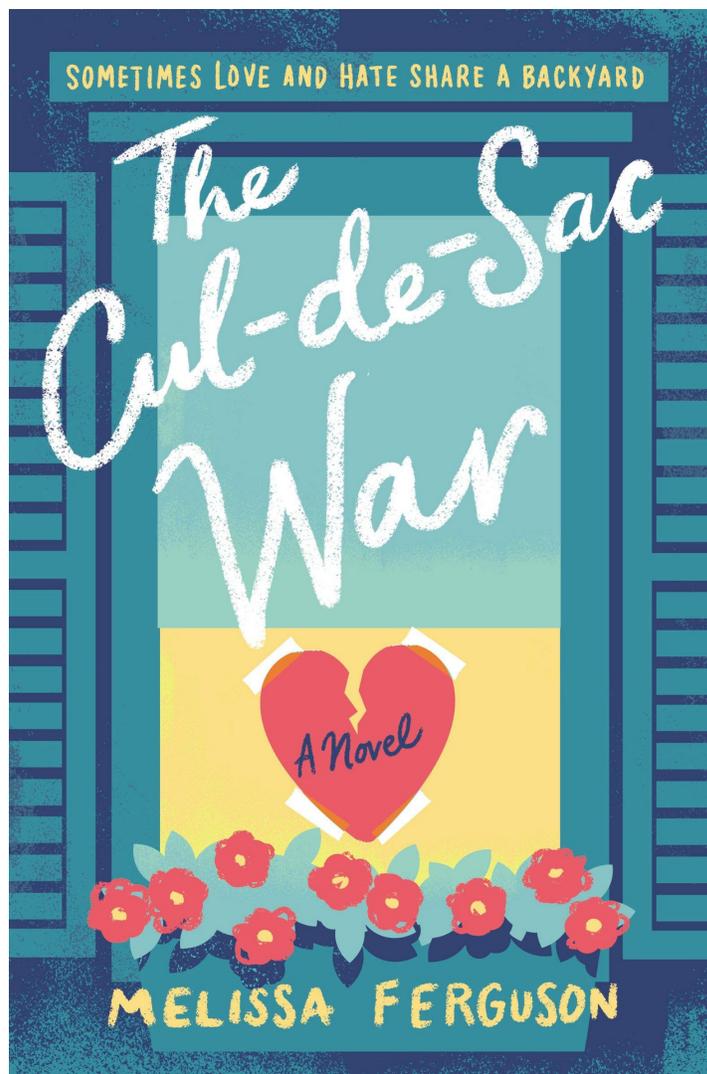
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"Melissa delivered a book that is filled with both humor and heart!"

-DEBBIE MACOMBER
ON THE CUL-DE-SAC WAR

ABOUT THE BARTER THEATRE



The Barter Theatre has a prominent place in The Cul-de-Sac War, and carries a fascinating story of its own as the oldest live performance theater in the nation and "the most famous stage in Virginia."

The story

of the Barter Theatre begins with its name. And no, it wasn't named after some long-established Virginia family by the name of Barter; it was a theater founded on the Barter system. The theater was established in 1933, during the Great Depression. Founder Robert Porterfield was a young actor who returned to his hometown in Southwest Virginia with an idea for a theater that would help both struggling farmers and starving artists: a theater founded on the barter system, where farmers could exchange their unsold produce,

livestock, and dairy products for an evening of entertainment, and actors and theater staff could receive food for their performances. The theater's tagline? "With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh." And it worked. For forty cents or an equivalent amount of produce, theatre goers were able to see a show. The local residents were, as Porterfield put it excited to "trade ham for Hamlet." According to the Barter's website, by the end of the first season the theater had only made \$4.35 in cash—but it



resulted in a collective weight gain for the staff of over three hundred pounds, a remarkable feat in lean Depression times. Not only did it stave off hunger for theater workers and boredom and unused good for farmers, the theater had established a practice of giving back to the community in mutually beneficial ways that persists today; the Barter Theatre is still a working theater, and it dedicates at least one performance per year to serving the community by offering the barter deal it was founded on: see a show for a donation of canned good for

Feeding America Southwest Virginia.

The Barter Theatre is not only notable for its unique, community-minded origins, but also for the quality of its productions. Patricia Neal, Kevin Spacey, Gregory Peck, Ernest Borgnine, and Hume Cronyn are among famous alumni who launched their careers at the Barter. At the Barter, one can catch dramas, musicals, comedies, and even new plays by Appalachian playwrights, including favorites and standbys like *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Mary Poppins*.

About The Author

Melissa Ferguson lives in Tennessee, where she enjoys chasing her children and writing romantic comedies full of humor and heart. Her favorite hobby is taking friends and acquaintances and turning them into characters in her books without their knowledge. She is confident you should read all her novels, starting with this one.



If your book club is interested in scheduling a virtual chat with Melissa, reach out on her website at:

Website: melissaferguson.com

Instagram: @melissafergusonauthor

Facebook: @authormelissaferguson

TikTok: @melissafergusonauthor

Hosting a Great Book Club

Some ideas for a fun and successful book club meeting for **THE CUL-DE-SAC WAR**

Book clubs are about reading good books, of course, but they're also about so much more: delicious snacks, socializing with friends, considering new perspectives and ideas, and maybe even learning something new. For your book club's discussion of *The Cul-de-Sac War*, here are some ideas for all the components of a good book club that you won't find in a paperback.

