

Also by N.E. Lasater:

Farmer's Son

"A powerful drama with a conscience"

Publishers Weekly

ALTERNATE ENDINGS

N.E. LASATER

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“It’s not the load that breaks you down, it’s the way you carry it.”

—Lena Horne

She couldn't catch her breath. She gasped and gulped the air, her chest pumping the dry wind that had robbed the wet from her mouth an hour before and a thousand feet below, where the canyon floor met the first long climb.

Far above her, so high she had to jam her head back onto her sweating shoulders to see it, a red chunky peak scratched the turquoise sky. It topped a peninsula of sheer cliff that rose 1,500 feet in a shark's fin whose ridge in spots was less than two feet wide. The moody river carving a rusty groove had so far lost to this great stone altar, for the flash floods that routinely killed hikers still swung wide in a respectful bend around its feet.

She saw them ahead of her still, laughing, their voices young like the perfect day. At first they had included her, walking alongside in the freckled morning as they crossed the shady metal footbridge and began what started as a level stroll. Once the trail had steepened to leave the cottonwood trees, though, the pack of happy teenagers had moved ahead in the basking sun. By the time they arrived at the long dusty switchbacks up the bright west wall of the valley, they had stopped calling back to her. "I'm all right!" she yelled to them anyway. "Go on ahead!"

She was panting now, her chest aching, and her heart beat way too fast. She peered ahead but could only hear them. They had turned a steep corner and were gone. Lightheaded now, with both legs shaking on the sharp incline, she stepped back to the hard wall, her daypack between her spine and the rock. She bent her twitching knees and put her hands on them, then willed her arms to straighten to brace herself as she struggled to find her breath.

SEPTEMBER

“Five. The plane’s at five.” Calyce Tate pressed her phone to her ear as she drove the George Washington Parkway south toward National Airport. “Nina won’t come. She wanted Labor Day at her place this year, but how could we all fit in her one-bedroom? And how were we all supposed to afford the trip to Chicago?”

She interrupted a few seconds later. “I know you and Greg could do it. Me too, but what about Damion? I have to bribe him as it is.”

Calyce leaned left to feel the steam heat rushing in through her open driver’s side window. She had rolled down all the windows on her old Camry, though the air-conditioning still worked fine. “Let Nina stew. But you’d think she’d want to see her own mother. No, I’m all right. Just hoarse.”

Through flashing breaks in the summer trees, she saw far down to the languid Potomac River and the rock cairns of Three Sisters Islands, which cleared the surface by only a few feet. A huge tree had come hurtling downstream sideways in the last big thunderstorm, and its long trunk had caught between two of the tiny islets a child’s height above the water. Browned debris hung in flags from the bare wood.

She coughed and it hurt her. “You can bring red cole slaw. I’ve got the rest.” She smiled. “Tell Jimmy I’m making his cuppie cakes.”

The call over, she dialed the next with her right thumb then waited with her ear to the phone as cars darted sullenly around

her. When no one answered, she dialed it again, punching the digits with irritation. When her son, Damion, finally answered, she pounced. “Were you sleeping? No I don’t know when you came in. I want you to clean the powder room. I’ve been asking and you haven’t done it and we have people coming. No I can’t. I’ll have your grandmother. Today. I told you. Four fifty-six.”

Across the slow river, Georgetown University crenellated the opposite ridge with its two piercing steeples and its odd, massive, square croquet arch through which she could see the sky. On the wooded shore directly below, a clover green and white boathouse had launched student-rowers on two long boats that sliced the glassy water. She watched their rhythm as they moved as one in the bright sun that strobed their white skin.

“Steak like you like it,” she told him. “And barbequed chicken. Yes of course she’s welcome.”

Key Bridge skipped over the river, its ribboned arches light. She moved to the right to avoid the slow traffic turning left and heading north into D.C., and she continued south along the Virginia side through Rosslyn. “Seven? Can’t she get there earlier? That’s too long for Jimmy to wait.” But then she laughed at something he said to charm her. “Just tell her to come as soon as she can. Did you update your resume? Then do that too. Starting Tuesday everyone will be back at work.”

