



**SOUTHERN
LIGHTS**

Liz Arncliffe



PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

January 2022

I THOUGHT THERE'D BE MORE color here. I thought there'd be more sound too. But everything feels as muted as it does back home. Is it still home? I don't think I want to call it that anymore. Would Julia be angry about that? Sad? No, she would tell me I'm being melodramatic, and she'd go back to her book. She might be upset that I'm traveling, though. This was always her dream.

At forty-two, Sloane Sullivan had apparently lost her ability to bounce back quickly from jet lag. After three flights and more than twenty-one hours of travel from her native Tennessee to Sydney, she was disoriented, a bit dizzy, and bone-tired, but the image of her late wife's quiet exasperation brought a small smile to her lips and she stretched her body in the emerging light of dawn on a grassy knoll overlooking Bondi Beach. She had fought insomnia all night, then had staggered out of her small hotel to watch the sunrise. Laying back against the hillside, Sloane closed her eyes against the rising light as it danced off the ocean's waves. She breathed in the salty air and wondered if she might have a small nap before heading back to the hotel to pack for her flight out of Sydney to her final destination later in the afternoon.

Whatever momentary peace she might have found was interrupted by a loud and insistent barking to her right, and she sat up just in time

for a very large and very enthusiastic dog to barrel into her, knocking her back to the ground.

“Charlie! Charlie, no!” A woman rushed toward them from the walkway that bisected the small park above the beach. To Sloane’s American ears, the woman’s pronunciation of Charlie sounded very much like *Cholly*, and she felt something akin to joy for the first time in a long time. Sloane just managed to grab Charlie’s collar before he could dash off toward whatever it was he was pursuing, and the woman rushed over to attach a leash.

“I’m so sorry! I’m so, so sorry!” the woman said. “He gets overly excited about the bin chickens some mornings,” she explained as if Sloane was supposed to know what bin chickens were.

Sloane sat back up, looked around, and assumed the woman was referring to the large, pale bird lurking near the trash cans up the hill. Charlie, meanwhile, sat down and waited patiently for Sloane to acknowledge his presence with ear scratches, which she was all too happy to provide.

“Y’all call ibises *bin chickens*?” Sloane continued to scratch behind Charlie’s ears.

The woman tilted her head in a small and brief gesture of surprise. “You’re American. On holiday?”

“Um, sort of. But I fly out later today.”

“Yes, ibises are known as bin chickens because they root around in the bins. Your accent—I can’t place your accent. Southern, but something else.”

Sloane wasn’t sure if this was a question or not, but she answered anyway. “Appalachian. Southern Appalachian.” She let her gaze wander down the woman’s body. She might not be seeing much color these days, but she could certainly see shapes, and this woman had a lovely shape.

She realized she was being a bit too conspicuous in her ogling and she looked up just in time to see the woman’s lips twitch upward into a smirk.

“It’s adorable.” The woman smiled fully into Sloane’s upturned eyes, and motioned to the spot beside Sloane as if asking for permission.

Southern Lights

Sloane nodded as the woman stepped around both Sloane and Charlie so that the offending pooch wasn't between them and sank elegantly onto the grass next to her. She leaned toward Sloane and crinkled her brows in a way that made the freckles along her forehead cozy up to one another. "You smell amazing—like lavender and ylang-ylang," she said more than a little flirtatiously.

"Oh, good," Sloane replied. "It's my lotion. Good to know it is what it claims to be. Truth in advertising, you know? I'm surprised you can smell it. Is it too strong? It's just lotion. I don't have a very good nose these days." Her voice sounded so awkwardly chipper, and she looked away in confusion.

The stranger bit her bottom lip as if biting back some lascivious remark and studied Sloane's face. "This may seem forward, but may I offer you a coffee to make up for my dog so rudely interrupting your morning meditation?"

"Oh, I wasn't meditating, I was thinking of a nap. I—I know that's odd but—" Sloane stopped short, getting lost in her own errant thoughts about shapes and how long it had been since—well, since. She wondered what expression she was wearing that led the woman to believe Sloane would be interested in spending the morning with her.

She looked down at Charlie, hoping he might have answers for her, but he only looked back with newfound affection.

"You'd be missing Golden Hour if you napped," the woman teased and leaned into Sloane's shoulder.

"I'd be missing Golden Hour if I took you up on a coffee." The sound of her own playfulness surprised her. "It does remind me of a croissant, though."

"Golden Hour reminds you of a croissant?" The woman laughed a deep and full-throated laugh, and it made Sloane's stomach flutter.

"Bondi reminds me of a croissant. Because of its crescent shape. Or maybe the coffee reminded me of a croissant?" Sloane smiled, and her gaze lingered on a pair of full, lush lips. She shook her head as if to ward off the unexpected and unwelcome tingling that spread over her.

