



SCRAPS

ROSALYN WRAIGHT

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Lesbian Adventure Club: Book 7

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A Don't Waste Daylight Publication

Chapter 1

On the deck of Crappie Cabin, I smoked a cigarette and sipped fresh coffee. The November morning was bitterly cold, but I knew it was warmer there than inside, even with a roaring fire. I stared at the DWD tree, knowing that on its other side, way up high, nail polish spelled KS + CK. Any other day, that knowledge would have made me smile. Not today.

I figured anger would have been easier. It was a do-thing: yell, argue, cuss, spit. Hurt feelings were vastly different. There wasn't anything to do, other than attempting to domesticate a throat demon. I hated hurt, and I could readily admit that it turned me into a three-year-old, in terms of pouting and, even more so, in terms of decision-making skills.

Who thought this was how we'd be spending the first day of our eleventh year together? Not me. Probably not her. But here we were.

Our anniversary the day before had been quite pleasant. We got up early, went out for breakfast, and then hit every antique store between home and the cabin. Who the hell made tin the tradition for ten years? Someone who like baked beans and fiery breath mints? A gaseous person with bad breath. Figured. Regardless, all antique stores in the area were out of anything tin; we superstitiously bought every scrap of it. Then, we shopped to stock the refrigerator for the weekend. We enjoyed the hot tub, the fire, the utter stillness of a resort area in the off-season. We grilled steaks for dinner and shared a bottle of overpriced ten-year-old wine. We were close, so close. At least, I thought we were.

I tossed my spent cigarette into the can, took the last swig of coffee, and braved a turn of the doorknob. I entered to find the area deserted, but a tilt of my head detected the sound of a running shower. For the moment, safety proved mine. Quickly, I headed to the kitchen to refill my cup and then made a beeline to the fire to combat a bone-chill. With downright dread, I glanced at the wall clock and felt a tremendous pressure build inside. On some country road, a van carrying our friends moved closer and closer. I felt as though I was supposed to get over this instantaneously,

to turn on a smile, to be a gracious co-hostess. But, I wasn't done being hurt, and the thought of standing beside her, even looking at her, caused a knot in my stomach the size of Bulgaria and seemed just as weighing. I felt trapped, wedged between responsibility and the urge to put my feet on the roadway and just run.

A sudden thud of the cabin's plumbing system alerted me that shower time had ended. I thought to wait for her, simply to do whatever necessary to move beyond this. The nature of what exactly that was, however, eluded me. I pivoted between standing there and bolting outside. Indecision turned to panic. *Goddamn it!* I bolted.

Okay, now I was angry, except it was anger at me. I was a frickin' coward, increasing the pressure with every stupid thing I did or didn't do. I wanted to close my eyes, make it go away, convince myself I was dreaming, that this wasn't happening. The cold told me otherwise. My feelings told me otherwise. Every frickin' thing told me otherwise. I did the only thing I could think of: I lit a cigarette. Landing back where I started, I deemed myself a mouse in a maze, absolutely certain that an exit did not exist.

Suddenly, I heard the door open, and I willed myself not to move.

"Kate, please come in and warm up," she called.

"I'm not cold," I lied.

"Then come in here and tell me off—just yell at me or something."

Yell? How about cry? How about blubbering like a three-year-old? How about bawling so hard that maybe it wouldn't stop? This was so stupid. I was so stupid.

"Please, honey," she begged. "Just tell me off. I've got it coming. I'm sorry I was a jerk. I shouldn't have done this here, now."

That was her fifteenth apology, at least. It should have sufficed, but it didn't, and I knew that five hundred more wouldn't make a difference. "You don't need to apologize anymore," I said, fully believing. "Now, it's my problem."

"No, it's *our* problem. Things are falling apart between us ... and we've got eight obnoxious women on the way."

"I won't ruin it. I'll do what I'm supposed to do."

"This isn't supposed to be an obligation. It's supposed to be fun."