Once she hung up she hitched her thin hips to inch her long legs from the steering column that hit both her knees, and she reached for the typed papers in her lap. She found her half-glasses in the cup holder and pushed them to the bulb of her nose, then swung her eyes between the sheets and the busy road, flipping the pages with annoyance as she drove.



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She had been standing at the end of Terminal B for half an hour but her mother hadn't showed. Calyce had gone from standing, to standing with her arms crossed, to leaning against a round pillar opposite the short hallway with guards at the end that led in a jog to the gates. She had finally put her heavy shoulder bag on the glossy floor. Above her, honeycombed arches made angles of origami steel, folding into one of the many high cupolas that ran the length of the new building. After twenty minutes, her left black pump had begun tapping. After thirty, she picked up her bag, slung it over her tired shoulder, and began pacing.

She turned once again to look behind herself up the long main hall toward the other concourses, but her mother still wasn't coming from that direction either. The plane had landed on time, the signboard said, and had long ago docked at Gate B 32.

She ascended the escalator to the ticketing level, where the line was long so it took another twelve minutes, according to her watch, to finally step to the counter. All the while, Calyce kept scanning the corridor.

Flight 250, from Tampa.

"Name?" the young ticket agent said.

"Effie Guthrie."

The blonde typed at a screen they both could see. "Not here."

"She must be. Is that the final manifest?"

The woman's eyebrows walked up her forehead. "I'm telling you. She's ticketed but she never checked in."

Calyce scanned for someone older. Maybe a man. "Is there a supervisor?"

"I *am* the supervisor, and she didn't board. The seat stayed empty." She cocked her head to invite up the next person in line.



She dialed, getting no one. Into voicemail she said, “Simon, it’s Calyce. Mom didn’t get on the plane. Has she called you? It’s six o’clock on Sunday. If you hear from her, will you call me? I’m calling Nina.”

She dialed as she walked to her car in the parking structure behind the terminal, her heels clicking on the gray cement. When her sister answered, Calyce said, “Mom didn’t get on the plane in Tampa and she’s not answering her phone. Have you talked to her?...No, Chicago is not easier. Not for anyone.” She pinched her arms against her slender body. “You know how she is. Yes, she treats me like that too.”



She came downhill on the narrow road that pretzeled through her tight neighborhood of fifty wooden-slat townhouses. After making one left and another, she descended in the twilight past a last row of mailboxes and pulled up at the bottom, at the curb just beyond her one-car driveway, two houses up from the farthest end of her particular cluster. Her white multifold garage door was closed.

She opened the two doors on the sedan’s passenger side and pulled out six bulky white plastic grocery bags, which she loaded, wincing, onto the crabbed fingers of both hands. She bobbed duck-like over a short, elbowed walkway of fake-brick to her no-glass, solid, blood red front door, which was the only noticeable color on the home’s exterior. She struggled with the key then twisted herself sideways to step into the tiled entryway. Despite the warm day it was cold, ice-cream cold inside.

“Are you home?” she stage-whispered, her mouth to one of the two identical closed doors immediately inside. “There’s more in the car.”

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But no one answered. She sighed, then climbed the narrow staircase up the right-hand wall with one arm's heavy load knocking the other. She thumped the bags onto the linoleum kitchen floor, then went to the thermostat on the wall around the corner to turn off the air-conditioning. She switched on the old can lights in the low ceiling and began unpacking the groceries, which she inventoried out loud as she opened the behemoth stainless steel fridge whose French doors curved far beyond the front edge of the laminate counter.

“But where's the mayonnaise?” She looked again on the door, then checked the cupboard. “I had mayonnaise this morning. And what happened to the eggs?”

The kitchen occupied the main floor's far back left corner. The refrigerator faced right on the long left wall while the much older, shallow, single-bowl metal sink was mounted on the shorter rear wall under the one small window that slid open only halfway, a floor above the fenced pen of the back yard. On the ground, twelve feet beyond the house, a six-foot spear-pointed fence stood in military precision, above which zigzag loomed the identical gray-blue backside of an identical cluster of six townhouses on the next street. Calyce and her directly-behind-neighbor watched each other wash dishes every night.

The small kitchen ended on the right with an interior wall, beyond which was a twenty year-old brown corduroy loveseat with sewn-on cushions like bustles behind the head and over each round arm. Into the far corner on the other side of it was shoved a square pine coffee table that had been purchased originally for a much larger room. On it, a small square-box TV faced out diagonally with its remote placed sideways exactly parallel to the screen.

