

B U C K ' S
P A N T R Y

A N O V E L

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Lianna's hands gripped the steering wheel at ten and two as she drove five miles under the speed limit down the country highway. Around her, majestic trees opened onto pastures dotted by distant farmhouses—which felt about as alien from Manhattan as if she'd landed on the fucking moon. But there had been an accident on the interstate, and Google insisted this was the fastest route. She had a sneaking suspicion that Google might be toying with her but didn't see another option. It was four thirty p.m., and she needed to find a bathroom. She accelerated but immediately felt as if the rented Altima would slip from the road. Scowling, she slowed back down. She hadn't driven in twenty years.

Clutching the wheel with one hand and unknowingly decelerating another five miles per hour, she stabbed at the little blue arrow on the temperature control button. The digital screen insisted that the temperature of the air blowing from the vents was *Low*.

“Bullshit.” The ventilation flaps blew nothing more than dinky wisps of mildly chilled air. She lifted her dark wavy hair away from her neck and wondered why anyone would choose to live in this goddamn inferno.

“Liahhhna, it'll be hot out here,” Aimee had said when they talked on Friday, the only trace of her accent, a slight drawing out

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of the *ab* in Lianna's name. "Texas in August is hot, so you'll want to wear something cool when you get off the plane."

Lianna had laughed.

But when she had stepped through the sliding doors at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, the wall of heat that slammed into her was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Standing in the blinding sun, she had actually felt her pale skin burning and her lungs trying to adjust to the thick, stifling air. Within seconds, sweat popped from every pore of her body.

"You okay there, missy?" Lianna had blinked at the source of the booming voice, certain the heat was making her hallucinate. She blinked again, but the image remained the same. Along with his jeans and white button-down shirt, the man was still wearing a boat-like cowboy hat, a belt buckle the size of a salad plate, and gleaming cowboy boots. Furtively, her eyes scanned the crowd outside the airport, searching for this Missy person.

The man stepped toward her. "You need some help, hon?"

Lianna felt her back stiffen as she realized he was addressing her. Her face tightened into the *I-will-go-fucking-apeshit-if-you-touch-me* expression that allowed her to roam mostly unbothered in New York. She stepped sideways, searching for the rental car bus sign and preparing to shriek if he came closer.

He took a step back and smiled. "If you're new to Big D and looking for the rental cars, you'll need to take the shuttle from the lower level."

Without intending to, Lianna met his eyes.

"You sure you're okay, hon?" he asked.

She registered the sheer openness of his face, the sincerity and concern in his gaze. "Y-Yes," she managed before wobbling on one impractically high heel and walking toward the escalators.

She shook her head in bafflement at the memory.

Her phone rang.

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Keeping her eyes on the road, she pressed the Bluetooth answer button. “This is Lianna.”

Benjamin’s soft, elegant voice greeted her. “Hello, Lianna. How’s Texas?”

“Fucking hell, Benjamin. You’ve sent me to goddamn fucking hell.”

His weary sigh filled the car. “Lianna—”

“I’m speaking literally. It’s over a hundred degrees in this place.”

“If you want to be taken seriously as a future candidate for CFO, you’ve got to run an acquisition.” Benjamin’s voice implied his patience was rapidly diminishing. “It’s been nearly two years since we’ve found a viable prospect, and I have no idea when another will come along. Would you prefer that I hand this over to Robert?”

Lianna had a vision of her tiny junior one-bedroom in Chelsea—basically a loft with a nook for a bed. But still, a loft that she owned. *Sterile* was the word her mother had used the one and only time she’d visited. Sterile and un-lived-in because Lianna spent nearly every waking minute in her office. The most serious relationship she’d had in the past three years had been with Netflix.

She blew out a breath. “No, I do not want you to hand this over to Robert.”

“I didn’t think so. Just remember, diligence is the best time to get a sense of whether there’s any talent. Once they know they’re losing their jobs, they’ll be more difficult to assess.”