Visit the Barter

If you're local (or up for a road trip!) consider catching a show at the historic Barter Theatre. The Barter is full of rich history, and

the town of Abingdon, Virginia is a tourist destination in it's own right. Try not to laugh imagining Bree's costume malfunction on the historic Barter stage

Watch *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

If you can't make it to the Barter Theatre, check out a local production at your nearest local theater, perhaps of one of the plays or musicals mentioned in the novel, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If that's not possible, there are many film adaptations of *Midsummer*; check your library or favorite streaming service!

Hosting a Great Book Club

Host in your Backyard

If sometimes love and hate share a backyard, so can a book club.

Hold your book club meeting in someone's backyard to create that block party vibe!

An outside setting is especially good if anyone gets inspired to prank...

Invite the Author

Melissa loves chatting with book clubs! Have the author herself join over virtual drinks and treats as you chat about her heartwarming novel.

"Bree and Chip will have you laughing and rooting for them until the very end."

-DENISE HUNTER

Author Q&A

Melissa Ferguson discusses her influences and inspirations for *The Cul-de-Sac War*.

Readers love your realistic, relatable characters. How do you create characters who seem like real people?

Because I do write them about real people. I just find some exasperating neighbor, slap on thirty years, give him an old bathrobe he forgets to close on his way to the mailbox each morning, and voila. Meet Charles. Just kidding (mostly).

Before I write the first word of a novel, I write out a thorough character description and overview of the whole story. With my first (still unpublished) manuscript, I had no idea what I was doing and just started typing (hence why it's still an unpublished manuscript). But with every novel I've written since then, I've worked harder to flesh out the characters before I even type my name in the header. I may not have a clue what's going to happen in Chapter 4, or 5, or 16, but if I know the strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and quirks that make each of my characters unique, lovable, despicable, and true, I know a story can unfold. I know my characters will be realistic—because they've already become real to me.

It can be so tough to convey humor on the page. How do you infuse your fiction—which sometimes hits on harder topics—with funny moments?

Well, I am touched that people laugh at the scenes I myself laugh at while writing. That is one of the most exciting things for me, because there is so much power in humor. It is a balm to the soul and unifier of people. As for the “how”, I suppose I just write with the question often in mind of, “Wouldn't it be funny if . . . ?” and then go from there. The more I've been writing, the less concerned I've gotten with the idea that my scenes may be too outlandish. Maybe that freedom has come from reading so many Sophie Kinsella novels or watching *Frasier* (on repeat). I just write what tickles me, and in turn, hope it tickles my readers as well.

Author Q&A

What is your inspiration for The Cul-de-Sac War? What should readers expect from the story?

One of the biggest inspirations from the story came from the setting. I live in the area where this book is set: Abingdon, VA.

One of my favorite activities around here is to go to The Barter Theatre, the nation's oldest live performance theater.

One day while I was with my four-year-old daughter watching *Singin' in the Rain*, I thought, "Wouldn't it be fun (and funny!) to not only write a book about this adorable Hallmark town, but also write it from the perspective of a woman who just so happens to be a terrible actress at The Barter and only has a few weeks to learn how to tap dance for an audition, or else she'll lose a fantastic opportunity?"

I hope readers come away from *The Cul-de-Sac War* with a smile on their faces, having laughed and enjoyed a little mental break from the world. But also, perhaps most importantly, my desire is that readers walk away with a sense of hope.

Which character did you have the most fun writing?

I think of all the characters, I enjoyed writing about Bree's grumpy housemate the most:

Evie. She is the costume designer for The Barter Theatre and Bree's frenemy.

Because Bree's grandmother left the house to both Evie and Bree, they are stuck living together until they figure out what to do with the situation. And, oh-so-conveniently, Evie (spurred by Bree's nemesis neighbor, Chip), decides to attempt the ultra-hippie, minimalist lifestyle, and starts hauling off furniture, shutting off water, and doing so much more in a humorous way that makes Bree's life miserable. I thoroughly loved writing about quirky, cranky, oddly-lovable Evie, and particularly enjoyed seeing her get her own happily ever after in the end.

Discussion Questions

Some questions to prompt your book club's discussion of *The Cul-de-Sac War*. These questions can also be found on pages 307–308 of the book.

1. Neighbors can be a blessing in your life or a curse. What is your life like with your particular neighbors? What are some things they do that you appreciate or cannot stand?
2. If you had a neighbor move next door to you who drove you to sanity's ledge, what humorous thing would you want to do to get that person out of your life?
3. What do you do to be a good neighbor? What are three things you could do in the coming month to become a better one?
4. Chip and Bree both let their emotions get the best of them. Have you ever made a rash decision in a moment of anger that you later regretted? What is one coping method that has benefitted you in maintaining self-control in those heated moments?
5. Which character's weakness do you identify with most? Why? Which character's strength do you identify with most? Why?
6. Bree Leake has jumped from job to job, relationship to relationship, and house to house throughout her life. Why is that? Why hadn't she settled down?
7. "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical conclusion is that I was meant for another world." What does this C. S. Lewis quote mean? Can you relate to it? How?

Discussion Questions

Some questions to prompt your book club's discussion of *The Cul-de-Sac War*. These questions can also be found on pages 307–308 of the book.



8. Despite the fact that Chip argued with him, Chip's father won the bid and lost a lot of money in order to protect his son. Have you ever experienced this kind of sacrifice in your life—someone taking the negative consequences for something in your place?

9. Chip loses the bid, but walks outside feeling like he has won, and that he can breathe for the first time. Why is that?

10. What does Evie learn throughout her time living with Bree that changes her? How?

11. Who is your favorite character and why?

12. The quaint town they live in is Abingdon, Virginia, population of 8,000. What would you love about living in a town this size? What would you dislike? And if given the choice between a city or a small town, which would you choose?