"They'll have fun. They always do."

"*They?* It's not supposed to be us and them, either."

"Then what the hell is it supposed to be? I don't feel like an us. I feel like a me, and that doesn't feel very good right now."

"What can we do to make you feel better?"

"I'll feel better. I just can't turn it off because it's not convenient."

She paused for a moment. "Then do me a favor, would you?" she asked very seriously, and I was leery. "Run to that little store and get

orange juice.”

“We got five hundred gallons of orange juice yesterday.”

“Then get grapefruit. I don’t care. Just go. Just get out of here for a while. It’s what would help you if we were at home.”

For the first time since yesterday, I smiled. She was right, and as hurt as I was, I appreciated it—with a stipulation. “I’ll go, but promise me that if everybody gets here while I’m gone, you will not send someone after me. That’s not what this is about. I’ll take care of it.”

“I promise.”

“No accidentals either. Like suddenly running out of Earl or tossing Laura’s cigarettes in the lake.”

“I promise.”

“Okay, I’ll go.” Mindful not to look at her, I set my cup on the railing and headed for the car. The sense of being trapped lessened with each footstep.

“I love you,” she called to me.

“I know that,” I readily replied. “It’s my love for you that suddenly seems to come with a question mark.”

“Ouch.”

“Very big ouch.”

With that parting shot, I prepared to get in the car, but I found parting rather difficult without keys and money.

“Hang on,” she yelled and dashed into the cabin. A minute later, she stood in front of me with an outstretched hand. She dared, “I’ll trade cash and keys for a hug.”

Without hesitation, I drew her close to me, and it felt so strange there. I loathed it. I felt her robe, her arms, her wet hair against my cheek, but I did not feel her. I had walled off my heart. Holding her was mechanical: brushing teeth, changing a roll of toilet paper, mowing the lawn. It was a void that eerily echoed. I missed her, but I knew that I needed to find me first. Somebody had misplaced me.

I pulled away and said, “Get in the house before you get sick. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Just do what you’ve got to do, Kate. I’ll still be here,” she said and then turned. “As weird as this sounds, I do know you love me,” she added as she walked away.

“I don’t think you do. You couldn’t possibly.”

Silently, she kept walking, and I got in the car. As I started the engine, I watched her, and for the millionth time, I remembered how close we had come to losing each other. I had vowed to be alert to her turning away from me because I missed it last time, and that proved near fatal. This time, I knew the precise moment she turned, but instead of rushing

in with an emergency plan all prepared to go, I did the unthinkable, the thing I least expected myself to do: I turned away from her. I could hear the earth's tectonic plates shifting, like an elaborate puzzle rearranging its pieces in order to move that abyss nearer us.

When the cabin door closed behind her, I drove away.

Trying desperately to remember Mother Superior's route, I ferreted my way to the micro-metropolis. There, I procured the unneeded juice and a cup of coffee. I pulled to the very edge of the parking lot and simply sat. After cranking the heater to thaw me, I opened the window and breathed the cold air, trying to force what writhed within me into frigid stillness. A few tears escaped without antagonizing the throat demon, and I felt better—a little less wounded, but not much more amenable to offering her the reassurances she needed. It was her fear again. It had to be; there was no other explanation. I knew that. But I also knew how much I loved her, how utterly committed I was to her. Having that questioned—even if via fear—seemed like a punch in the stomach, the heart. To me, nothing proved bigger than trust. Nothing. But I knew myself well enough to understand that I considered my own trustworthiness paramount. How could she doubt it? Of all things, how could she doubt that? It was the mother of all my buttons. It was humongous. It flashed red. It was gaudily inscribed: *To watch someone die inside, push here*. She not only pushed. She rammed.

And I had fifteen minutes to figure out how to give artificial life support to my insides.