“We’re buying them. How can they not know their jobs are at risk?”

Benjamin sighed again. “Look at where you are.”

Lianna glanced left then right. All she could see were flat yellowy-green fields, a smattering of trees, and black cows.

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"I think you're wise to go down ahead of the team. Call me tomorrow with your initial impressions." Benjamin's voice had taken on the distracted quality that usually signaled something else had grabbed his attention. The line went dead.

Lianna returned her attention to the road. She screamed as her foot slammed the brakes.



"Ashley, honey, can you please water the geraniums and move the sprinklers in the wildflower garden?" Gillian—"*Jill-i-an with a soft J*," she'd gently correct anyone who got it wrong—said to the Bluetooth display on her black Lincoln Navigator. She zoomed around a turn, fifteen miles over the speed limit. "And make sure the little trough we put out for the deer has water. It's been hot as blue blazes this week, and I'm sure it's low." They lived on ten acres, and Gillian loved watching wild deer graze in the backyard.

"What did you do with my leopard-print cold-shoulder top?" was her fifteen-year-old daughter's reply.

Gillian bit her lip. That blouse, which Ashley had brought home from the mall two towns over a few weeks ago, was tacky. And the orangey colors looked terrible on her. Gillian had taken it to Goodwill the next day.

"Sweetheart, I told you that top was in no way appropriate or flattering."

"Mother—"

"And I'm not gonna discuss it again. But I need—"

"This is so unfair!"

Gillian couldn't be sure when her daughter had begun shrieking her displeasure like an angry bobcat, but it was happening all the time now. There was only one way to deal with it. "As God is my witness, Ashley!" she bellowed with all her might. "If you don't water those plants before I get home, you're gonna be eating

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a peanut butter sandwich for supper instead of that King Ranch Chicken I fixed!”

“But—”

“Don’t you ‘but’ me, young lady. I was up half the night making those awful gluten-free muffins for Bobbie’s class. And I had to go to school drop-off twice this morning because Carly forgot her spelling homework even though I specifically asked her if she had it, and she *specifically* said that she did.”

“Mother—”

“I had not been home five minutes from my second trip to the school when they called and told me Bobbie threw up. I had the planning meeting for the Cattle Baron’s Ball, so I had no choice but to drop him at Mama W’s and get a lecture about what I’m letting him eat.”

“But, Mother, none of that has anything to do with me!”

“Ashley Lauren Wilkins! I am pulling up at the UPS store as we speak to pick up your new dance shoes because UPS has apparently decided to only make one delivery attempt before they cart packages off to some drop-off location because *apparently* people are willing to pay for shipping even if that means they have to drive somewhere to pick up their stuff.” Gillian glared at the wrinkled ticket stuck to her dashboard, which she’d ripped from her front door, wadded up, and thrown into the azalea bed a few hours before. “I rarely ask for your help with the garden, but I’ve still got to run to Sprouts or we’re gonna be out of milk and bacon by the weekend.” She could have easily picked these things up when she’d swung by Albertsons—yet another unexpected errand that had been thrust on her. But ever since she’d discovered the ASPCA’s Shop With Your Heart website, she tried not to buy any meat or dairy from a farm that didn’t have one of the ASPCA’s approved humane certifications. She could not fathom the idea of being a vegetarian or, God

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Almighty, a vegan. But she could spend her money at farms that were trying to treat their animals well. The Sprouts Farmers Market in the adjacent town was the only place that carried those brands.

“Why can’t—”

Gillian’s voice dropped lethally. “As God is my witness, Ashley, if I come home to wilted geraniums—”

“Fine.” Only her oldest daughter could end a discussion as effectively as Gillian, perfectly matching her mother’s crushing tone of finality. “Daddy wants to talk to you.”

Gillian rocketed into a parking space and shoved the Lincoln into park. A familiar wave of disbelief and consternation filled her as she considered her daughter’s unwillingness to help with even a single household task. She heard Ashley’s muffled voice, “I don’t know. She’s talking about God now.”