Along the long right wall, between the corner table and the top of the stair landing, a matching second brown corduroy loveseat had a pink plush snuggie draped over one arm. Two padded tan

faux-leather ottomans sat in the middle of the beige wall-to-wall carpet. On one of them, a woman's small yellow shoulder bag lay open.

When she had finished with the groceries, Calyce picked up the purse. She latched it without looking inside and headed downstairs with it. She hung the bag on the same interior door she had spoken to, and she went out again.



Four minutes later she charged back through the front door with the mail in her hand. On top a white business envelope blared a red banner in alarming lettering. She knocked determinedly on the same door, the yellow purse still dangling.

“Damion! Are you up? Selene, are you in there?”

She put her ear to the door. After a moment, she opened the door next to it, then peered into an empty garage. Her son's car wasn't there.



She heard them downstairs finally as she was getting ready for bed. The chime of china plates rose to her overhead in the small bathroom of her small master bedroom. She heard their low conspiratorial voices and their shushing and muffled laughter.

She cinched the belt of her blue chenille bathrobe and slid her feet into her matching backless slippers. Holding the wooden railing she carefully went down, clearing her throat at the bottom so they would hear her. She heard the door to the powder room close and the ceiling fan inside it start to hum. She smelled the warm, inviting smell of oregano in tomato sauce.

In the kitchen, her son Damion stood eating her leftover lasagna. He held the plate near his mouth as he shoveled with a fork. He was shorter than his very tall mother but undeniably beautiful,

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with close-cropped hair and pecan eyes under lashes so thick they looked false. He wore a neat goatee that focused attention on his lush mouth. His full-face smile could convince anyone of anything.

“Is she asleep?” He looked at the ceiling.

“She didn’t come. She said she decided to stay home.”

“You went to the airport?”

“It was two hours before she answered her phone. She said she was out walking the beach like always.” She pointed to the envelope she had left on the counter, just inches from the glass lasagna pan whose foil top was now gaping. “Did you see that notice?”

Damion shrugged.

“It’s addressed to you,” she said. “May I open it?”

She tore carefully. “It’s what I thought. They’re canceling if you don’t pay within the next five days.”

She heard the fan stop in the powder room and the door open. “You need to call our insurance agent first thing tomorrow. They may want a certified check. I don’t know. This has never happened before.”

Selene wandered in, transparently pale with long, fine blonde hair that sat limply on the curve of her bony upper back in her gunmetal summer halter. Her makeup-less eyes were the merest sigh of blue and her eyebrows so blonde they disappeared. She smiled at Damion as she greeted Calyce, and he smiled back, his wet lips pulling his cheeks into four unequal signs, one pair each of less-than and greater-than on either side of his perfect teeth. Selene took his now-empty plate and put it in the sink along with his fork, then moved in under the arm he offered. They both leaned against the counter facing Calyce.

Calyce had stopped talking. She looked from Selene to Damion and back again as they regarded her. “Sorry to wake you,” Selene said. “We’ll be quieter so you can get back to sleep.”

They regarded her, mute now, but still she didn't leave. She cleared her throat.

"What is that?" he said. "You do that a lot now. It's annoying."

She looked significantly at Selene but still the young woman didn't move. "There's something I need to discuss with my son." She bent her right leg and propped the foot on top of her left slipper, stork-like.

Selene said she was going to take a shower and politely wished Calyce goodnight. When they heard the door close to Damion's room beneath them, he said, "My son? What am I? Twelve?"

"You were supposed to pay this."

"I've never paid it before."

"You know I changed it so you'd have your own policy."

"Which costs way more. And it moves all the cost for my car to me. You drive it sometimes. You know I don't have the money."

"Which is why you're looking for a new job, something that fits your degree. Not that bartending."



The siren woke her from her light sleep. She jerked as the throbbing wail raced along the dense blocks of streets.

She felt a sharp lump in her throat and sat up. She tried to swallow but had to cough. As the Doppler effect lowered the siren to a moan, she forced a gulp to clear it, moving her neck like a bird.

