



**EATING  
LIFE**  
**BETH BURNETT**

## SUMMARY

Carefree and irrepressible, Casey Wilde has spent her life running. Running from love, running from responsibility, and running from commitment. Megan Woodson, Casey's best friend, has spent her life building security with a long-term partner and a well-paying, highly respected position in the best ad agency in Memphis. Ben Stagg is a man who has lost everything, including the desire to live. And Brilliant Wilson is a photographer who can't quite figure out why she keeps dating women who don't love her. Faced with painful and pressing decisions, the group is forced to confront their own life choices. When their worlds collide and everything starts to fall apart, these friends must learn that the only important decision is the one to follow their hearts.

# EATING LIFE

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BETH BURNETT



SAPPHIRE BOOKS  
SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

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## *Dedication*

With love to JVS who taught me that instead of just writing about soulmates, I should start believing in them.

## *Acknowledgment*

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## Chapter One

As she reached down to skip forward on the car's CD player, Casey Wilde felt the steering wheel jerk like it was being yanked out of her hand. Gripping it tight to control the shuddering, she checked her mirrors for traffic, and seeing none, began to slowly brake and merge to the right. The cars she had flown past just a few moments ago swerved into the left lane to pass her. Glancing up, she noticed the passenger in one of the cars pointing toward her, his mouth gaped open in shock. The shimmying car was now making a strange flapping noise. Turning down the music, she listened for a second to the whap-whap-whap noise. Casey stared stupidly at the dashboard as if it might tell her something, and she tried to put her finger on what could be causing it. As she braked a little more, it suddenly occurred to her that it sounded exactly as if one corner of the cartop carrier had come loose and was banging against the rest of it in the wind.

"Shit," she said out loud.

Braking even harder, she pulled over to the shoulder right as a brown flash caught her eye in her rearview mirror, followed by lots of other little flashes. Something hard hit the trunk. A knot of anxiety sank into the pit of her stomach.

As she came to a complete stop, Dakota, her eighty-pound slobbering mass of a lap dog, popped his head up in the back seat, grinning and drooling.

"Stay here," she told him, getting out of the Mazda. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

The top half of her carrier was lying in the road several hundred feet back. The base half was still firmly attached to the roof of her car with the straps, but there was no way the top was going back on. The metal clasps were bent from the strain of the ropes. She surveyed her clothing lying all over the highway and the side of the road. The speaker from her ten-year-old stereo had banged into the back of her car and left a small dent in the trunk. Apparently, it had hit the car behind her as well, because that driver had pulled over to the side of the road and was rolling down his window, yelling something. Ignoring him, Casey ran around and tried to gather up the clothes that were on the shoulder. No sense running into the middle of the interstate to pick up her favorite pair of purple panties. Sighing, she shook her fist at the sky and continued to gather her things. The stereo was in pieces all over the side of the road. Laughing, she thought of her friend Megan Woodson, who had all the latest technology. Megan couldn't believe that Casey was still carrying around that old stereo CD player. She had bought Casey an iPod for Christmas a couple of years ago, but Casey needed regular access to a computer to charge it and put music on it and somehow it never seemed worth the hassle. Besides, if she went that route, she'd have to get some sort of speaker thing for it anyway. Shaking her head, she kicked the remains of the stereo off into the bushes and returned to her car with an armload of clothing and books. She threw them on the ground next to the car and looked at the carrier. Casey realized that there was no way she was going to be able to get this thing back together. The rope had frayed and broken in several places. Swearing again, she started untying the bottom half of the carrier. Yanking it down brought a shower of clothing and books onto her head. The corner of the spine of her hardcover copy of *The Four Agreements* nailed her on the skull.

“Don’t take it personally,” she snapped through gritted teeth.

The man from the car behind her stalked up, carrying the top of her carrier. He tossed it on the ground at her feet.

“This hit my hood,” he growled.

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry about that,” Casey responded. “If you wait until I finish gathering my things from the highway, I’m sure we can exchange insurance information and be on our merry ways.”

She opened the back door, pushing Dakota with one hand to keep him from jumping out.

“Don’t let that dog out,” the man called.

Continuing to ignore him, she eyed the back seat, contemplating whether she could fit anything else back there.

“Why do I have so much fucking stuff?” She surveyed the piles of clothing that she had gathered. Picking up the books, she laid them in neat piles next to the car. The man from the other car paced back and forth behind her, kicking up gravel. Finally, she turned to him.

“Look, if you need to call the cops and have them fill out a report, just do it. It doesn’t look like your big fancy car suffered any damage, but if you need to somehow have some satisfaction from this interaction, that’s your best option because I don’t have any money.”

Stepping forward, he got extremely close, straightening up to tower over her. She put both hands on his chest and pushed him back. “Do we need to have a discussion about personal space?”

“Do we need to have a discussion about destruction of property?”

Aware that Dakota was losing his shit in the back seat, Casey took a step back and put her hand on the door handle. Barking his head off, Dakota started pushing against the back door, trying to get out. The man from the car took a few steps back toward his own car.