What People Are Saying

Readers love the hilarious hijinks, witty banter, and heart at the center of *The Cul-de-Sac War*



“Melissa delivered a book that is filled with both humor and heart!”
—Debbie Macomber,
#1 New York Times bestselling author

“Witty, wise and with just the right amount of wacky, Melissa’s second novel is as charming as her debut. Competition and chemistry battle to win the day in this hilarious rom-com about two people who can’t stand to be near each other—or too far apart.”

—Betsy St. Amant, author of *The Key to Love*

“With her sophomore novel, Melissa Ferguson delivers hilarity and heart in equal measure.

The *Cul-de-Sac War*’s Bree Leake and Chip McBride prove that sometimes it isn’t the first impression you have to worry about—it’s the second one that gets you.

What follows is a delightful deluge of pranks, sabotage, and witty repartee tied together by heartstrings that connect to turn a house into a home worth fighting for. I was thoroughly charmed from beginning to end.”
—Bethany Turner

What People Are Saying

"Two neighboring houses, a big, slobbering dog without boundaries and one unwelcome attraction add up to a madcap romance in *The Cul-de-Sac War* . . . This kisses-only . . . romance is a sweet treat with a soft center."

-BookPage



"Melissa Ferguson's *The Cul-de-Sac War* is sweet, zany, and surprisingly tender. Bree and Chip will have you laughing and rooting for them until the very end."

-Denise Hunter,

bestselling

author of *Carolina Breeze*

"Melissa Ferguson delights with a grand sense of humor and a captivating story to boot! With vivid detail that brings the story roaring to life, *The Cul-de-Sac War* brings us closer to the truth of love, family, and home. Bree's and Chip's pranks and adventures turn into something they never expected as Melissa Ferguson delivers another heartwarming, hilarious, and deeply felt story."

-Patti Callahan, New York

Times bestselling author of

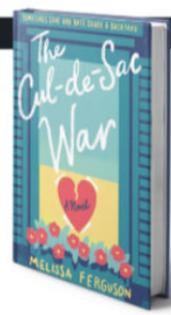
Becoming Mrs. Lewis

What People Are Saying



Ripe for the Netflix rom-com treatment, the book follows a free spirit who is bribed into living for a full year in her grandmother's beloved home, but she and her handsome and infuriating neighbor attempt to drive each other from the neighborhood.

—The Hollywood Reporter



Rights Available! Hot new books with **The Cul-de-Sac War** (THOMAS NELSON, NOV. 10)

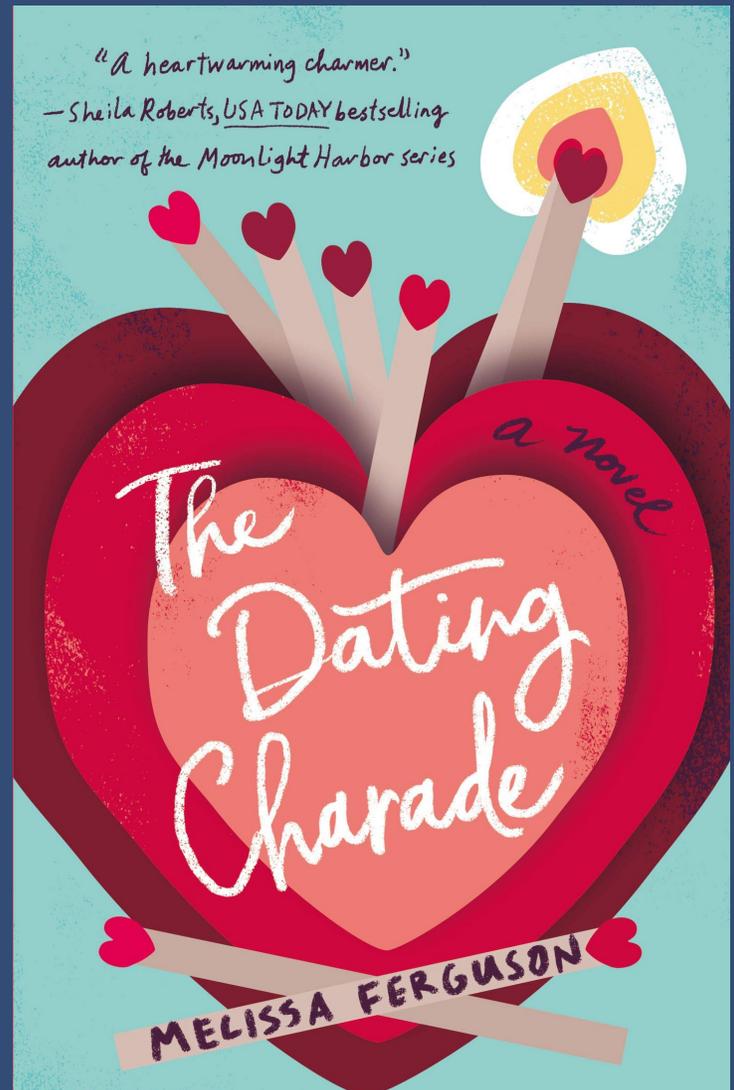
BY **Melissa Ferguson** AGENCY **The Whalen Agency**

Ripe for the Netflix rom-com treatment, the book follows a free spirit who is bribed into living for a full year in her grandmother's beloved home, but she and her handsome and infuriating neighbor attempt to drive each other from the neighborhood.