Gillian narrowed her eyes at Ashley’s name, glowing across the dashboard display. Then she heard her husband’s muted but unmistakably irritated response, “Aw, hell.” She could picture him standing there, his stomach straining against his pastel golf shirt—he didn’t even play golf—his tanned legs like tree trunks under a pair of hideously plaid madras shorts.

“Honey?” he asked too brightly. They’d been aggressively polite with each other since the party, two days before.

Gillian made a tight, unhappy smile at the dashboard. “Yes?” She didn’t even need to ask why her husband was home at four thirty in the afternoon. He worked at his daddy’s bank, so he did pretty much whatever he wanted.

“You home soon?” he asked. “I was gonna go down to the pond and see what I can catch.”

“Not until closer to five thirty,” she said, trying to keep her voice even. “I’ve still got a couple of errands to run. Then I’ve got to pick up Bobbie at your mama’s.”

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“You took him to Mama’s?” Trip’s voice was hopeful. “Does that mean—”

“It means,” Gillian growled through gritted teeth, “that Bobbie got sick, the babysitters were all in school, and I didn’t have a choice.” She blew out a long yoga breath, knowing she shouldn’t be so mad at him.

But she was.

She could hear him walking into another room. He lowered his voice. “So you’re still, uh, thinking about—”

The yoga breath evaporated as a volcano erupted in Gillian’s chest. “I don’t know, Trip! Because I have not had a minute to myself to think in the last forty-eight hours!” She raised her hands and shook her head, her long blonde ponytail quivering. “I thought I was going to be able to go to yoga and think about it this afternoon. But *somebody* ate the last can of Ro-Tel tomatoes!”

Trip coughed but didn’t say anything.

“Which I figured out after I’d thawed the chicken and *after* I’d put everything else together. So I had to run to Albertsons because King Ranch doesn’t taste right without the Ro-Tel, and—”

“You made the King Ranch?” Trip sounded like a second grader who’d come home and smelled cookies.

Gillian punched the steering wheel. Only her husband could send her world into a tailspin not two days before and still get excited about supper. “Yes. And I didn’t finish until it was time to pick up the girls. So to answer your question, no, I have not thought any more about it!”

“Okay, okay.” Trip had switched to the voice he used with the kids when they were hysterical toddlers. And he still hadn’t apologized for eating the Ro-Tel.

Both of which made Gillian want to plow him down with the Lincoln.

She closed her eyes, hoping her fury would pass. It didn’t. She

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tried another yoga breath. “You know what? I am gonna think about it. Tonight. I’m gonna go to a late yoga class.” She snatched her phone and googled the studio, having no idea if late classes even existed. “Then I’m gonna go have a nice dinner. *By myself*. I am taking the night off!”

“You’re what?” Trip’s voice actually cracked.

“You heard me. Your mama’s hosting garden club tomorrow, so Bobbie can’t stay over. You need to go get him.”

“But Gillian—”

“Y’all will be just fine. The King Ranch is in the icebox. Just uncover it and bake it at 350 for thirty minutes, then let it stand for another ten. And, Trip, don’t you dare forget to put potholders under the pan or it’ll burn the marble, and—”

“Dadgummit, Gillian! Let me get a pen!”

“Ashley knows what to do. And you tell her that if I don’t come home to perky geraniums and a deer trough full of water,” Gillian’s voice dropped ominously as her finger hovered over the disconnect button, “her phone is mine.”

Gillian punched End Call so hard she chipped her rose-petal-pink nail polish.



Aimee circled yet another typo on the presentation deck, which she’d spent the last hour correcting. She was thirty years old, but her soft, butter-colored hair and porcelain skin made people think she was younger. She wore a pale-blue sleeveless sheath dress that looked more expensive than it was. A black cashmere cardigan—a present from her mother—was draped over her shoulders because the thermostat at the bank was never higher than sixty-three degrees.