“I have your license plate. Don’t think this is the last you’ll hear of me!”

Casey lifted the door handle and started to open the back door, barely able to hold it closed against Dakota. The man jogged the remaining steps back to his car and jumped into it. He gunned the engine and roared off the shoulder, spraying gravel everywhere. Casey lifted her middle finger at him as he took off. Laughing, she turned back to her own car and opened the door. Dakota jumped out and ran to the side of the road to pee on the bushes. Watching him, she laughed again. She glanced at the back seat. With her winter coat and boots taking up most of the floor, there really wasn’t much room for anything else back there. Her Djembe was propped in the corner in its protective bag, and a couple of grocery bags filled with bathroom-type stuff was shoved in next to it. With Dakota wandering the back seat slobbering on everything, she had to resign herself to the idea that anything in the back seat would end up crushed or covered with dog spit.

She opened the trunk in hopes of somehow finding it magically less crammed full of stuff than before. Sighing, she pawed through the merchandise a bit before giving up. Casey had made a practice of living lean, but the idea of tossing her tent, sleeping bag, little camp stove, and the other detritus that came from years of solo camping gave her the chills. No matter what else happened in this world, she could pitch a tent, blow up her little air mattress, boil some water, and crawl into her sleeping bag. It seemed like a small thing to the homeowners of the world, but to someone like Casey,

having her trunk full of camping gear gave her a little piece of security. She thought for a moment about at least getting rid of the oversized camp chairs, but decided against it. So the trunk was out. She whistled for Dakota and herded him back into the car. Closing the door after him, she looked through the window. There was just no possible way she could get anything else back there. For one thing, it would be ruined. For another, it wouldn't be fair to the dog to not have room to stretch out. The front seat was already crowded with her banjo, road snacks, CDs, and shoulder bag. If she put anything else up there, she'd be pressed for space.

Resigning herself to reattaching the carrier from hell, Casey pulled the straps back around the roof of the car and secured the bottom. Looking at the bent and broken metal clasps, she realized that even if she dug out another rope from the trunk, there was no way she could tie the two parts back together. She paced around the car a few times, trying to come up with a solution. Technically, she could probably shove the clothes in the back seat with the dog. They would all need to be washed by the time she got to California, but at least they would get there. But what about the books? As she took another circle around the car, she thought about the duct tape that Megan had thrown in the back seat at the last minute. "Just in case," she had said.

Casey grinned and opened the back door, rummaging under her winter coat until her fingers closed on the roll of tape. She shoved everything into the carrier and hoisted the top back on. Fixing a solid chunk of tape to the top of the carrier, she then brought it around and underneath the bottom portion as far as it would go. She did this a few more times until the carrier seemed secure. Passable, at least, if she drove somewhat slowly. Satisfied, she got behind the wheel, whistling a happy tune to herself. Meeting Dakota's eyes in the mirror, she smiled. "It's you and me, baby. Let's do this thing."

Carefully checking for traffic, Casey eased out onto the road. By the time she made it to about forty miles per hour, the entire car was shaking. She pulled over again. Apparently, the duct tape wasn't strong enough to hold in the wind shear. She added some tape and got on the road again, this time with a look of grim defiance in the rearview mirror. Again, she made it to forty before the car started shaking. Pissed, she wrenched the car over to the shoulder and got out. She undid the straps from the bottom of the carrier and slid the whole thing forward, letting it slide down the windshield and onto the hood. Grabbing at it to keep it from going all the way to the ground, Casey jammed her hand between the carrier and the windshield. Wincing, she stomped around to the front and started wrapping duct tape around the entire carrier. When the whole thing was nothing but a square-shaped pod of duct tape, she climbed up on the hood and shoved against it with all her might, sliding it back up the windshield onto the roof. She heard a snap as it went up, and cursed. "That was a windshield wiper," she said aloud, rolling her eyes. Once she hefted the carrier back into place, she climbed back down to reattach it to the car. She secured the straps and stepped back to assess her handiwork. The carrier looked like the homemade spacecraft from some fifties B movie. If she rigged a string to it and managed to lift it, she could film it and make a very un-scary sci-fi flick about aliens. Walking around to the front of the car, she entertained herself with the idea of the cartop carrier pod people from *Tapal Ductalon*. Dakota was still smiling in the back seat. Letting him out to pee one more time, she watched him gallop into the bushes with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. No matter what happened, Dakota was almost always happy. She made a mental note

to try to retain her equanimity a little better. “Be more doglike,” she avowed. Dakota turned back to look at her when she spoke. He tilted his head as if he understood what she had said.

“Come on,” she called. “Let’s get the hell out of Texas before any other shit goes down.”

She opened the door and her dog raced over to the car, leaping into the back seat. Sitting up in his usual position, he smiled his big goofy dog smile at her and wagged as if to say, “Let’s go. What are we waiting for?”