Also by Melissa Ferguson

No one is more surprised than Cassie when her first date with Jett is a knockout. But when they both go home and find three children dropped in their laps—each—they independently decide to do the right and mature thing: hide the kids from each other while sorting it all out. What could go wrong?

Melissa Ferguson's hilarious and warmhearted debut reminds us that love can come in very small packages—and that sometimes our best-laid plans aren't nearly as rewarding and fun as the surprises that come our way.



"A heartwarming charmer."
-Sheila Roberts, USA Today bestselling
author

The
Cul-de-Sac
War

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

MELISSA FERGUSON



Chapter 1
BREE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

They say 95 percent of the time the first impression you have of a person is right.

Well, if anyone in the audience was watching her clutch a plastic fern with one hand and the slumping fabric on her chest with the other, all the while beads from her costume scattered across the shadowy stage with a thousand *ping-ping-pings*, they'd have a fairly accurate picture of the woman formally known as Bree Leake. Or, in this particular moment, Mustardseed, fairy servant of Titania, as vital to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the fern in her hand.

"How canst thou thus for shame, Titania . . ."

Glitter floated in the green-tinted spotlight as Bree stood far upstage, where she stayed approximately . . . *always*. She took a step to the right. Then another. And another. Beads dropped with each movement, no matter how she adjusted her hold on the intricate

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MELISSA FERGUSON

fabric dissolving in her hands. Leave it to her roommate, the Barter's one and only costume designer, to go overkill.

Actually, leave it to her roommate to plan a wardrobe malfunction like this. Evie had probably gone to great lengths, in fact, to attach the shoulder straps with just enough strength to hold up until Bree made one fatal step onto the long tulle train that—now that she thought of it—no other fairies in the cast possessed.

She could just see Evie now, in the dim light of their basement, laughing maniacally over her sewing machine.

So here Bree stood, newest member of the nation's oldest live-performance theatre, trying to shield herself with a plastic plant while smiling a not-too-convincing stage smile as heat crept up her neck. Not that anyone would notice her blushing, given that her face and neck were painted Andes-mint green.

While she understood all of this was very, very important, her immature side couldn't help seeing it as also very, very funny. But laughing was, by all means, the most critical thing to avoid at this moment.

Do. Not. Laugh.

She *mustn't* laugh.

She was a professional artist, and artists were at all times calm, cool, and engaged.

She took a step to the right.

Ping-ping-ping.

Slid her left foot to meet her right.

Ping-ping-ping.

One creeping step to the right.

Another.

With three more swift *ping-ping-ping* steps she slipped off-stage and broke into a run between the curtains.

2

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"Evie!" Bree hissed, passing a couple of stagehands waiting beside overhanging set trees.

Bree swept past portable columns and hanging windows and hedged around Titania's set bed laden with roses and vines. Stephen, the stage manager, caught sight of her while talking rapidly into his headset, but before she could propel the manic-driven man into overly manic drive, she let go of her hold on her dress long enough to give him a thumbs-up from across the room.

Nothing to see here. Just your newest actress jumping ship.

She pushed open the doors to the back hall.

Half a dozen doors lined the long hallway, one of them open to the dressing room, whose dozens of vanity bulbs were blinding even from where she stood twenty feet away. She made for the room but only found the ever-disgruntled understudy on her phone.

Bree halted beside her chair. "Have you seen Evie?"

Celia looked up. Blinked. "She just left to get coffee."

"She went all the way to Zazzy'Z?" Bree said, her tone inching higher.

She shook her head and tilted her chin toward the door. "No, Styrofoam coffee. To the front. The gift shop."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks." Bree reemerged into the hall. She had to get back onstage for one line—*one*. True, it may not be an important line, but it was *her* line.

And by golly she'd be there to give it.

It was going to take ages to throw open the back door, dash down the metal stairway, and fly around parked cars and pedestrians to reach the front of the theatre while hanging on to her dragging dress and slumping top. But she could kiss her job

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MELISSA FERGUSON

good-bye if she took either door leading into the shadowy aisles of the theatre's auditorium.

She would just have to run.

She picked up speed as she moved down the empty hall in her leather slippers. As fluorescent lights shone overhead, beads fell like breadcrumbs behind her. The *Exit* sign loomed and she shoved the doors open with her fern.

As she pushed her way through, her fairy wings knocked against the doorframe, fighting against her as if crying out, "This is the exit door! Get back onstage, woman!" But with a final wrench of her drooping costume and an explosion of beads, the wings gave way and she took two stumbling steps onto the metal platform in the bright midday air.

Bree grabbed for the railing with her right hand but felt the impact of something against her knee before she could reach it.

Her foot slammed into the unidentified object. Before she could stop herself, she found herself flying forward.

"Whoooooa—"

The world was suddenly upside down.

Pavement and steps now above her, racing toward her head.

But just as the tip of her braid whacked the steps, she felt something grab her by the waist.

Her body tilted like a carnival ride. Only the ride was a man who had reached around her waist and was pulling her backward. A man who had been sitting on the top step of the metal stairway leading to the back parking lot. A man who, after her knee had knocked him in the back of the head, had stood, grabbed her flying body out of thin air, heaved her backward by the force of his might, and landed her back on the metal platform.

Where she now stood. Frozen.

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Clinging to her potted fern.

She blinked. Looked down at the fern. Then up at him.

"I'm . . . sorry. Thanks."

"Sorry—thanks," the man repeated, stooping down for his phone, which had toppled three steps down. "Well, I'm sort of the reason you tripped, but I'll take it."