"Coffee *and* a croissant, then. Fortunately for you, I have both back at the flat that I'm borrowing, just across the street." She turned

slightly and pointed up the small rise behind them and across the street to a row of restaurants, a bank, and a tattoo shop.

“You don’t even know me. And I don’t know you,” Sloane protested weakly as Charlie rolled onto his back, clearly feeling optimistic he’d be getting belly rubs.

His owner seems all too willing to expose her belly for me too. Sloane chuckled at her own silent joke. When she looked back up, the woman was smiling at her with a soft expression that held a promise of mischief.

“We’ll get to know one another, then. You clearly have Charlie’s seal of approval, and he is a very good judge of character.”

Sloane once again let her eyes roam down to the stranger’s chest and then back up to her lips. It had been so long, and she wouldn’t be doing anything wrong. And it was meaningless—simply fulfilling a physical need. Like breakfast. Or sleep. There had to be a justification for the sudden longing she felt.

“Coffee and a croissant, then,” she said hesitantly.

The woman was up before Sloane had even finished answering. She confidently extended a hand to help Sloane stand and led her across the Parade to an unassuming door tucked beside a bank. Once they were inside, the woman lifted Sloane’s hand to her lips, kissed her fingertips, and led her up the narrow flight of stairs.

* * *

Ava James woke hours later as the early afternoon sun streamed through the bedroom windows, casting undulating light and shadows on the floorboards. The other side of the bed was empty and cold, as if the American had never been there at all. For a moment, she wondered if it had been a dream, but her still vibrating body, sticky from sweat and sex, told her that it had been very, very real.

She closed her eyes and reveled in the memory of the woman’s near-desperate movements, her moans, and her apparent pleasure. Ava always chose her one-night stands, never the other way round. She couldn’t exactly say why she’d chosen this one except maybe that it had been too long since she’d last slept with a woman. Or maybe it was the way the woman had elongated the *I* in *ibis*, making it sound almost

Southern Lights

like *ah-bis*. Maybe it was the ease with which she handled Charlie's exuberant interruption of her almost nap. Maybe it was the cinnamon in her deep brown eyes or the honeyed tones of her hair, still messy from bed. Maybe it was that the woman wasn't overly eager to know Ava. Whatever it was, Ava was happy to have spent the morning in bed with her, even happier that the woman had slipped out before either of them learned the other's name.

She sat up to face the remainder of the day and gazed dopily through the gauzy sheers to the deep cerulean ocean, its color matched only in intensity by a cloudless sapphire sky. She'd grown accustomed to the occasional one-night stand before, but this was her first one-morning stand, and she felt very pleased with herself. Just one more day of press for the upcoming series of her show, and then she'd be on her way back home to the Gold Coast, feeling renewed and rejuvenated.

* * *

That was not cheating. I did not betray her. Did I betray my Julia? Can she see me? Could she see me with the woman from Bondi? I don't want her to think that I don't love her. I'm still hers. It was just a physical need. A release, like the trail runs and bike rides. I used that woman for distraction, for release. Something good for the body.

No, it was a mistake, that's what it was. Stop fooling yourself into thinking that was somehow OK.

Sloane chided herself while she showered, while she packed, during the Uber ride to the airport and the entire flight up the coast, as she signed the paperwork for the rental car, and throughout the whole drive to her rented cottage. She tried desperately to convince herself that it was not a betrayal, that she had not been unfaithful, and that it had been nearly a year and she'd done nothing wrong. She told herself that this was what moving on required of her, but that hurt deep in her gut and the guilt persisted. So she tried instead to focus on the task ahead of her.

Her Queensland rental, set back in the Gold Coast hinterland—Sloane had yet to grasp exactly what the word *hinterland* described—was a long way from her native home. But thus far, the people and

the place had somehow felt simultaneously familiar and foreign. She'd already heard the word *reckon* used repeatedly, and there was something in their hospitable and welcoming mannerisms that felt familiar. Yet the accents were foreign, and the sunlight felt different. And the people seemed more relaxed than back in the States. How was it possible for something to feel both odd and familiar when she was nine thousand miles from home for the very first time?

As she nervously drove north along the Pacific Motorway, she knew objectively that the sun was bright and the sky clear, and she assumed it was a lovely shade of blue. But it felt off somehow, filtered and not nearly as vivid as it should be. Sloane hadn't seen the world in color since she'd lost Julia. Her world had gone all grayscale on that day, and she'd traveled half a world away, hoping to find color. But thus far, she'd found only more gray. And the woman at Bondi Beach.