Laughing again, Casey slid into the driver’s seat and hit the road. At forty, the car seemed to be holding steady, but the wind resistance was giving her trouble. She couldn’t seem to get higher than fifty without the entire car shuddering. Shaking her head, she resigned herself to traveling the rest of the way at forty-five miles per hour. She was always telling herself to relax and enjoy the moment. This was one way of making sure she slowed down to smell the exhaust fumes. Turning the CD back on, she tapped along with the music until she merged onto I-40. Making her way toward Albuquerque, she had a half-formed plan to stop in and visit her ex-girlfriend, Linda, and Linda’s new girlfriend, Patty. Linda and Patty had built an amazing earthship in the mountains and had often extended the invitation to come stay with them. They were a nice enough couple, though kind of old and kind of weird. The last time Casey had seen them, she had marveled at the fact that she had ever been in love with Linda, a woman who was happy spending all her time in the garden, and who hadn’t been to a concert or gone out to a restaurant in probably twenty years.

Seeing a sign for Amarillo got her excited. Amarillo wasn’t far from the border. In Casey’s mind, the road was the best part of any trip and crossing into each new state was a moment of bliss for her. It felt like being reborn at every border. She looked at the clock and realized she could be in Albuquerque by just about dinnertime if she kicked it up a bit. Bringing her speed up to forty-nine, she laughed, suddenly struck by the hilarity of her situation. As people passed, they stared at her, pointing at the enormous pod on the top of her car. Some were laughing, while others looked mortified. She shook her head, chuckling to herself. She’d probably be pointing and laughing if it was someone else. In the meantime, she was almost in New Mexico and that was cause for a celebration. She reached over to the CD case and rummaged through until she found one of her favorite CDs by one of her favorite groups, Big Bad Gina. Pure bliss. She took out the compilation CD and tossed in the BBG one instead. Singing along to “Butch Witch” sent her spirits soaring. She cranked it as loud as she could. Lost in the music, it took her a minute to realize there were flashing lights in her rearview mirror.

“Well, I know I can’t be speeding,” she thought, slowing down even further.

When she realized the cop was not trying to pass her, she had a wild moment in which she fantasized about gunning it. She laughed as she envisioned herself screeching off the interstate and bouncing wildly down the dirt road into the woods. Dakota stuck his tongue out at her in the mirror, shaking her out of the fantasy. Casey pulled over to the side of the road. Somehow, pulling a Dukes of Hazzard on the back roads of Texas seemed a little ridiculous in a 1993 Mazda with a duct-taped pod strapped to the roof. Dakota poked his head out of the back driver-side window as the officer approached the car.

“Hang on,” Casey muttered as she maneuvered the glove box open as far as she could before it stuck on the side of her banjo case. She slid her fingers into it and felt around for her paperwork. Reaching it, she pulled it out, praying the action wouldn’t dislodge the joint she had stashed in there. Casey handed her license, registration, and insurance card out of the window without looking at the cop. In her experience, it was best to not engage.

“Nice dog,” a deep but decidedly feminine voice said.

Surprised, Casey looked up, smiling automatically at the handsome woman in uniform. The officer was petting Dakota with one hand and holding Casey’s paperwork with the other.

“Officer...Bane,” Casey said, reading the name tag.

“I suppose you know why I stopped you?”

Grinning, Casey chanced a cocky remark. “To get a better look at my gorgeousness?”

Officer Bane stared straight-faced at Casey for a long moment before breaking into a glorious smile.

“Well, that is certainly worth a stop,” she said.

Casey smiled even wider, delighted. Officer Bane was a gorgeous dark-skinned woman with deep brown eyes and laugh lines that deepened around her eyes when she smiled. Trim and athletic, she looked to be in her thirties. Confident of getting out of whatever the problem, Casey fixed her own big brown eyes on the officer’s face.

“And seeing your beautiful face has made it my lucky day,” she said.

“You were swerving back there. One of your taillights is out. And it looks as if some of the tape is coming off your...um...pod. Potential safety hazard.”

“I don’t have that much farther to go,” Casey said, smiling up at the hot cop.

“Where are you headed?”

“Albuquerque.”

Officer Bane smiled. “I’ll be back.”

Casey waved her off. Deciding to take advantage of the unplanned stop, she checked for traffic and seeing none, got out of the car and let Dakota out on the passenger side. He sprang out and ran into the brush at the side of the road, stopping to lift his leg on every plant over about six inches tall. She loved watching him run; he was so full of life. Dakota loved riding in the car, but he loved getting out of the car even more. Officer Bane came up beside her and handed back her paperwork along with a ticket.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” she said, grinning.

“Seriously?”

“Your car is a potential hazard,” the officer responded. “I understand you can’t help your pod problem, but you need to get that taillight fixed. You can pay by mail or online.”

Casey groaned and grabbed the ticket. She turned away in time to see Dakota squatting in the grass.

“Oh, Dakota. Really?”