I shoved the car into drive and made my way back to the cabin. Finding no van in the driveway, I wasn't sure if I was relieved or apprehensive. I'd have to be alone with her again. When I dreaded that, life was not a good thing—as disposable as the cardboard tube from a spent roll of toilet paper. With a deep breath and a pledge to act as normal as I could, I made my way inside.

She busied herself with setting out food and smiled expectantly at me. “Do you feel any better, Kate?” she asked.

“I do,” I responded, trying my best to return the smile. I set the jug of orange juice on the counter and humorlessly joked, “And now we have enough orange juice to fill the lake if it happens to run dry in the next twenty-four hours.”

“Good,” she said. “I worried we wouldn't.”

“Do you need me to do anything?”

“All under control. You go change. ... And you might want to do something with your hair.”

I took a gander at my reflection in the oven door, able to clearly identify shocks of hair sticking out every which way. “You let me go to the

store looking like this and in my pajamas, but I have to clean up for our friends? Screw that.” I turned the faucet on and splashed water onto my head. After a few strokes with flattened hands, I declared, “I’m ready. This is as good as it’s going to get.”

She shook her head at me, but I knew she was in no position to argue. Even better, there was no time to argue; a blaring horn announced the arrival of the Lesbian Adventure Club’s remaining members. We headed to the door, but I grabbed her arm before she reached for the doorknob.

“Wait, Claudia,” I implored. “You’re the project manager. Can you make it so I don’t have to do any of these things we have planned?”

“Kate, maybe these couples things are exactly what we need right now.”

I shook my head vehemently. “Not now. Not with them. Please. This is between you and me. It’s none of their business.”

She laughed, which irked me. “Kate, you’re not very good in the stealthy department. That’s how I know when there’s something you’re not telling me. I figure you have a maximum of three minutes before they figure out that something’s wrong.”

“Then let’s just not answer the door. I don’t want to do this.”

“It’ll be okay, Kate,” she assured. “We’ll get through it. Just trust.”

“Oh? You mean like you trust?”

She swatted me. “Are you just going to take potshots at me all day?” She raised her arms in surrender. “Go ahead. I can take it. Maybe I’ve got it coming, but I still wish you’d just tell me off and get it over with.”

Suddenly, Laura’s voice thundered, “Sutter, let’s jump in the lake!”

Something demonic perked up inside me, just as Claudia’s hand clenched my arm. “If you jump in that freezing lake, Kate, I will be more pissed off than you have ever seen me.”

Unwittingly, she presented me with the passive-aggressive *pièce de résistance*. The urge to make for the pier loomed larger than what I fearfully imagined I’d feel on day three without coffee and a smoke.

“Promise, Kate,” she ordered while gradually applying a hand-tourniquet to my arm.

“No,” I calmly defied and jerked out of her grasp. “But I’ll make a trade.” I stared at her until I knew she acquiesced. “Get me out of these couples things. Get me out of as much of this as possible without letting on that something’s wrong. Please.”

Frustrated laughter blasted out her nose. “Fine!” she conceded. “Now, let’s go.” She glared at me a few seconds, turned, and let the doorknob unseal our fate.

The first thing I spied was Maggie and Susan hugging the DWD tree. When Susan turned and saw us, she roared, “Don’t you guys have your

phones on? I've been calling every five minutes for the last hour!"

I shot Claudia a dirty look and said, "Sorry, Susan. Our phones are off."

"What did you need?" Claudia asked her.

"Mimosas!" she declared. "We were hoping you'd start us out with mimosas again. If not—and it's not too presumptuous—we brought the makings." She pointed to the stairs, and there sat two more jugs of orange juice and three more bottles of champagne.

I was two seconds away from laughing at the outrageous overabundance when the rest of them stormed the deck.

"Oh my God!" Janice wailed. "What the hell kind of celebration did you guys have last night? You both look like crap."

"For shit's sake, Sutter! You need to have those bags under your eyes aspirated before they burst."

"Oh my God, chickies! What did you do? Something I probably would have done, huh?"