A smile ghosted his lips, his sharp jawline softened by a five-o'clock shadow. His brown eyes—crinkly at the temples, as though he dispensed of smiles easily—were just a few inches below hers. Which was incredible, given he was now standing two steps below her.

And she was six feet even.

The fabric at her chest started to droop, and she adjusted her grip. Only then, it seemed, did he look down. "Oh. I see you've still got that problem there."

Bree felt her green face flush. "Ah. So you saw."

He let out a breathy laugh. "Saw you inch your way offstage like some sort of plant-loving alien backup in a music video who wasn't supposed to be there?"

Bree's eyes narrowed.

He coughed. "Because that is *definitely* not what I saw. That is *definitely* not what made me start taking a video and get kicked out by a ninety-year-old usher for violating Barter rules." He paused, grinned. "I'm Chip. And believe me, you were the highlight of my evening."

He put out a hand.

"Bree." Bree's smile twitched as she looked to his outstretched hand, her own hands still occupied by her dress and plant. "And now you're taunting me."

His smile was as good as a wink. "Just a little."

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Her eyes lingered on his before a shout came from onstage.

Her mission. Right.

She edged around him, hiked up her dress a few inches, and took a couple of steps down the stairs.

“I need to find my costume designer,” she said. “And I have about, oh, two minutes to get back onstage.”

“So, tons o’ time.”

“Loads,” she said, her eyes flashing back at his with a smile.

“Well,” he said, resting his arms on the railing as he scanned the empty parking lot. “I’d venture a guess she isn’t out here. But if you’re looking for a quick fix, I have something in my truck that might do the trick. It’s across the street, but I could be back in forty-five seconds.”

She paused, her foot hovering over the third step down.

Glanced down the brick wall leading to the front of the theatre, which was growing farther away by the second.

Turned back to him.

He gave her another smile. The kind of companionable smile that said, *Hey, let’s go on an adventure*. The kind the first kid gave the other kids when he convinced them to jump off a bridge, and they did.

Her gaze followed his across the street, past the sixteen-foot bronze *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* fountain, up the stairs, to the unseen truck in the other parking lot a football-field length away. She pressed her lips together.

The clock was ticking. She knew Evie may or may not still be at the gift shop. Even if she was, how long would it take for her to work her magic?

She looked back to Chip. “You really think you can fix it?”

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He shrugged. “Fix a dress with zero seamstress skills in forty-five seconds? Sure. Who couldn’t?”

Bree raised her brow at his confidence. Part of her knew it would be better to push on toward Evie, but a bigger part of her wanted to see him try. “Make it forty?”

A spark lit in his eyes, as though she didn’t realize exactly who she had just challenged.

And that was how thirty-six seconds later, the mysterious man in a fine gray suit was racing across traffic while Bree stood at the top of the metal platform, shouting numbers across Main Street.

“Thirty-seven!” Bree cried, and two shoppers turned to see who was making the commotion.

The man’s tie flapped over his shoulder as he reached the bottom of the stairs, grabbed both sides of the railing, and heaved himself up three at a time.

“Thirty-eight!” Bree’s voice rose higher.

Chip leaped up four stairs. His toe clung to the edge of a step, and he wobbled. He balanced and jumped another three.

“Thirty-nine!” Bree called, bouncing on her leather slippers as she watched him now halfway up the staircase.

She hesitated, just a hundredth of a millisecond, before opening her mouth for the last number.

As Bree drew a breath to call out, the man reared back and lobbed the camo-green duct tape in the air.

“Forty!” Bree cried as the duct tape bounced, rolled, and landed on her slipper.

The man collapsed onto the steps five feet below her, sprawled out, his chest heaving.

She laughed, several beads pinging on the platform as if in

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amusement. The two shoppers smiled slightly at the two bizarre strangers and moved along.

She nudged the duct tape onto its side and hooked it with her toe.

“You know, I didn’t think you had a chance against that minivan.”

“Never underestimate a competitive person.” His head popped up, and before she knew it, he was standing on the step below her, eyes shining. He picked up the duct tape. “Especially a bored competitive person.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should’ve made myself clear.” Bree pressed the fern firmly against her chest with one hand and put out the other. “I’m Bree Leake, extremely competitive person, turns explosive when bored.”

He took her hand with an easy grin, held it for a moment longer than expected. The crinkles along his smiling temples grew deeper, then he blinked and they were gone. “So,” he said, letting go and holding up the duct tape. “Shall I?”

Bree’s brows shot up. “Oh, right. Yes. Thank you.”

She turned to face the door, feeling her cheeks warm as he stood behind her.

She heard a ripping sound as he tore off half an arm’s length of duct tape. She looked over her shoulder and saw him kneeling on the platform, folding the strip of duct tape inside itself. He reached into his back pocket, unsnapped a pocketknife, and looked up. “Now, how much do you care about this costume?”

She was alone, on a back-lot staircase, with a stranger wielding a knife. She didn’t want the moment to end. Her survival instincts were nonexistent.

Sixty-two seconds later, Bree held still in her camo duct tape–strapped dress as the man stood behind her, close enough that

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she could smell the aftershave on his neck. But something else was there too. More natural, more subtle. Authentic scents of cool pine, of the Appalachian Mountains in the distance.

She felt his breath release on her shoulder as he slipped his pocketknife into his back pocket and stepped around to face her on the small platform.

“All done,” he said with a satisfied grin.

She smiled back. Her voice was not her own as she heard herself say, “Thank you.”

Titania’s lines echoed down the hall.