Chuckling as she walked away, Officer Bane called back to Casey over her shoulder. “Don’t make me add littering to that ticket.”



They'd been two miles from the next rest stop. Casey glared at the sign as she passed it. Catching Dakota's eye in the mirror, she frowned.

"You really couldn't have waited until the next rest area?"

Oblivious, Dakota panted and grinned his goofy dog smile.

Casey chuckled for a moment. She couldn't be mad at her loyal travel buddy for doing what dogs do. "What dogs do-do," she thought. The triple-bagged mound of dog poop in the back seat was bad enough. The memory of the cute officer watching in amusement as Casey dug out her bags from the car, traipsed down the incline, and scooped it up, was humiliating. Even worse was the hysterical laughter Casey could hear as she tried to find room in her overstuffed trunk to put the bag so it wouldn't have to ride in the car. As she had resigned herself to putting it in the back seat instead of trying to squish it into the trunk, she lifted her middle finger in Officer Bane's direction. The officer had responded with a friendly wave.

Casey changed CDs and cranked up the music as if the assault on her ears would somehow ameliorate the assault on her nostrils. She started singing loudly to Crys Matthews. Baby it must be some kind of serendipity. Serendipity. The story of Casey's life. She looked in the mirror at Dakota again. He was bopping his head around in the back seat, looking for all the world like he was enjoying the music as much as she was. Dakota's presence in her life was surely a happy accident. She had been taking a bus from Lincoln, NE to Rapid City, SD about a decade ago when she saw a bundle of fur, dirt, and blood moving in the bushes at one of the rest stops. At first, she thought it was a rat, but then it had whined. She put her hand out and he licked it. She knew instantly that she had to save him. Knowing she wouldn't be allowed to take him on the bus, she tossed a couple of shirts out of her shoulder bag and replaced them with the dirty dog. Admonishing him to stay quiet, she had climbed back onto the bus and fed him some of her road snacks. He had stayed quiet the rest of the trip and when she made it to her destination, she bathed him and treated his wounds. Over the next ten years, Dakota had become a fine travel companion. Smiling at him in the mirror, Casey suddenly giggled, her joyful mood snapping back. Great music, sunshine, and the happy face of her dog couldn't fail to lift her spirits even with a stupid ticket tucked into her visor.

"Just think, buddy," she called over her shoulder. "You could have been named Nebraska if I had found you an hour earlier."

She reached up to grab the ticket and opened it with one hand. Might as well see how much this was going to set her back. Inside the folded paper was a note. "Get your taillight fixed. Get safely to your destination. Thanks for the smile."

Casey was delighted. Trying to keep her eyes on the road, she briefly scanned the paper again, hoping the gorgeous officer might have included a phone number in the note, but she didn't see one. Still, she didn't owe any money and she had made the officer's day. Feeling the joy swelling from her stomach and up into her heart, she sang loudly, reaching back to rub Dakota's scruffy head.

She finally reached the exit for the rest area. As she pulled into the parking lot, Casey rummaged in her shoulder bag for her phone. Before she could lay her hands on it, she remembered that it was worthless to her anyway. She had meant to add minutes to the prepaid plan, but somehow hadn't gotten around to it. The cheap flip phone was a piece of crap, but at least it allowed her to connect with the real world when she needed to do so. She mentally counted the money in her wallet and tried to determine if she could afford to buy a phone card to tide her over until she got a job, or sold a sketch.

After procuring some disgusting rest stop coffee, Casey took Dakota to the back of the building and let him off the leash. As he ran around, she studied one of the maps she had picked up at the kiosk. She'd been planning to head to San Francisco after stopping over in Albuquerque, but she was struck with a sudden desire to see Sedona, Arizona. Watching Dakota chasing bugs or fairies or dust or whatever it was that he was seeing, she decided that as long as she was on this side of the world, she would go to Sedona. Scanning the map, she figured it would be an easy jaunt from Albuquerque to Flagstaff. Once in Flag, she could take I-89 down to Sedona. If she remembered correctly, it was a beautiful drive. She'd had a brief fling with an artist and welder who owned a most unusual house close to Oak Creek Canyon. What was her name? Flower? Starshine? The memory made Casey smile, and she made a mental note to go straight to Sedona from Albuquerque. Fifteen years was too long to stay away from her home state. Grinning again, she tried to fold the map back the way it came, but gave up and just smashed it down as best she could. It kind of resembled every attempt she'd ever made to fold a fitted sheet.

Back on the road, Casey picked up a little speed, ignoring the shaking car. Even with the unplanned stop, she could still make it to Albuquerque by about nine that evening. She imagined Linda and Patty welcoming her into their house, divesting her of dirty laundry, cooking her a delightful dinner of fresh, organic foods, and petting Dakota. Warm at the thought, she smiled. Briefly thinking about sex, she wondered if Linda and Patty had any sexy lesbian friends who might be in the market for a new lover. Man, that cop was gorgeous, though. Casey entertained herself thinking about sketching the woman's face. She could almost feel the curves under her hands as she thought about tracing the patterns of her face. Half tempted to pull over again and get out her sketch pad, Casey instead contented herself with thinking about the drawing. She wanted to remember the woman's face so she could bring her to life on paper. Mentally sketching the officer took Casey all the way to Albuquerque.