"Are you sure it wasn't sixty years and not ten?"

"You were naughty! I can tell by—"

"Be nice, girls!" Ginny reprimanded as she shoved her way through the obnoxious assemblage. "Happy anniversary, Kate and Claudia. We're proud of you." She kissed us and then handed Claudia a tea tin and me a can of coffee. "Ten years is tin," she informed as if we hadn't a clue.

Kris pushed her way to us, offering kisses, praise, and more coffee and tea.

By the time each had kissed and congratulated us, Claudia and I held five cans of coffee, five tea tins, a tea ball strainer, a tin of butter cookies, and a tin of anchovies. No baked beans. No breath mints.

As Susan stooped to retrieve the mimosa makings, she offered, "Maggie says there's something in Earl Grey that's a natural antidepressant. I didn't know that."

With a snide grin, Claudia shoved her tea tins into my already full arms. "Have some, honey," she whispered. "Have a lot. Dump all this in the hot tub and climb in." She attempted to ricochet her own potshot with a peck on my cheek; it didn't work, and I seriously considered dumping her and her tea into the hot tub.

Argh! This was not starting out very well. We were commended for something that seemed farcical in the moment. We were teased about wild partying, when in actuality, I slept alone on the floor with an angry partner in a tight fetal position on the couch above me. In essence, we were being trusted—that big, blasted thing again. They had complete faith in us and in our love for each other. While that thought made me want to hurl, I also knew that it provided the cover I required. As long as they believed we

were battered from a good time, I was safe.

Everyone went to unload the van, and I carefully maneuvered into the cabin with our haul of tin. I dumped it on a counter and began the task of making Susan happy with the mimosas we had already planned to serve.

Eventually, everyone gathered in the living room, glass in hand. The gossiping and recounting began full force, and I listened from the periphery, making like a good little bartender and keeping my area clean. That proceeded well enough until Alison decided a toast was in order. She climbed aboard an end table and hoisted her glass high. "To Kate and Claudia and their anniversary!"

Their glasses were raised and clinked, agreements were shouted, and drinks were taken.

"To ten more good years!" Susan shouted, and the process repeated.

"To fifteen more better years!"

Blather. Rinse. Repeat.

"To twenty more way better years!"

Blather. Rinse. Repeat.

"To twenty-five more better than better years!"

I figured by the time they hit thirty-five, I'd be busy making drinks again. And if they got to sixty-five, no one would give a shit what was wrong in the world. Maybe if I got to sixty-five, I wouldn't either. *Bad thought. Bad, bad thought.*

"To thirty more better than better than better years!"

I raised my glass, clinked with no one, shouted nothing, and downed my entire drink. Posthaste, I made another one, strong enough to endure the passage of another five years.

"To thirty-five more better than better than better than better years."

I raised my glass, clinked to no one, shouted nothing, and downed my drink as they tried to repeat the correct number of "betters." And then, they charged me with outstretched arms holding temporarily empty glasses. In a fire-ass hurry, I filled them up, juice jug in one hand, another bottle of bubbly in the other. One by one, they scurried back to the living room, and I replenished my own. *Light on the OJ, please, you hot-looking bartender you. It gives me a headache.*

"Okay, where were we?" Alison shouted when she regained her position atop the end table.

"Forty years."

"No, it was forty-five."

"Better than better than better."

"No, better than better than better than better."

"Yeah, to that!"

“To that!”

Sounded good to me. Downed good to me. Refilled good to me. Downed good to me. Refilled good to me. *Burp.*

“To better than that!”

Oh yeah, I started to remember what better felt like. “To a whole hell of a lot better!” I shouted to no one and promptly chugged. Then, I even remembered what laughter felt like as the next one slid down the hatch without benefit of a toast or even an orange hue. Then, I remembered hysterical laughter as a damn bottle of bubbly raised itself high and then sped to my lips. *Glug. Glug. Glug.*

And then, I remembered her.