The only light glowed red from the squared digits on the plastic clock that faced her from the end table on the other, empty side of the bed. It was 3:12 a.m.

From her pillow, she saw out the open glass single door to her Juliet balcony, which wasn't an actual balcony despite the realtor's name for it but an outside railing waist high. She found a full moon fuzzed by streamers of cirrus clouds as she felt the too-cold damp

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air, which was being chopped rather than moved by the whirring ceiling fan.

She untied the silk scarf she wore knotted below the knob of bone in the back of her skull. She tied it tight again, pulling hard on the rabbit-ear ends. She lay back once more and tried to sleep, feeling on her cheek the slick kiss of her satin pillowcase.



She held the basket in the doorway as the high school seniors shuffled in, heads down and backpacks hung by one strap over a slumping shoulder. She blocked each teenager from entering until a smart phone had been relinquished. The new kids who had never had her mewled but the veterans told them to “just give it up, already.” She didn’t slide the basket under her desk until she had collected all twelve.

“And your computers,” she said as they took their seats around the three outsides of a U made with long tables. Its open top faced her and the virgin whiteboard where she stood. Like the rest of the building, everything in the classroom was nearly brand new. “You can keep them, but you can’t have them out. Only paper. You remember paper.”

Of her dozen Senior Creative Writing students, she saw that three were black and four were boys. All were privileged to attend the private high school in Upper Northwest D.C. whose college placements danced like sugarplums in the heads of their overweening parents. Room 2860 was on the top floor of the high, white-clad building. Two more floors, which included a full-sized basketball court, hid underground at the insistence of the plush homeowners in the surrounding neighborhood of 1920s Craftsman bungalows.

Each day they would discuss two original pieces of student writing, she told them, which meant that each week, over three

classes, they would discuss a total of six pieces they would write. This in turn meant that each of the twelve students would be critiqued once every two weeks. The assignments would flow from well-known short stories she would give them.

“So you’re responsible for always having a piece ready. No excuses. I want them distributed in hard copy by the end of the class before. And once we critique yours, immediately start the next one. I also expect you to know how to use proper grammar. You chose this course. It’s an elective, so I expect you to know how to write.”

“Calyce, are you doing the assignments too?” a black girl with long twists asked her. “John DeGroot always does. That’s what my friend says.”

“Yeah,” a gangly boy said, “He sure doesn’t care about grammar.”

“Well, I do, and it’s Cal-ice, like Alice with a hard C. Not Cal-lease. And be sure to spell it correctly, even though it sounds like that hard thing on the bottom of your foot.” She didn’t smile. No, there would be no poetry, and no non-fiction. “Use your imaginations, starting with today’s assignment.” She picked up some printed sheets to distribute. “Read *The Monkey’s Paw* and use it to write your own piece focusing on setting, which –”

“Is that it?” A white girl named Madison cut her off. “You don’t want plot?”

She waited, staring, a full beat. “We’ll get to plot.”

“But setting alone isn’t impactful.”

One of her veterans groaned.

Calyce crossed her arms. “‘Impactful’ is not a word. It’s a trendy absurdity, like ‘incentivizing’ and ‘reach out.’ He reached out to me, instead of he wrote me an email. You may not use such words in your stories. They are what? Anyone?”

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Talia, the groaning veteran, had to say it when Calyce finally pointed to her, but she rolled her eyes in a display to her classmates as she did so. “Index expurgatorius.”

“And that’s not Harry Potter. Madison, tell us what that means at the beginning of next class and bring in a poster board so we can write words as they arise.”

“Seriously?” Madison said. “A poster board?”

When they filed out at the end of class, Talia lingered, pretending to arrange things at the far bottom of her sausaged pack. Once Calyce knew they were alone, she quietly said to the girl, “How’s your mother? Any better?”

The child didn’t look up as she shook her head.

“Do you want to talk about it? I’ve got a few minutes.”

The girl nodded.



As she tried to make her way through the throng of rushing teenagers shouting and weaving, Roger, the freckled science teacher, came abreast of her in the hallway. They maneuvered shoulder-to-shoulder to create a wedge that diverted the flow.

“I got that map for you,” he said loudly so she could hear him. “To show you the topography, remember? I’ll bring it in.”