“Well, I’ve gotta—” Her words faltered. She tipped her chin toward the stage. Half of her body wanted to stay. The bizarre suggestion swept in and out of her thoughts. *I don’t need this job that much. What if we just left it all and went for ice cream? A high-school track? An equally insignificant and isolated stairwell?*

She wasn’t sure, but she felt it too. Their scene closing. The time for their bizarre meeting, their sudden moment, to come to an end.

And the reluctance. At least for her. She dared a quick, deeper glance to his eyes, searching for some clue.

“Good luck.” He smiled. Then set the duct tape in her hand. “In case you need some backup.”

She held it up. The moment had passed. It was time to move on.

She put on an overbright smile as she pulled the door open. “Thanks.”

Twenty seconds later, she floated onstage to deliver her important line.

She stopped beside Birdie—in this moment, Cobweb—fellow fairy and closest friend in the six months since she’d moved to Abingdon, Virginia.

MELISSA FERGUSON

She dipped her head toward Titania.

Met her gaze.

Opened her mouth.

Sensed the hushed auditorium.

Took a breath.

“And I.”

Done.

She stepped back, the brave line given its due in the spotlight.

While the scene continued, Bree couldn't help scanning the shadowy audience for one certain gentleman, even though he'd said he'd been kicked out by one of the ushers. Even though she'd left him standing on the metal platform. Even though—

Her roving stopped.

Because sure enough she found him, three rows back. Right.

Their eyes locked.

He gave her that smile. A knowing smile. A private smile. A smile that couldn't look more delighted for her if she had just recited a flawless ten-minute monologue.

Despite the hard-and-fast rule in the first chapter of every acting book on the planet, she smiled back.

Just as her eyes fell upon the woman beside him looping her arm through his.



Four scenes and sixty minutes later, Bree dodged the cast relaxing backstage to get to the dressing room. She changed so fast she was tempted to brag to Stephen about it. After all, no one but actors talked competitively over dinner about the record speed with which they could change into and out of clothes. But because she

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was about to attempt the impossible feat of driving home, pulling together something edible, and bringing it back for the Barter's 30th Annual Spring Gala in less than twenty minutes, she had to forgo the opportunity to brag to her supervisor—or for that matter, sneak into the front of the house just to “run into” the duct-tape man who'd saved her night.

Not that she really wanted to spot Chip arm in arm with a woman who was a physical manifestation of the word *pearly*. Silky smooth blond hair, flawless cream skin, two rows of perfectly white teeth. Not that Bree had noticed while she sat stuck on her mossy log prop for the rest of the play. At all.

And yet . . .

She slipped her phone out of her pocket as she exited the front of the theatre and skipped down the steps two at a time. Sure, maybe the actors typically used the back doors to escape to their cars. Maybe she had only eighteen minutes to get home and back with something edible. Maybe Stephen had expressly forbidden the cast from exiting through the front doors in slouchy sweaters and holey jeans while the patrons filed out in diamonds and silk ties.

But what was life without mixing it up, eh?

She pressed on Cassie's name in her list of contacts and held the phone up to her ear.

Bree appreciated the view from beneath the illuminated awning overlooking Abingdon's Main Street. The air was crisp and cool as it nipped at the hem of the dress she had borrowed from her roommate, one of the dozens of ostentatious outfits poking out of Evie's closet. It was a solid three inches too short, but then, beggars couldn't be choosers. Though the Barter paid a decent share, Bree wasn't about to splurge on a two-hundred-dollar dress she'd only wear once in a while.

MELISSA FERGUSON

The matinee audience had spilled out of the theatre and now milled about the area, some walking along the sidewalks, some moving across the crosswalk. Waiting cars hummed on both sides of the road.

Yes, Bree thought, turning slowly in a circle, this was a delightful view.

Inspirational.

She was glad to take a beat and experience the Barter world from this angle, with no ulterior motive whatsoever—

“What are you doing?”

The sound of Cassie’s voice in her ear jumpstarted her.

“What do you mean, what am I doing?” Bree turned and started, a little wobbly, down the sidewalk.

“I answered the phone two minutes ago. You’ve been doing that thing with your teeth.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But of course Bree did know what her best friend of twenty-six years was talking about, and of course Cassie knew that Bree knew exactly what Cassie was talking about.

Leave it to her best friend to answer the phone and sit there listening to her nervous tick like a creeper.

In the background of Cassie’s line, screaming erupted.

“Hold on a sec.” Cassie’s voice was brisk and husky, which really was the appropriate term for the woman who in the past year had gone from single chum and adventure pal, to single chum in custody of three kids, to, as of precisely thirteen months ago, married chum loaded down with six kids—four of them under five.

After some prodding, then vague threats, the screaming died down to a reasonable level.

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“So, what’s going on down there?” Cassie asked. “Why the beat-box session?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.” But Bree’s feet slowed as her eyes fell upon him. Chip. Her right foot floated six inches off the ground.

Keep moving! she commanded it, but her foot was as stubborn as her. She felt like she was pulling it through quicksand, but she managed to push one heel to the ground and move on to the next step.

Bree’s eyes stayed on him. He was across the street, standing on the curb beside a gleaming pearl-colored SUV, with the pearl-dressed woman in his arms. She with her pearly cheek pressed against his chest. He looking down at her with that same smile he had bestowed upon Bree on the metal stairway.

Honestly, what did she expect would happen? She had come out of her way to see this little picture of the cozy couple. All they needed were a few butterflies and songbirds and the scene would be complete.

Did she really expect him to be incapable of thinking of anyone but her for the rest of the play? To be unable to tear his eyes away from her while she lounged upstage in her mossy surroundings?