Chapter 2

When I tilted my head to accommodate the last drops of an emptying bottle, I saw her on the far side of the living room. She was the only one seated, the only one with a glass-less hand. She just stared at me. While she certainly was not amused, I did not detect anger. She seemed pensive, like maybe she was trying to figure me out. *Good luck with that one!* Or maybe she was trying to figure us out. *Good luck with that one, too!* Or maybe I had no clue what the hell she was thinking. I just knew that better was suddenly fizzing out like discarded champagne.

“Okay, everybody,” Alison shouted. “We have to stop toasting before we get toasted.”

Kris added, “I agree. Let’s behave before we ruin whatever Kate and Claudia have planned.”

“Yes, we sure don’t want to do the gacker/goner thing again,” Susan stated very adamantly.

Holly spun and cast a look to me and then Claudia. “What *do* you guys have planned? What are you going to do to us?”

I heard her questions, but I don’t think they registered anywhere inside my spinning brain. Claudia, I didn’t think had even a toe in the physical world. We just stared vacantly at each other. Simultaneously, I wanted to scream at her and hold her tight: polarities separated by fragile and intoxicating bubbles.

“Claudia!” Holly yelled and swatted her knee. When Claudia finally looked at her, she asked again, “What do you guys have planned?”

“Nothing,” she distractedly said. “Just do what you’re doing.”

“You mean keep drinking?” Alison gasped.

“No, I do not mean keep drinking,” Claudia quickly corrected. “I mean just have fun. We just want you to have fun. No pressure. Just have fun.”

“You really have nothing planned?” Holly asked, her hands now on her hips. She looked at me, and I awkwardly shrugged, completely unsure how the project manager managed to surrender control. Holly’s jaw dropped.

“Seriously? A free-for-all?”

“That sounds like our most dangerous adventure yet!”

“No kidding! Think of the trouble we could get into without rules!”

“But we won’t!”

“No. It’ll just be a nice, relaxing weekend.”

“How come we’ve never tried this before?”

“I suggested it last time we were here. I think it’s a positively brilliant idea.”

“This sounds awesome! ... But, how exactly do we do it?”

“Um.”

“Um.”

Janice loudly suggested, “Before we make any decisions, let’s all go out on the porch and see how the owners made it more secure. I’m horribly curious. Let’s go, guys.” She helped Alison down from the end table and started herding. Immediately, I bowed my head, hoping to hell she didn’t look at me as a head of cattle.

A moment later, the French doors closed, sealing Claudia and me in a strained silence. She stared. I stared back. Then, she slowly rose and headed in my direction. I suddenly rued not having packed my Dead Meat T-shirt. To my surprise, she gently stroked my back. “Did that major ingestion of alcohol make you feel any better, Kate?” she calmly asked.

“Yes,” I stupidly replied. “No,” I corrected. “I hope so,” I settled on.

“You’ll regret it, Kate, and be horribly mad at yourself. Go make yourself throw up before the rest of it has a chance to hit you.”

“No way in hell!” I equated vomiting with hemorrhoid removal via the nostril.

“Then have a seat at the table.”

I did so—very reluctantly and very mindful not to show any signs of intoxication. But, holy shit, movement was a damn strange thing.

She poured me a cup of coffee and delivered it with a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Then, she retrieved acetaminophen from her purse. “Take these with a lot of water,” she said as she handed me the pills. “And then just stay right here and drink the coffee ... slowly ... slowly.”

Again, I followed her orders—not because I saw wisdom in them but simply because I didn’t want any more trouble.

She took a seat next to me, and we bided the discomfort.

“I don’t get you,” I finally dared, or maybe the booze congealed into a set of nonexistent gladiator balls. “You accuse me of something so disgusting, but then you sit here and take care of me after I do actually do something stupid.”