He was gone, having stepped ahead of her as the tide took him. All she could see was his red hair that curled like peaked whipped cream, and soon even that confection was swallowed.



Twenty minutes later she was squeezed onto a chair at a small round table in a little room next to the English Department faculty office. The walk-in-closet-sized space served as storage unit, winter coat rack, book depository and conference room. If four people

met the table had to be pulled away from the wall, where the whiteboard was. Its ribbed metal bottom lip poked now into her left shoulder. She waited with her papers lined up neatly on the fake wood tabletop as she squinted through her reading glasses to text on her phone, holding it with her left hand and stabbing letters with her right index finger.

John DeGroot, the head of the high school's English Department, returned finally. "Everything okay?" he asked as he shoved a short stack of books on the floor with his foot to close the door.

"It's my sister." Calyce clicked the phone off. "There's something wrong with my mother but Nina thinks I'm crazy, at least that's what I'm getting from these texts. Three words. Why doesn't anyone talk anymore?"

DeGroot had fine white hair in gauzy tufts and small, close-set eyes straddling the narrow bridge of a beaked nose above an edged jaw parallel to the noticeable ridges of his windpipe. "Why does Nina think you're crazy?"

"Mom didn't come for Labor Day and she was supposed to stay for two weeks. I went to the airport but she didn't show up. She says she just changed her mind."

"Has she done that before?"

She nodded. "But you know that feeling when something's not right?"

"I do." He scrolled on his laptop.

Calyce still had two things to discuss. First was the new teacher, a young black woman who had already sent around a multitude of emails with her "thoughts" about the curriculum. "Who is this child?" Calyce said.

"It's Amita's first teaching job."

"She doesn't understand politics."

He smiled. "And you do? She reminds me of you all those years ago. Be nice to her."

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Last was the senior creative writing class Calyce was teaching for the first time, and she told him she was nervous because she wasn't a writer. DeGroot told her to relax. She didn't have to use the same short story prompts he had used for years but should find pieces that spoke to her. And yes, he confirmed, he had done the assignments along with the kids, although he hadn't always shared them. "It kept me attuned to the process of writing."

"I'm not a writer," she said again. "Grammar I know but imagination eludes me."

"Life's not as empirical as you make it."

He thanked her again for being willing to teach his class at the last minute and in addition to her English 9 for freshmen. He said it meant a great deal to him, that she would cover for him, particularly since he hadn't given her a reason.

"I figured it was Steven," she said. "And you would have done the same for me."

He said she deserved to know why he had asked her to do it. He hadn't been able to say before, it was all in flux, but he had finalized things that morning with the school's Head of Academics, so he could tell her. "I'm retiring."

Calyce blinked.

He hurried to say, "Don't worry, I'm not leaving until June, but I can't do it any more, not with my brother institutionalized. What Steven did really threw us and he's alone out there."

"But you promised," she said.

"You've got Belinda."

"She's a history teacher. Can't you work part-time?"

"He nearly died, Calyce."

She finally registered the closed door. DeGroot said, "I know we promised each other another five years, but I can't do that now. I'm here all this year but with time off whenever I need it. You'll be head of the department next year like you've always wanted,

and I'm asking Hank's approval to make you Interim Head immediately, so it'll be a *fait accompli*. You're younger than I am. You'll have years to run all these pain-in-the-ass people we hired."



"Did he say what Janice is going to do?" Belinda asked as they walked into the noisy faculty lunchroom at first period lunch that same day.

"Only he's retiring, not her. She's staying on as Vice Principal." Calyce lowered her voice as she talked about John's wife. "He said they need the money."

Not all the tables were occupied. At one, next to the double row of small windows that punched square holes in the vast white-brick outside wall, three English teachers sat talking and eating. One of them was the young black woman, Amita, who had sent all the emails. She was flanked by a white woman in an olive sweater set and a broad-cheeked white man in his thirties. The other three chairs at the table were empty.

"Is that the new teacher?" Belinda whispered.

Calyce nodded but didn't lead them over, choosing instead an empty table by the entrance, near a row of short cabinets on which a microwave sat with its door open. Calyce smelled chicken noodle soup. "He likes her. I don't."

Belinda scanned the other table. "Dan?"

Calyce nodded. "Let him deal with her. I like your new 'do.'"