## Chapter Two

Trying to ignore the rattle of the magazine pages turning in her partner's hands, Megan Woodson focused on her computer. Anna had argued in vain against the computer being allowed on the dining table, but since Anna herself liked to read house and home mags, she didn't really have a case. Megan used her computer to read the news, among other things, and she didn't see why she should give it up. She looked down at her carefully prepared breakfast: a four-egg omelet with spinach, onions, and mushrooms. The bacon was done to perfection. Anna clucked from behind her magazine.

"What?" Megan asked, trying to keep her voice neutral.

"You'll have a heart attack before your fortieth birthday if you continue to eat like that."

"A low-carb, high-protein diet is extremely healthy."

Anna snorted.

"I'm sick of having this argument every day," Megan stated, tapping the keys a little harder.

"This isn't an argument. It's a conversation. I'm merely expressing my opinion about your breakfast."

"Shall I express my opinion about yours?"

Anna took another gulp of black coffee before reaching for another doughnut. "I well know your opinion about my breakfast. And everything else, too."

Refusing to answer, Megan took several silent bites of her breakfast as Anna returned her attention to the magazine. Quietly debating and discarding subjects in her head, she tried to bring up something that wouldn't cause an argument.

"I tried to call Casey last night. Her phone is disconnected again," she finally said. "Now, I'm worried."

"There's a surprise," Anna scoffed.

"What? My worry or her phone being disconnected?"

"Both. She's irresponsible as hell. I wouldn't be surprised to find out she dropped her phone down the side of a mountain somewhere, or traded it to a hippie for pot."

Suppressing a chuckle, Megan shrugged. "She's not irresponsible. She just has different priorities."

"She has no priorities. And you've been cleaning up her messes for years."

"She's my best friend. She does the same for me."

Anna snorted. "Except you don't have messes, Megan. They wouldn't fit into your perfectly planned schedule."

"Speaking of which, I need to leave in two-point-seven minutes."

"Yes, you'd hate to miss your eight minutes of free time in the office."

"I'd kill someone without my morning meditation," Megan responded, only half joking.

Megan stood and walked over to the other side of the island. "I do love you, you know."

"Do I know that?"

Megan leaned down to kiss Anna on the mouth. "You should."

In the car, Megan tapped the steering wheel while listening to old Van Morrison songs. Singing along with "Into the Mystic," she laughed at herself a bit. The music reminded her of Casey and her ability to take off on a whim to anywhere her heart desired. Casey, who barely eked out a living doing odd jobs and selling sketches, had somehow managed to find herself in all sorts of exotic locales over the past few years. She picked up her phone and dialed Casey's number to see if the phone was back on.

"The number you have dialed is out of service. Please hang up and try your call again."

"Dammit," Megan said under her breath.

She entered the parking garage at work and pulled up behind a green sedan parked in the spot that was clearly marked, "Reserved for Megan Woodson." She maneuvered her SUV directly behind the car, taking care to make sure she wasn't blocking access for the two spots on either side. In the elevator, she stared at the ceiling and tried to remember the mantra that Casey had taught her for moments like this. "Breathe in peace, breathe out that which is not peace." She focused on her breathing for a few moments. When the elevator door opened to the lobby of Hartford, Brant, and Lipscomb, she strolled calmly to the receptionist and handed her car keys over the counter.

"Someone is parked in my spot," Megan said. "I'd very much like for them to be found and removed, at which point, my car can be moved into my space."

The young woman behind the desk looked flustered. "How do I find the owner of the other car?"

"Ask around. If you don't find them, I'm sure they'll come to you when they find that they cannot get out of the space."

She strode calmly down the hall and into her office. After buzzing her assistant, she sat back in her chair with her hands clasped behind her head. She cursed the interruption to her daily routine and she tried to clear her mind, but kept coming back to the car in her parking spot. She worked long hours at this agency to get to this level. It was demanding and stressful, and some days she felt like screaming, tearing apart her office, and storming out, but ultimately, the job was rewarding. The company cared. She knew a lot of other creative designers who worked for evil empires and she was lucky to have gotten in at the ground floor with H, B, & L. She made good money and she had some good perks. One of those perks was a parking space big enough that she didn't have to worry about someone dinging the side of her X5.

Several minutes of deep breathing left Megan with something close to a feeling of peace. Ready to face the day, she looked at her watch. One minute until eight. Her assistant was dangerously close to being late.

Devin Sams popped his head into Megan's office. He grinned at her from the doorway.

"Just taking the temperature before I make an entrance," he said.

Laughing, Megan motioned him in. Devin traipsed across the room, dangling the keys to Megan's BMW from one pinkie finger.