“You about done there, sugar?” Clayton stood, too close, at her shoulder.

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Aimee scooted in the opposite direction. “Almost,” she said without looking up.

“I was hoping to head out a little early.” He stepped around to the other side of her desk so that he faced her.

Aimee met his eyes, understanding exactly what he wanted her to say.

He flashed what she knew to be his idea of a disarming smile.

Not that long ago, she would have volunteered to type the changes for him. She circled a patch of white space where a period should have been and ignored the faint-but-still-present impulse to please—that strange feeling like a tuning fork in her stomach that had plagued her for as long as she could remember. She said nothing.

“I’d sure appreciate it if you could just go ahead and finish it up.”

She flipped another page. “I’ve still got a lot to do to get the office ready for Lianna. She’s coming by when she gets in.”

He shrugged. “I’m sure you can get her anything she needs.”

“What if Big Floyd calls?” Aimee couldn’t help but enjoy the apprehension that shot from Clayton’s eyes when she mentioned the bank’s largest shareholder and chairman of the board, Floyd Wilkins, who marched through the office on a near daily basis, his gravelly voice hurling commands and rebukes. He was almost eighty years old but looked and moved like he was thirty years younger. There were lots of stories that floated around such a small town about Big Floyd. The one that summed him up best to Aimee was this: Years ago, Big Floyd woke in the night and saw a man’s arm snaking through the bedroom window, just above his sleeping wife’s head. Big Floyd, who kept a five iron next to his nightstand for exactly such a scenario even though he’d never had a break-in, grabbed the arm and tried to pull the burglar inside.

“Big Floyd’s out at the deer lease today.” Clayton raised his chin, but fear still laced his voice.

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Aimee stared at him. The man she worked for, Jonathan, who also happened to be Big Floyd's nephew and who swore the burglar story was true, had already left to go coach his son's football team. He'd mumbled exactly the same thing as he hurried out the door. She wondered if either of them had any idea what was at stake.

Her cell buzzed. She lifted the phone just enough to see her mother's smiling face.

Aimee set the phone back down.

"I am Jonathan's assistant, not yours, and I am doing this for you as a favor," Aimee said, feeling tension creep into her shoulders. She tried to ignore it, knowing Clayton wasn't the real cause. She'd been edgy all day. August 22nd always did this to her. And selfish person that she was, she hadn't even called Andy.

Clayton gave her the wounded expression that got him free coffee at the lunch place across the street. When she didn't respond, his voice sobered. "You're doing this because you don't want us to look like a bunch of stupid bumpkins."

She turned back to the presentation. *Yep*, she thought but did not say.

"There's no way that Lianna girl's gonna give you a job in New York City, Aimee."

A burst of fear flared in her stomach. Studying his haughty smirk, she realized that Clayton was simply fishing, trying to get a rise out of her. He had no idea about her secret wish. She forced nonchalance into her voice as she swiped another page, reminding herself that what Clayton thought didn't matter because there were a thousand reasons why her living in New York would never happen. "Me in New York is about the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." She squinted at a large boxed number. Marking her place, she shuffled back through the pages she'd already read. She circled the number, scrawling a note next to it—*Inconsistent w/p. 13.*

"Damn straight it is." Clayton laughed unkindly as he picked

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up her stapler and turned it over in his hands. “Come on now. How about you help me get on outta here?”

Aimee smiled and handed the marked-up deck to him, shocked at how easily the words flowed from her mouth. “Not today, Clayton.”

Her phone buzzed.



Lianna gasped in short, ragged breaths as she pulled onto the shoulder of the highway and put the Altima into park with a shaky hand. “Are you fucking kidding me?” she yelled into the rearview mirror.

The cow—the cow she had nearly run into, the cow who was still standing in the middle of the road—regarded her a moment, then turned to gaze the other way.