She abruptly stood and shoved in her chair. “Maybe they both mean the same thing,” she said and returned to her original spot in the living

room.

I resumed my slow, slow sipping and willed my head not to float to the ceiling.

The door suddenly burst open, scaring the crap out of the both of us. Alison's head appeared. "Hey, did you guys freeze your butts off last night in your swingy bed?"

"No," Claudia answered, and the door immediately closed.

Again, I returned to my slow, slow sipping and wondered if I could sneak past her to have a cigarette on the deck. By the time I decided my chance of sneakiness was nil, the door flung open again, this time bringing them and their clamor back into the room.

Janice declared, "They really did a nice job securing the porch. If it had been like that last time, Laura would have had Natalie's ass in handcuffs in three seconds flat."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Janice," Laura said. "But I think it might have taken a bit longer than that. I actually have no idea how to put an ass in handcuffs."

"You'd need butt cuffs."

They all laughed. I thought to laugh, but laughter didn't come from the mind, and my belly was busy doing some strange, strange things.

Still in herd formation, they stampeded through the kitchen for coffee and then returned to their spots in the living room. Holly tossed a couple logs on the fire, and they simply sat there quietly.

Again, I returned to my slow, slow sipping.

Ginny cleared her throat and said, "Kate and Claudia, we like your idea of a free-for-all weekend. Good choice. We commend you."

Agreement rippled through the room, and I found myself very relieved. I had one less thing to worry about. We had screwed up, but it would be much easier to live with if it didn't impact anyone but us.

"And we've decided what we'd like to do first," Maggie announced. She paused and then said, "We want you to tell us what's wrong between the two of you."

Shit! Shit! Shit! I laid my face on the table, very appreciative of its cold against my clammy skin. I hoped to hell I had merely drunk too much, that I was imagining things. I waited. The need for a smoke overtook me. I stared at the coffee cup less than an inch from my face. Cross-eyed, I waited some more.

"Well? ... Who's going to tell us?" Janice asked.

"There's nothing to tell," I finally asserted.

There was a moment of sheer noiselessness, and then Maggie jumped in, "Let me get this straight then, Kate. You're honestly saying there's nothing wrong. We're all hallucinating. You and Claudia are just fine. Is

that what you're claiming?"

I didn't hear the word "honestly." I swore to myself that she didn't utter the word. "Yes," I said with a grimace and promptly thanked my unlucky stars that I faced the wall and not the living room.

"I'm trusting you, dilly," she reminded and then paused in wait.

Shit! Shit! Shit! I heard a clock loudly ticking in my head, and I knew that it was not counting forward. My mouth opened more widely with each tick. I had nearly assembled my soul-saving line of crap when I heard Holly.

"And what about you, Claudia? Are you claiming there's nothing wrong?"

"No."

My mind scrambled and staggered. No, there was nothing wrong? No, she was not claiming there was nothing wrong? Negative? Double negative? Triple negative? No? What the hell did she say no to?

"Did you and Kate have a fight?" somebody asked her, and I really wasn't sure who.

"Not really. I wouldn't call it a fight."

"Then what happened?"

I flew to my feet to stop her from saying it out loud, but my feet did not seem to exist at the ends of my rubbery legs. I wiped out only to find myself being scooped from the floor by Laura.

"For shit's sake, Sutter, what's wrong? What did you do?" she screamed. "Did you take something? Do we need an ambulance?" She shook me, enlivening champagne bubbles that gave buoyancy to acetaminophen, orange juice, water, and coffee.

"I didn't take anything!" I shouted right back at her. "Jesus, do you think I'm that frickin' unstable?"

"No. ... But then what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm a sucky bartender."

"Shit, Sutter, you're drunk? I've never seen you drunk. ... Wait! You're drunk from just those silly ass toasts? How can you be drunk from that?" She shook me again—vigorously. "Are you sure you didn't take something? I'm going to call—"

"Jesus, listen, will you? I didn't take anything! I'm not drunk! I don't get drunk! I just drank too much too fast. And I need a cigarette. Jesus, do I need a cigarette! And, man, I gotta pee."