"Guess who got that evil middle-class Ford out of your parking spot?"

"Thank you. Did you bring the work for the Argan campaign?"

“I most certainly did.” Devin placed the keys down before handing a stack of folders across the desk. Megan opened a folder and spread the proofs across her desk.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Devin came around the desk to lean over her shoulder. “Perfect. You’ll get a promotion over this one.”

Megan shook her head. “How much of a promotion do I need? I have my own parking spot, an awesome assistant, and more money than my partner can spend.”

“If you get promoted, I’ll get your job,” Devin responded, grinning. “I’d look good in that leather chair.”

She pushed him out of the way. “It will be a few years before you’re ready for an office. Get these scanned and online. When you’re done, email and text Mr. Argan and let him know the proofs are ready for perusal.”

As Devin closed the door behind him, Megan checked the schedule. Once the proofs were accepted and finalized, she would initiate the release. Magazine ads, social media campaign, two radio spots, a promo on MTV, and a billboard just off Times Square. Pricey, but Argan industries had money to spend and they wanted to spend it with her. Megan had actually fought against the billboard because of the cost, but Argan wanted to see his brand in lights. “Argan Designs—Be More Beautiful.” Megan held the mock-up of the billboard and smiled. The line of the model’s body beautifully showcased perfection of the clothing in the ad. Brilliant Wilson, Megan’s favorite photographer, captured exactly the air of grace and wealth that Megan had wanted. The print ads, featuring the same model in various outfits from the Argan line, were equally gorgeous. The clothing line was expensive, but well made. Megan was wearing a suit from the line herself. The dark grey trousers fit her long, lean body perfectly, and the suit jacket, which had just a hint of darting, gave it a touch more femininity than her other jackets. Paired today with a white dress shirt and a silk tie in varying hues of deep blue, Megan felt rather like Katherine Hepburn.

By lunch, Megan was more than ready to push the campaign out the door. She texted Devin, who said he was still waiting for final approval.

Harris Lipscomb popped his head in the door a few minutes before one.

“Let’s get some lunch.”

“I can’t,” Megan said, waving him off. “I’m waiting for Argan to give final approval on the proofs so I can launch all of the ads.”

“You can’t sit around waiting for the phone to ring,” he said. “Besides, isn’t that why we have cell phones?”

Sighing, she pushed aside the papers and followed Harris to the parking garage. She gave an inner satisfied nod toward her car as they drove by in Harris’s big, shiny Lexus. She leaned back in the seat, watching the people on the sidewalk. Harris wasn’t one for small talk, so they rode to the restaurant in silence.

At the table, they exchanged a few brief words while deciding on their meals. Megan sensed there was a bigger talk coming. Finally, as they started to eat, Harris let it out.

“Argan is pleased with your work.”

Megan nodded. "He should be. It's a gorgeous campaign."

"Let's get it out to the printers without a glitch and we can relax for a minute."

Megan grinned. "A full minute?"

"Maybe thirty seconds," Harris said. "Once you put this one to bed, I'm going to bring you on the Whitman account."

Stunned, Megan occupied herself by cutting into the broiled chicken breast on her plate.

"The Whitman account?"

Harris nodded. "Argan was big, and you've handled it with aplomb. You're ready for something bigger."

"I am ready," she replied.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Harris cleared his throat. "Look, Megan. We don't talk about your personal life."

She held up her hand. "We don't talk about it because it has nothing to do with my professional life."

"I agree. I know you have a female partner and I don't care. Hell, I don't care about the associates' opposite sex partners, their dogs, or their children's birthday parties. All I care about is the fact that they do their jobs."

He paused, stabbing into his steak. "You do your job. There's no doubt about that."

Megan interrupted. "I do. I absolutely do. So what's the problem?"

"There's no problem. It was a huge boon for a big New York company like Argan to hire our little firm."

"We're hardly tiny."

Harris shook his head. "We're big for Memphis. We're growing. Clients like Argan and Whitman are huge feathers in our cap."

"I know all of this, Harris," Megan said, trying to conceal her impatience.

Harris waved for the bill. "The point, Megan, is that I can't have your personal life getting in the way of your work ethic."

"It never has," she said through gritted teeth.

"You left early five days last month to deal with personal issues, Megan."

"And I stayed late fifteen days last month to make up for it."

"Just don't let it affect your ability to do your job."

"I won't, sir."

The waitress returned with a credit slip and Harris signed off on a large tip. Megan studied him as he pocketed his credit card. He was a good-looking man in his early fifties. He had a thick mane of white hair that he never colored. With his strong jaw and long nose, the white hair simply served to make him look distinguished and handsome. It suddenly occurred to Megan that she knew only that he was married and had two children.

As they got into the car, Megan smiled at Harris. "It occurs to me that I don't even know your children's names."

Harris nodded. "Sometimes I feel the same way."

Back in the office, Devin and Megan spread the proofs across Megan's work table.