Belinda was pulling plastic containers from her neoprene lunch bag. "I had to stop paying all that money."

Calyce was doing the same, laying a place for herself perfectly with her fork on her napkin on the left and a knife and spoon on the right. "It's shorter but I like it. The big earrings help."

Belinda jangled them, bouncing her gray spirals. "You know the best part? I can scratch my head."

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The lunchroom's ground-level portholes faced the school's long entrance driveway, down which boisterous teenagers streamed like fire ants to the quick eateries they sought in their daily flight from the school cafeteria. Through a window Calyce saw a car edging its way through a mass of young people.

"All the girls have the same short shorts," Calyce said as she peered out. "Their backsides are falling out."

Four tables away, the three English teachers laughed as a math teacher joined them. The perky young man had curly hair and earnest brown eyes. Unlike the others, who dressed casually, he wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt and a red-striped tie. "That will wear off," Calyce said to her friend.

"Are you okay? You're in a mood today."

"It's Damion. What's he doing bartending?"

"Cut off his internet."

"What?"

"Cut it off. You know, intermittently. Turn the Wi-Fi on and off when he's home, secretly, so he doesn't know. 'Gosh, honey, I don't know what's wrong with it.' That'll make him get his own place."

"I don't want him to get his own place. I just want him to get a career. He spends money like water."

Belinda waved goodbye at a woman leaving. "So show him how much it really costs to run a household, and show him he spends more than he earns. He's a business major. He'll understand that."

"May I join you?" a deep male voice. It was Roger, the red-headed science teacher, who looked and dressed like a Brawny commercial. Belinda made eyes playfully at Calyce, but the man towered so far above them he didn't see it. When Calyce didn't answer, her friend jumped in.

"Sure." Belinda patted the seat next to Calyce, and he stepped over quickly to take it.



Two Sundays later she stood impatiently in her kitchen holding an armload of carefully folded clothes and a ceramic mug of fast-cooling coffee. She had made brunch just an hour before, but her son still had his close-cropped fade deep inside her refrigerator.

“You think if you stare long enough things will start dancing?” she asked his back. “Electricity costs money.”

But he didn’t move. Finally, he opened the crisper to select a nectarine as big as his fist. He bit and sucked at the sudden spurt of juice as he walked from the kitchen through the small brown sitting room with his mother padding behind him. “I’m glad we’re doing this,” she said. “Did you print out your bank statements and your credit card bills?”

Damion suddenly stumbled in front of her. Catching one foot behind the other, he flung out his right hand to catch the stair railing, which sent the fruit flying. She heard it thud on a step and then on the tiled floor below.

She turned back to the kitchen. “I’ll get a paper towel.”

Damion didn’t wait but kept heading down, his heavy feet thumping. “If I had a fridge in my room, I wouldn’t have to keep coming up all the time for food.”

He had gone inside already when she returned from throwing away the nectarine, and he had taken his key out of the doorknob, so she had to knock. After a minute Damion let her into his living room with its black leather two-part sectional that cornered on her right, from where a tall chrome floor lamp arced nearly to the spotlight ceiling. Under its globe a black coffee table sat on a rug whose furry white pile matched the two fake-fur throw pillows, one on each couch. Over the back of the far end diagonally away from her was a fake-chinchilla afghan she hadn’t seen before. Its long hairs riffed in the icebox breeze that fell from the ceiling vent.

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The sectional's other half, along the long right wall of the house, faced a flat-screen TV mounted on the left wall shared with the garage. The TV was on and the remote was on the couch next to where Damion usually sat. The football game cast the only colors in the monochromatic room. Even the clean clothes she was delivering were all dove grays and blacks.

Beyond the TV a short hall led to the full bath and dim bedroom, where Calyce saw the unmade edge of his queen-sized bed. On the new carpet lay a balled up and surely wet white bath towel.

"Let's start with inflow and outgo," she said as she sat. "I don't want to have to pay your car insurance again like I had to last week."

"Careful of the mug." Damion pointed, then went into his bathroom and closed the door.

She waited, eyeing the towel. When he emerged minutes later, patting his hair, she said, "It's like ice in here. And dark. Do you still have the bedroom blinds closed?"