"How the hell much did you drink, Sutter?"

"Enough to puke all over you if you shake me once more."

She got the hint and let go of me, but either I didn't react quickly enough, or the rubber was still not rigid. She scooped me again and screamed again, this time demanding answers from Claudia. My story was

verified, although I really wanted to dispute her assessment of exactly how much champagne I consumed. I couldn't have been that stupid. Champagne befriended me only when sipped. Otherwise, it was a mean SOB.

Some inaudible chit-chatty shit occurred amongst them, and then Laura suddenly dragged me down the hall and into the bathroom.

"Pee!" she ordered as though I really was a three-year-old.

"Not if you watch me."

"For shit's sake, Sutter, I've seen you pee a hundred times. Now shut up and do it! Your ass is mine, Sutter. If you ever want another cigarette in your life, shut up and pee!"

And so, I peed. Amen, oh amen, I peed.

Then, like a frickin' sack of potatoes, she hoisted me over her shoulder and made for the front door. Maggie threw a water bottle to her, and before leaving, she ordered, "Don't talk about her when she's unable to defend herself. That's cruel. Don't do it. I mean it."

Yeah, you tell 'em, Laura! Don't talk about me, you frickin' nosey women! And don't believe a goddamn thing Claudia says about me if she ignores police orders!

We trudged onto the deck, and I fully expected her to set me down and offer that cigarette for which I had so freely peed. Instead, she kept moving until we were halfway down the driveway. Then, she dared, "If I set you down, will you get it over with and make yourself puke?"

"No frickin' way in frick-frickin' hell!"

"I didn't think so, but it was worth a try." She sighed heavily and started spinning us, singing her own warped rendition of "She's a Little Teapot."

At first, it was funny, and I even appreciated the laughter that came out of me. But when other things threatened to come out of me, I changed my tune toot sweet. She didn't; she just sang louder.

"Laura, you're a lunatic! Put me down, or I'll puke all over you!"

"No, you won't, teapot." Somehow, she wove those words into her maniacal tune and continued to spin.

"I will, Laura! I'm not kidding, b-word!"

"No, you won't, f-er teapot."

"Really. Oh shit, Laura! I mean it. I will. All over you!"

"No, you won't, f-er teapot."

"I will. ... Oh shit." *Burp.*

Posthaste, she stopped spinning. Instead, she heaved forward and backward, shaking us like a goddamn bottle of champagne. In my mind, I seized the cork. *I will not blow! I will not blow! I will not blow!*

Burp.

“Tip her over and pour it out.”

In an instant, I was on all fours, having a big-ass hemorrhoid lanced and pulled from my nose. *Jesus!*

But to my absolute amazement, the vile procedure brought nirvana. I felt such incredible relief—physically and emotionally. Still, I was obligated to point out, “You’re a frickin’ lunatic.”

“No, you’re a lunatic, Sutter. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I hurt! Goddamn it, I hurt!” I wailed at the top of my lungs. “I just wanted to feel better.”

“Booze isn’t the way, Sutter. You f-ing know that. Haven’t you written some snappy-ass articles about how stupid what you just did is?”

“Oh shit! Please, please, please don’t tell those pissed-off mothers what I did! Holy frickin’ shit! They think I’m God’s gift every time I put their name in the paper.”

“I’m the only pissed-off mother you need to appease at the moment.” She pulled the water bottle from her pocket and flung it at me, and the fling lacked all traces of mercy. “Rinse and spit—seventeen times, or a cigarette will not want to come anywhere near you. You stink, Sutter.”

I did stink. Even I could smell my rank self. But then again, a hemorrhoid had just been in my nose.

When I finished, she outstretched a hand to me and pulled me up. “Now, you get a cigarette. But for shit’s sake, not here. You stunk up you and the whole f-ing place.”