After exiting the M1, she drove more slowly along rural two-lane roads. Sloane rolled down the windows of the Toyota that would be hers for the next few weeks until she could find something more permanent that would get her through the year. The first week in January in Queensland was hot and humid, not unlike July in Tennessee, and she hoped a few minutes of wind on her face might shake her out of her thoughts and reward her with enough presence of mind to meet the owner of her rented cottage.

Her GPS told her to make a left turn off the forested road, and she pulled into a short, graveled drive lined by tall, lanky trees. As Sloane opened the car door, an older, elegant woman walked toward her with purpose. The woman had a strangely familiar smile, and her eyes crinkled in a way that Sloane recognized but couldn't quite place, and so she pushed the thoughts away.

"You must be Ellen," Sloane said and reached out to shake the woman's hand in greeting.

"Yes, dear. Who else would I be?" the woman returned in a restrained-but-definitely-there Australian drawl. "I trust your travels have gone smoothly up to this point? Did you find us easily enough?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did. Thank you for asking. And thank you for opening your home to me. I'm grateful for it." Sloane meant it.

Southern Lights

“Well, of course. When...” Ellen stopped and looked Sloane over from head to toe. “I thought you’d be younger.” Her tone was observational and matter-of-fact.

“Um, well, I’m not sure how to respond to that—I’m sorry?”

The older woman laughed. “No, no need for that. What are you? Late thirties?”

“I’m forty-two. Nearly forty-three.”

Ellen turned and climbed the few stairs to the front door of the cottage. Instead of going inside, she sat down in one of two chairs on the porch, crossed one leg elegantly over the other, and motioned for Sloane to join her. “Fortysomething women rarely go off on grand adventures such as this. A teacher exchange program on the other side of the world at forty-two? Interesting.”

“Maybe more women should go off on grand adventures in their forties,” Sloane responded coolly as she sat down. She certainly felt her age—her joints were still screaming at her after all the air travel the past few days, the long run she’d completed the day before, and the questionable choices she’d made earlier that very morning.

“Hmmm. You have a point. Maybe women in their seventies should go off on grand adventures as well.” Ellen eyed Sloane. “I’m a retired educator. I taught with Bea at Robina State School years ago.”

“Women in their seventies should absolutely go off on grand adventures. Bea, as in Principal Beatrice Bowen?”

Ellen smiled when Sloane said her friend’s formal title. “One and the same.”

Sloane pressed on about Ellen’s time in the classroom. “I was thrilled to find out that Principal Bowen was able to arrange a place for me for the year, but I had no idea that you’d taught with her. What subjects did you teach?”

“Drama and theatre. Sometimes English, like you. I normally don’t rent this place out.” Ellen gestured around the cottage. “Not since my daughter returned home from living in Melbourne. I’ve only rented to friends and friends of friends since then. But when Bea called, explaining she had an English teacher from America coming for a year, I

couldn't say no to her. Or to a fellow teacher. What on earth made you decide teaching abroad was the thing to do?"

Sloane smiled. The woman's bluntness reminded her of her grandmother. "The States, ah...it's a bit of a train wreck. Things have changed in the last several years there, and, uh, I needed to get away for a bit. I don't think I'm ready to leave the classroom. I love teaching, and I don't want to make decisions I'll regret. I thought maybe some distance and a change of scenery might help me find a way forward."

Sloane's explanation was honest but incomplete. She wasn't prepared to discuss her real reasons for leaving home; nor was she sure when she'd be ready.

Ellen seemed to find the explanation acceptable, if not vague, and so Sloane offered no more.

"It's been difficult to watch from here as well. Disappointing. Despicable, really," she corrected and said with real compassion, "Well, welcome. We're glad to have you. Come, let me show you around."

Ellen's farm was smallish, fifteen to twenty acres maybe, but it was more than enough for the larger home in which Ellen lived and the cottage set far to the property's edge. There was also a small stable and yard, a riding arena and adjacent tack room, and four paddocks. The property bordered a protected park and was home to four horses. It was beautiful and quiet and picturesque—not at all like the beaches and busy tourist areas the Gold Coast was known for. No, this suited her needs far better.

The cottage itself sat on a small knoll just above one of the paddocks and the small riding arena. It was a small two-bedroom home with a kitchen, dining nook, and a cozy and comfortable living area. The living room and kitchen both opened onto an terrace. She could sit on the sofa in the living room or on the terrace and look out onto the ridges of the park that lay beyond. Sloane loved that the cottage had so many windows that let both morning and afternoon light in. The bedrooms were technically on the front of the cottage with windows that looked out onto a small yard, a gravel drive, and the road that continued around to the main house.