Lianna sucked in a breath and slowly exhaled, promising her bladder she’d find a place to pee. She put her hands back at ten and two, then carefully switched the car into drive. “If you’re too dumb to move out of the road, I can’t help you,” she muttered, searching both directions for oncoming traffic. There was none.

She inched the car forward.

She stomped on the brake. “Goddamn it.”

She threw the car into park, clambered out, and marched toward the cow. “Are you fucking crazy? Someone is going to hit you!”

The cow turned her massive head.

Lianna took a step back. The cow was much bigger up close.

Gentle chocolate-colored eyes studied her.

Lianna blew out a rush of air, her voice softening. “Listen, you need to move. It really isn’t okay for you to stand here.”

The cow blinked.

“Seriously.” Lianna pointed toward the field. “You need to go back there or you’re going to get hurt.”

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The cow blinked again.

"Please." Lianna waved her hands toward the grass, swiveling her head to make sure there were no cars coming. She took a hesitant step closer, wondering if cows bit people.

The cow's tail swished from side to side.

"Fucking hell." Lianna took another step. The cow was absolutely huge. "Go!" Lianna began to jump up and down, waving her hands and thrashing her head from side to side. "Get the fuck back into your fucking pasture!"

Slowly, the cow ambled onto the shoulder and into the weedy ditch.



Aimee carried the cardboard box into the bank's boardroom, just in time to see Clayton's truck pulling away. Setting the box down on the table, she stared through the window at the near-empty parking lot and wondered if he'd made any of the changes she'd marked on the presentation deck. *Probably not.*

Her phone buzzed.

She peeked at the screen with a sinking stomach. Her mother's twinkly blue eyes and homecoming queen smile greeted her. Aimee stared at the picture until the buzzing stopped, then put the phone down on the conference table.

"What've you got there?" Mr. B stood in the doorway. He'd been cleaning and taking care of maintenance for the bank's executive offices and local branch for as long as anyone could remember. Aimee had no idea how old he was. Based on his stories about being called up in the first draft lottery for the Vietnam War, he had to be over seventy.

Her phoned buzzed again. She lifted it and read the text message.

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Mom: Hi honey. I found a beautiful blue blouse for you and put it in the mail. Call me please.

Aimee set the phone back down on the table and wiped away the frown she could feel settling onto her forehead. She smiled at Mr. B. “That,” she nodded toward the box, “is a coffee machine made in this century.” She ripped open the flaps and pulled out the sleek black Keurig.

Mr. B eyed it as if she’d just told him it fell spontaneously from the sky. He glanced at the mud-colored Mr. Coffee, which Aimee suspected had been sitting on the side table long before she was born. “Hmph” was all he said.

“Thanks for making the special trip today, Mr. B. I really appreciate it.”

“Happy to help.” He swept away the box and wrappings before Aimee had even unwound the power cord. “You said it was important.”

Aimee nodded and tried not to let concern swallow her face. “It is. We need this place to sparkle tomorrow. We’ve got a big meeting with an important lady from New York.”

Mr. B’s eyes widened. “You want to check and see that everything looks spic-and-span?”

Aimee shook her head. “You’re maybe the only person on this planet who’s as particular about cleaning as I am.” She grinned. “If you’re happy with it, I’ll be.” Her eyes drifted back out the window. The temporary gardener she’d called in to trim the azalea bushes and cut the grass—her regular one was too busy this time of year to fit in a special visit—had not been as finicky. She’d had to march outside at least three times this morning to point out things he’d missed.

“Looking good out there,” Mr. B said, admiring the lawn. His eyes narrowed.

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She followed his gaze. "What?"

"Nothing." His voice rose in innocence that Aimee didn't believe for a second. He headed toward the door.

She peered through the window again but couldn't see anything amiss. "Wait," she called to his back. "What are you—"

Her phone buzzed.

She stared at the screen, knowing the calls would not stop until she answered.

Closing her eyes, she picked it up. "Hi, Mom."