We moved further up the driveway and sat down. She gave me a cigarette and a light and then lit one for herself. We sat in amiable silence through the first one and the second one. Through the third one, we pondered where our loons were vacationing for the winter. I felt like the loon left behind, abandoned by what I depended on so desperately. It was a sobering thought.

“Can we go back in now?” she asked as we extinguished our smokes. “Are you ready to face the music?”

“It can’t be any more nauseating than ‘She’s a Little Teapot.’”

“Oh yes, it can. Trust me: it can, and it will. But just face it, Kate. Whatever went wrong between the two of you, just face it. Get the bad shit out of the way as quick as possible. It doesn’t deserve to be anywhere near the two of you. Just do it, Kate.”

“All right,” I acquiesced and swore to myself that I’d figure out how, although I still had no clue. I was certain, however, that I could cross champagne off my wee list of possible solutions. “All right,” I repeated more confidently. “But I want to go by the lake first.”

“For f-ing what?”

“Because I want to.”

With her muttering in what seemed a foreign language, we walked until we reached the pier. There, she grabbed a wad of my sweatpants in the back and threatened, “If you do anything stupid, *think* anything stupid, I will arrest your ass and throw it in jail.”

“For frickin’ what?”

“Public urination. You peed in front of a cop, you f-er.”

“You really are a lunatic.”

“I am, but for some reason, it only comes out when I’m with you. You’re a carrier.”

Still clutching my pants, she nudged me away from the pier and down to the shoreline. The both of us simply gazed in each direction. It looked and felt so vastly different from last time. Bare trees replaced the colors of autumn, and a stillness, a deadness, permeated everything. I sensed this to be more akin to me this time. But I also knew that my change had been abrupt, nothing like the measured transformation from one season to the next. Just yesterday, I was happy, fulfilled. In a mere second, I heard the loons laughing at me as they flew away, leaving me bare and dying inside. In the blink of an eye, a warmth turned bitterly cold. I shivered, but I knew it came more from fear than from an unexpected freeze.

I proceeded to kneel, and without question, Laura followed, squatting behind me, still clenching the reverse sweatpants-lifeline. With my fist, I cracked the thin ice that edged the shore, and with both hands, I scooped the icy water onto my face. The sobering ablutions braced me for my walk through a tunnel of shame leading back into Crappie Cabin.

“All right,” I said as I stood and stiffened my spine. “Let’s go back in before I lose my nerve.”

She let go of my pants, and we made the trek to the front door.

Doorknob in hand, I hesitated. She knew I hesitated.

“Just do it, Kate. Everybody in there loves you—despite what a sucky bartender you are.”

“I’m embarrassed,” I admitted. “I’m scared.”

“Then trust Holly. That’s all you have to do right now. Trust Holly.”

“Holly?”

“Fifty bucks says she has you out of this jam in thirteen seconds or less.”

“Deal! And your fifty bucks will be my consolation prize.”

She looked to her watch and said, “Go!”

I don’t think I even saw anyone before I heard Holly’s voice.

“Get in here, you two! Kate, there’s a hot bath waiting for you. Clothes and fresh coffee, too. Get a move on, chickie! And, babe, get over here. I need a kiss. Bring lots of money, too. I’m losing really bad at poker. Maggie is *not* the saint she pretends to be.”

Laura elbowed me—really, really hard. I elbowed her back—really, really harder. And then, I escaped into a vessel of the kind of bubbles that would not encourage the growth of hemorrhoids.

The complete book can be purchased in ebook or paperback. Please visit the [LAC Bookstore](#). Also available from other retailers.

About the Author

Rosalyn Wraight is also the author of three Detective Laura McCallister lesbian mysteries: *Woman Justice*, *Secrets and Sins*, and *Corpse Call*. These novels feature several characters from this book.

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On the Web

LAC Bookstore: LesbianAdventureClub.com

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