"Argan loves everything," she told Devin. "We need to get everything to the release, as is."

"I can take care of that," Devin said.

"Thank you, but no. Harris wants my fingers on it until the very last moment. I'll get it to the billboard ad, send the press releases to our media contacts, and email the final galleys to the magazines. We're good to go."

Her cell rang. Ignoring it, she turned back to Devin. Immediately, her office phone rang. Devin rolled his eyes. "I bet I know who that is," he sang.

Megan picked up the phone. "Woodson," she snapped.

"Ms. Woodson, it's Darby from Magnolia Grove."

"Call my partner," Megan said.

"We tried. There's no answer on her mobile or at home. Mrs. Goff is hysterical and we can't get her to take her meds."

"Can't you give her a shot?"

"It isn't advisable to medicate a patient into oblivion every time she gets upset about something," Darby responded.

Megan looked at Devin, who was shaking his head and mouthing, "No."

"Okay," Megan sighed. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

She hung up the phone and stared at it for a moment. She could feel Devin staring at her. Looking up, she met his eyes.

"I can't help it," she said. "I can't ignore her."

"I know," Devin said. "I just don't think it would be a good idea to leave early after Harris just told you he was worried about your commitment."

"I don't have a choice," she said, grabbing her purse. "Maybe after I calm her down, I can come back and get this stuff done."

"Forget it," Devin said. "Who knows how long you'll be there."

"Fuck, Devin! I understand where Harris is coming from, but sometimes families have emergencies."

"I wouldn't know. I'm going to be single and fabulous forever," he said, laughing.

"You're smart," Megan said. She glanced at the clock on her desk.

"Hang on," Devin said. "Just give me ten seconds."

He popped out of the office, closing the door behind him. Megan waited, impatiently tapping her foot. None of this would be happening if Anna had just answered her damn phone. She didn't have a job. Where the fuck was she? It was her responsibility to be available when these things happened.

Devin opened the door and slipped back in. "Great news. All the partners are at an off-site meeting, also known as drinking martinis on a Friday afternoon. Lipscomb's secretary said they won't be back."

Megan let out a sigh. "So, we finish this stuff up quick and I take off."

"And leave Mrs. Goff freaking out at the nursing home?"

“I don’t know what else to do.” Megan sighed again.

“Okay, look,” Devin said. “What if I get all of this stuff to the sources? You have detailed notes of every email that needs to be sent, every package to ship, everything that needs to be done. I’ll do it, and I’ll call you when it’s all done. Then you can call Harris and let him know you did everything.”

Megan froze. “You would do that for me?”

“You better not forget it when I’m getting my review next month.” Devin laughed.

She grabbed him and kissed his cheek. “You are the best assistant on the face of the planet.”

“I know,” he said, patting his perfectly coiffed hair. “It’s one of my many gifts.”

“That and modesty,” Megan responded, grinning.

In the car, Megan skirted around Graceland to avoid the traffic before jumping on I-69 to head to the southern part of the city. She debated stopping for Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Carole Goff’s favorite. Next time. Haste was the important factor today. She pressed down on the accelerator and tried Anna’s number again. Listening to her partner’s voice mail message with increasing irritation, she gritted her teeth. After the beep, she left a message. “Anna. Yet again, your mother needs you and yet again, you are nowhere to be found. Call me as soon as you get this.”

Hanging up the phone, she took a few deep breaths and tried to find some calm. A truck cut in front of her and she stuck her arm out the window, waving her middle finger at him.

“Very zen, Woodson,” she muttered to herself. “Very fucking zen.”

## *About The Author*

Beth Burnett wears so many hats her neck hurts. The Director of Education for GCLS and the head of the Writing Academy, Beth strives to combine her love of writing with her passion for empowering women. In addition to running the writing academy, she teaches women's empowerment workshops and online self-love classes. Because she believes sleep is for sissies, she has recently registered to go back to school for her second master's degree. *Eating Life* is Beth's fourth novel with Sapphire Books. She is currently working on a novel about writers exacting revenge on the people who vex them. In her spare time, Beth reads, walks with her geriatric dog, and works on perfecting her hippy, hippy shake.

## ***Check out Beth's other books***

**Man Enough** - ISBN - 978-1-939062-09-3

Things are going well for Davey Carter. She loves her job and she has a comfortable bed. Granted, her love life is non-existent, her pot-smoking mother is wreaking havoc in her apartment, and she is starting to suspect that her lesbian best friend might be secretly in love with her. But none of that matters when Davey meets Danny, a kind, loving, intelligent man who just may be the love of Davey's life. Until it turns out that Danny is harboring a secret of his own.