To be standing beside that gleaming SUV right now, breaking that shiny girl’s heart by explaining he had just experienced an ethereal moment with the green girl holding a potted plant, and by golly, he just had to find her? Right there? Right then?

Yep. That sounded about right.

Instead, there he was, hands in both of his jacket pockets while he waited for the woman to slip inside her SUV, grinning in that same charming, crinkly-templed way.

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The engine turned, and he headed toward the parking lot where his truck was parked.

Bree faced forward and resumed her pace.

No, no. She'd made a fool of herself enough tonight, thank you. No need to add *Staring at Stranger from a Distance Like Vengeful Imaginary Ex-Girlfriend* to her list.

She would just forget him. Put everything about him behind her.

In fact, good for shiny blond girl. Way to find a good one.

Bree hopped off the curb.

Focus, Bree. Task at hand.

"So, Cass, tell me," Bree said, unlocking her car. "What makes a better impression at a party: a bowl of pistachios or two cut-up bananas and a splash of watermelon?"

"How much watermelon are we talking?"

"One, maybe two cubes."

"How nice is the bowl?"

"Lime-green plastic. But dishwasher-level clean." Bree slipped the keys into the ignition. "And quiche! I can steal three, maybe three and a half, pieces of Evie's quiche."

"Didn't she start locking her food up in those plastic containers?"

"Please. These are desperate times. I can pick a lock if needed."

Bree cranked the car, then reached for the five-hour-old coffee in her cup holder. She took a cool sip while Cassie's voice went fuzzy.

"Hand it to me. *Give. It. Now. Drew* . . . No, I'm not doing the mean voice . . . Well, if you weren't trying to poke his eye out with it—" Cassie's voice switched over at lightning speed. "Are we talking about a fancy party here?"

Bree turned the wheel with her pinky and ring finger while

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gripping the coffee cup with the rest. "A high-profile gala where my boss can judge me by my sad food contribution while sorting out the cast placements for the summer season."

"Ah. So nothing special or important in any way."

"Precisely."

She turned onto Church Street to avoid the steady post-play traffic on Main. She eased to a stop at the Plumb Alley crossing, and her eyes ticked up to the rearview mirror while she waited for a pair of joggers to cross.

She frowned.

Behind her, monster truck tires vibrated beneath a block of rattling red metal—although the owner of the ancient Ford F250 resting his fender two inches from her bumper would've no doubt called the color "the blood of the latest buck I shot with my Ruger American Magnum." From her vantage point, which was nearly beneath the massive vehicle, she saw oil dripping from the chassis.

"So, your mom was asking me the other day . . .," Cassie started, hesitation deep in her voice.

"You're going to have to talk louder. I have an earthquake squatting behind me," Bree shouted.

Cassie raised her voice. "Are you going to make it back next weekend for Anna's birthday party?"

Bree's lips pursed, that same involuntary wave rolling through her body whenever she heard her eight-year-old niece's name. Anna.

Bree had seen a lot in the six months since she'd left her home of twenty-six years and made her way to Abingdon to live with Nana and try her hand onstage. No one had any clue that Nana would pass away that morning four months ago—especially not Bree, who'd found her. Who'd shaken her. Who, in a state of panic, had made a shabby attempt at CPR until the medics came and

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finally pulled her away. None of them knew how much that moment had tipped Bree over the edge.

She knew her family had their suspicions that losing Nana was harder for Bree than she let on. The fact was, they didn't know how hard. How deep she had sunk. How dark everything had become in recent months.

Unlike everyone else in the family, Bree couldn't keep herself together when she saw Anna. Ironic as it was, she—the only one getting paid to pretend—was the only one in the family who couldn't slap on a happy face and keep conversation light in Anna's presence. Her niece, just a child, was dying, and one day someone would wake up and find her the way Bree had found Nana. She tried to muster courage two months ago, at a family supper, and panicked. Ended up in a bathroom stall heaving.

Bree pushed everything about Anna away—her name, her image—looking instead to the fuming grill that edged closer to her bumper with each second.

"Chill out, you old rattletrap," Bree said aloud, waving with her old coffee cup toward a couple pushing a stroller across. "You think I don't have somewhere to go, too, buddy?"

For a moment she considered darting around them, and her toes lifted off the brake. But then a curly-headed boy on a bike jumped in front of her, pedaling fast toward his parents.

One more agonizing moment of watching the boy cross the road, and she hit the pedal.

"Sorry, Cass. What were you saying?"

"I was asking about next weekend."

"We have shows all day," Bree said, stopping at the stop sign and looking left, then right, then back at the truck who hit the gas at an alarming speed.

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She turned onto Valley Street and, to her chagrin, the truck lurched in her direction with so much vim she jerked her wheel. Drops of the cold black coffee splattered the skirt of her borrowed dress.

"Shoot." Bree rammed her cup into the cup holder and began swiping at the spill.

The engine behind her roared.

"I'm going to kill this guy behind me."

Deidre's muffled voice came from far off in the background.

"No, honey," Cassie said. "Bree isn't going to kill anyone. She didn't really mean that—"

"Yes, I did," Bree said.

"Ha-ha!" Cassie replied in an overbright tone. "No, of course she didn't."

Bree bit her lip. "Did."

There was a pause. Muffled words in the background.

"Of course she won't go to jail," Cassie said.

More muffled words.

"Yes, well, even if she does go to jail, she'll still send you Christmas presents . . ."

She turned on Court Street and blinked as the truck jerked left as well.

"You've got to be kidding me," Bree hissed.

Was he following her on purpose? Who was this guy?