He pinched the razor creases of his charcoal slacks as he sat.

"Where are your papers?" she asked.

"I know what happened. It was that blue suit you had me buy for Jay Jay's wedding. Plus that shirt and tie. And these shoes. Altogether, it cost me a thousand."

"A thousand dollars? That's my mortgage."

One shoulder moved. "You said you wanted me to look good."

"I told you to shop at Macy's. Where did you go?"

"You said I looked 'better than every other cousin there.' Plus I need it for interviewing."

"But a thousand dollars for a plain blue suit?"

"You haven't bought a man's clothes in twenty years. That's what a good one costs. But that's why I can't pay my minimums, and if I don't pay them by tomorrow, there'll be more late fees."

She shook her head at him. “You can’t keep waiting until the last minute. What are the balances?”

He lifted his right ankle onto his left knee. She saw a matte black sock above a polished black dress shoe. “The minimums aren’t much,” he said. “A hundred each for the two of them.”

He paused. She stared at his foot.

He said, “I could always work a day shift.”

“No. No. I want you –”

“To have my days free for interviews, I know, but you can’t have it both ways. I can either be available during the days or be able to pay my credit cards.” He tilted his head.

“I want you to focus on your job search, of course.”

“Of course, but these bills distract me. I don’t need the whole thousand. I could ask for that. After all, you’re the one who wanted me to buy it. But just a couple hundred. Oh, and maybe some cash too. So make it four. Five.”

“I don’t have five hundred dollars.”

“Sure you do. Not in your checking but I went over all your bank accounts like you told me, to see how you manage your money.” He smiled. “See, I do do my homework, and you say I sleep all the time. You’ve got two thousand in savings, so it won’t affect your cash flow.”

She frowned as she thought about it.

“Or I could work a day shift,” he said again.

“You’ll pay me back? It’s just a loan?”

“Like I always say, I’ll pay you back as soon as I get that job you want me to find.”



Calyce was on the phone as she drove to school early the next morning. It was Maryland, and the Beltway, and she was holding the phone to her ear, which was illegal, so she was looking for cops

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all while she was trying to breathe. A sudden coughing fit had stolen her wind.

She gulped as she tried to speak. “I’ve got a job, Nina, an actual job. You’re the one who’s freelance.”

She forced a cough and then another. “I can’t go see Mom until Columbus Day weekend. I’ll pay for you to go if you go this month. I don’t know how, but I’ll pay.”

Driving sixty, she said, “I just talked to her. No, it does not tell her we think she can’t live on her own anymore.”

She took her foot off the gas and the van close behind her braked hard. It honked, and she turned on her flashers. Struggling to breathe, she moved right looking in her side mirror, and she couldn’t listen at the same time to what Nina was saying.

She inched into the far lane and slid onto the narrow shoulder. She hit the brakes, throwing herself forward. She came to a stop as cars whizzed by inches from her.

Panting, her chest straining in the dry hot sun, Catherine finally reached the cutout blasted into the rock. It was a trough that slashed along the side of the mountain and curved outward to create an overhang like a tunnel sliced vertically. At the same spot, the trail's cement changed from bleached gray to rose flowerpot. Man-made ridges had been added too, running perpendicular to the canyon wall. At the path's outer edge, square-cut blocks had been brick-laid to mark the rim but they didn't barricade the lethal drop.

If she stood fully upright she would stumble backward, the grade had steepened so suddenly out of the last turn. The dangerous pitch was obviously the reason for the new traction lines. She focused on her feet, sure she would lose her balance as her right side baked in the sun that had risen above the soaring opposite, eastern wall of the canyon. The backpack she had been told to buy balled a load that tilted her frighteningly off-center.

She heard them before she saw them, two abreast with their arms swinging, a young couple thumping down the hill toward her in billed caps and special hiking belts that holstered their precious water.

"Mojave, not diamondback," the man was saying. "It was yellower."

"Sounded like one of those wind-up toys," the woman said.

"You know it's illegal to kill them here?" They nodded to her as she shuffled carefully out of their way. She got next to the wall and balanced herself by grabbing it. She slowly raised her head to look ahead, to where the mounting path turned again, left this time and out of sight.

"Don't worry!" the man called back to her, laughing. "I'm sure he's gone by now."