**Andy's Song** - ISBN - 978-1-939062-14-7

Is there more to life than sex? Andy Ericksson is trying to find out. She's had a pretty easy life. She's sexy, she's tough, and she has a trust fund that ensures she will never have to work a "normal" job. She has a circle of adoring friends and all of the hot, casual sex she could want. It's a recipe for a great time. However, lately, Andy has started to feel that something is missing. Casual sex isn't cutting through the loneliness. Her best friend falls in love with someone else, her ex-girlfriend makes an appearance, and she meets someone who isn't willing to be a one-night stand. Andy's world is changing and she's not sure that she's changing with it. In the midst of Andy's turmoil, everyone in her life suddenly seems to be spouting new age wisdom and finding inner peace. Through the changing of one relationship and the beginning of another, Andy struggles to open her heart without sacrificing her freedom or alienating those she loves the most.

**The Love Sucks Club** - ISBN - 978-1-939062-50-5

Tragedy and heartbreak drive Dana McComb to a Caribbean island where she sets about to becoming a hermit. Settling into numbness seems to be the only way to suppress the psychic visions that once showed her the death of her soul mate. A failed rebound relationship leaves her even more intent on losing herself in the loneliness of her isolated house on the hill. With her middle-aged, beef jerky obsessed Tom cat, Dana vows to live a life devoid of ups and downs. Making fun of her own state of mind, she and her best buddy start "The Love Sucks Club" which is really just a euphemism for sitting around bitching about their own bitterness about love. Trying to stay wrapped in her own misery starts to fail when Dana's pesky younger sister and a host of other island misfits insist on poking into her best laid plans for comfort. When a new woman shows up on island, bringing back Dana's visions, she is suddenly besieged by night terrors, vivid hallucinations, and panic attacks. Half-convinced she's going crazy, Dana tries to shut out her past with increasing difficulty. Aware that it may be the only way to put her dead lover to rest, Dana begins a journey that could either shatter her life or save it.

## ***Other books by Sapphire Books Publishing***

**The Dreamcatcher** - ISBN - 978-1-943353-67-5

High school is rarely easy, especially for a tall, somewhat gangly Native American girl. Add a sprinkle of shyness, a dash of athletic prowess, an above-average IQ, and some bizarre history that places her in the guardianship of her aunt. Then normal high school life is only an illusion.

Kai Tiva faces an uphill struggle until she runs into Riley Beth James, the extroverted class cutie, at the principal's office. Riley shows up for a newspaper interview, while Kai is summoned for punching out a classmate.

Riley is the attractive girl-next-door-type whom everyone likes. Though a fairly good student, an emerging choral star, and wildly popular, she knows she'll never live up to her older sister. She makes up for it with bravery, kindness, and a brash can-do attitude.

Their odd matchup is strengthened by curiosity, compassion, humor, and all the drama of typical teenage life. But their experiences go beyond the normal teen angst; theirs is compounded by a curious attraction to each other, and an emerging, insidious danger related to mysterious death of Kai's father.

Their emerging friendship is tested as they navigate this risky challenge. But the powerful bond forged between them has existed through past lives. The outcome this time will affect the next generation of Kai's people.

**In the Direction of the Sun** - ISBN - 978-1-943353-65-1

“The emotions flying between the two women who tell their story here is as dramatic as the Appalachian Trail and as tumultuous as the Atlantic Ocean. These natural elements are a perfect backdrop for the revelations of love which both repel and engage them.”

– Jewelle Gomez, author, *The Gilda Stories*

Steady and smart, Alex McKenzie is settled into a comfortable life in her beloved hometown of Stockbridge, MA. Everything Alex thought she knew about life and about herself changes the moment Cate Conrad blows into town like a warm breeze. Alex falls head over heels in love with the free-spirited artist and sailor but there's one problem: Cate's complicated past makes it impossible for her to open her heart completely and so she does what she's always done—she runs away. Devastated, Alex tries to heal her heart by literally walking away from her life to hike the famed

Appalachian Trail while Cate takes to the water. The unexpected turn of events shows Cate and Alex how fragile life is and how love is the all that really matters.

**Lavender Dreams** - ISBN - 978-1-943353-59-0

When Sarah Chase got on the ferry to Bainbridge Island, she left her lover, her job, and her past behind. She didn't know that in the course of one day she would meet a woman who might be the girl of her dreams, change her career path, create a new family, and find herself in a fairytale mansion with two of the quirkiest little old ladies imaginable.

**The Details in The Design** - ISBN - 978-1-943353-79-8

Every Stitch tells a story.

Avery Michaels has longed to work in the fashion industry since she was six years old. Now at thirty-two she's fed up with her job as a food critic and signs up with an employment agency that promises to find anyone their dream job.

She is thrilled when she gets an interview with the fashion house of her choice, Catherine Davenport Designs. There's only one problem. For the past six years, Avery has had a massive crush on Catherine, one of the hottest fashion designers of the past two decades.

In the midst of a new job, nosey friends, Catherine's meddling daughters, difficult co-workers, and a dachshund named Polly, Avery also has to contend with a new woman that enters Catherine's life.

From the Start, Avery knows winning Catherine's heart will be no easy feat. When curve ball after curve ball is thrown her way, does she scrap her design or make it work.

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