Bree maneuvered with sleek precision around a car parked along the slim street. She did a full swivel-head twist at the truck riding so close to her Subaru anyone would have assumed it was hitched to the back.

"Bree."

Perhaps it was some eccentric art critic who didn't appreciate

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her costume fiasco. Her disruption in the play was entirely out of line, and in order to save the world from terrible actors, he was hunting her down.

“Bree?”

The Deranged Art Critic Serial Killer. He’d be known in the newspapers simply as The Critic. He would ride her bumper until she hit the lip of a small road, right next to a cliff, and ease her right on over . . .

Cassie’s thoughts must have been on par with her own, because the next thing Bree knew, Cassie’s voice was off speaker and booming in her ear. “Bree.”

Bree winced and pulled the phone away. “What?”

“Don’t do anything stupid. Just let the guy pass.”

A chant of “stupid, stupid” began in the background.

Bree squinted in the mirror. It was time for a dose of his own medicine. “Oh, I’m letting him pass.”

“No, you sound like you’re forming an evil plan. Use a normal voice. A nonmalicious voice. Let’s try it now. *I am letting him pass.*”

“I’m letting him pass.” The words held all the unyielding weight of Thor’s hammer.

“See? That’s exactly what I just told you *not* to sound like.”

With a quick, one-handed swerve, Bree stole between two parked cars in front of a two-story Colonial. The roar of the truck’s rusted-out exhaust pipe shook her car as it passed. She gripped the worn leather of the steering wheel, her hawk eyes now as focused on the truck as if it were her last meal.

“Don’t forget you have a dinner to get to,” Cassie said, snatching for a distraction.

Too late.

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“Unbelievable.” Bree’s preying eyes locked on his bumper—or what she could see of it. As if tailing innocent vehicles and contributing to noise and earth pollution weren’t enough, the bumper was covered in outlandish, chauvinistic stickers. The kind that should’ve been illegal. The kind that made a person speed up to see what sort of woman could *possibly* sit in the passenger seat beside such a moron.

Bree’s blood pressure rose as her eyes moved from *Then Satan said, “Let women drive”* to *Looking for your cat? Try under my tires.*

Surely the police wouldn’t charge her if she rammed him. Surely they’d give her an underhanded fist bump and wish her on her merry way.

The truck began to ascend the hill.

“Bree, where are you now? What are you doing?” Cassie said.

Bree’s tires answered for her, squealing as she gunned it after his trailing black smoke.

The nice thing about her 1998 chipped green Subaru was exactly that—it was a 1998 chipped green Subaru. Car insurance? They practically paid her. The road took on new meaning in such vehicles, one being the overwhelming impression that life was just one big game of bumper cars.

“Please,” Cassie said on the other end of the line, “please tell me you aren’t silently doing your villainous monologue about the world being a game of bumper cars. Please.”

The old Ford diesel flew up the road toward her neighborhood. With her foot pressing the pedal to the floor, the Subaru bravely held on, huffing as it chugged up the hill. She tightened her grip, leaning forward until her nose nearly touched the wheel.

There? How does it feel? She eased back to make the turn into her neighborhood.

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But just as her car broke off to give him space and make the turn, the truck turned onto her street.

Her street.

She jerked her car after him.

Standing along the sidewalk beside a hedge, her neighbor Mrs. Lewis tugged her dog leash close to her heart and watched the pair speed down the road. Bree gave a sheepish wave and ducked her head but kept on.

What was there to apologize for, anyway? She wasn't the criminal here but the hero, chasing the man out of her neighborhood, seizing him by the collar and giving him the boot. Showing the inconsiderate hooligan exactly what it feels like to get pushed around.

They covered the length of the street quickly, rushing toward the cul-de-sac and its abrupt end. The truck flew by each house, the options for where it was going dropping by the second. There were only six, five, four houses left before it'd have to turn around—

The beast of a truck pulled into a driveway.

Bree barely managed to swerve in time.

At the same moment Bree hit the brake, her head whipped around to stare as she passed the parked truck. The world was moving in slow motion. Her mouth popping open and dangling like a codfish at the shock of being above water.

Ten feet into the cul-de-sac, her car came to a stop.

She put her car in reverse.

Pulled back.

Turned her wheel.

Drove into her own petite, graveled driveway.

The engine of the truck beside her cut off.

She cut hers and climbed out of the vehicle.

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His door popped open.

Out of the heinous truck, with nothing but a tiny patch of grass between them, hopped Chip. Duct-tape man. With the bright, innocent face of a cherubim.

He shut the door, oblivious to her while he pressed a phone to his ear. "Well, then just upgrade service to 200 amp. But hey, I gotta go. I'll call you when I get to Rodefer." He kicked a chunk of gravel at his feet. "Sounds good."

He slipped his phone into his pocket, and she watched as he put his hands on his hips and looked up at the run-down two-story brick house before him—from the limp *Sold* sign in the meager front yard to the crisp, white-capped Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. A smile played on his face as he surveyed it all, as though he was now lord of the Biltmore. When he spotted her, his smile widened.

"It's you."

"Bree?" Bree nearly jumped at Cassie's voice in her ear. "What's happening?"

She lowered the phone to her side and stood motionless, her eyes moving from the sign and back to him. To the sign again.

What was happening?

Oh, nothing.

Nothing except the fact that she was standing in her driveway staring into the face of the man who'd owned the range of her emotions for the past two hours, who just so happened to be her new neighbor.

They say that 95 percent of the time the first impression you have of a person is right.

And in this case, she had been dead, *dead* wrong.

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