At the end of the short tour, Ellen walked Sloane to the terrace at the back of the cottage. "I am pleased to say that I am leaving on

Southern Lights

a small adventure of my own tomorrow with friends from town. My daughter will be back by then, so if you have questions, please come ask either of us. We're happy to help get you settled." She smiled broadly and handed Sloane a set of keys, "And, dear, there's no need to call me ma'am. Ellen will do just fine."

CHAPTER 2

TWO DAYS LATER, SLOANE WAS still recovering from the travel, adjusting to her new surroundings, and grappling with the uncharacteristic choice she'd made on her last day in Sydney. She'd only left the cottage once since she'd arrived and that had been to drive down the road to a small shop for protein bars and yogurt and then to a roadside fruit stall for bananas and melon. Her appetite just wasn't what it used to be.

Aside from that, she'd wandered aimlessly around the farm, feeling both as if she couldn't wake up and as if she couldn't sleep either. She'd claimed a spot in the grass beside the terrace at the back of the cottage, where she'd gone each morning to sun herself like a cat. Removing her sunglasses and throwing an arm over her eyes, she thought about the start of school in a few weeks and how she needed to get herself acclimated before her teaching gig began at Ballard College.

She hoped her new job would reinvigorate her love of education after the chaos of teaching during the pandemic years back home. Of course, spending a year in Australia was about much more than her job—she desperately needed to move her life forward after losing Julia. A few of her family and friends accused her of running from her grief, but her therapist assured her that she was exercising a healthy sense of agency in choosing to go abroad for a while. A vague and desperate hope for the year ahead and despair about the year behind challenged the persistent jet lag and exhaustion for space in her head.

Southern Lights

Sloane tried to push aside the former in an effort to properly tend to the fatigue.

She suddenly felt heavy, wet panting very near her right cheek. Sloane opened her eyes to a very enthusiastic, very large shepherd-mix dog smiling down at her and she immediately recognized the beast as the one that had barreled into her at Bondi. “Charlie!” she said, in disbelief and confusion. She sat up, and the mutt plopped his hundred-pound body on her lap.

From nearby, Sloane heard footfalls of the human variety.

As she approached, the stranger’s greeting was a warm and friendly, “Hello there!” And then, recognition and something like panic crossed the woman’s face.

“Uh...” Sloane searched for some adequate greeting but could find nothing but shock at the woman’s presence. She stammered weakly, “Uh...I don’t understand.”

“Wh—why are you here? How?” The woman seemed as baffled as she was, and maybe a bit angry. “Did you follow me here?”

Definitely angry.

“Of course not. I don’t even know your name. I’m renting this place from a woman named Ellen.” Sloane stood up and crossed her arms defensively. Charlie stood between the two women, looking concerned about their interaction. “Are you following *me*? I’ve been here two days, and this is the first time I’ve seen you here.” Sloane recounted the steps she’d taken from Sydney to this horse farm, but she couldn’t recall seeing the woman along the way. She waited for an explanation for what was certainly too odd to be coincidental.

A slow, creeping blush started at the woman’s chest and moved up to her cheeks and ears as she answered. “I live here. Ellen is my mother. I live in the main house.” She gestured to the house on the big hill, near the far paddock. “You met me at Bondi and then show up at my home and you’re claiming you’re not following me?”

“*Your* dog plowed into me on the beach. *You* approached me. *You* propositioned me. *You* led me back to your flat.” Sloane closed her eyes and sighed as she counted to ten silently. *This cannot be happening*, she thought as the numbers ticked by. When she opened her eyes again, the woman looked back at her as if she didn’t believe Sloane at

all. “Look, the other day with you, it was out of character for me. It was a mistake. I’m here because I’m going to be teaching at Ballard this academic year. The principal arranged for me to lease this cottage from Ellen. I’m certainly not following you. If you’ll give me a few days, I’ll try to find another place to rent. This was a mistake.”

The woman stared back, lips set in a thin line, and her eyes stormy. She said nothing for a long moment, and then, “Two days, but that’s all. Find another place.”

“Wow. Thanks for the hospitality.”

“And a hat isn’t a bad idea, either.”

“What?”

“You’ll get sunburned out here. Buy a hat.”

“Fine. I’ll put ‘buy a hat’ on the to-do list, right next to *find a new rental*. You’re telling me to leave but concerned about my getting sunburned?” Sloane sounded far *less* brusque than she’d intended, and she inadvertently looked at her own rather pallid limbs in the sunlight. *It is winter back in the States, after all*. But she found she was indeed ghostly—and in more ways than one.

An awkward, uncomfortable silence stretched out between them, broken only when Charlie barked once and leaned into Sloane’s legs for more ear scratches. She reflexively reached down and patted the dog’s head.

“Charlie, let’s go.” The woman stalked away toward the tack room, looking over her shoulder at Sloane as if to make sure she didn’t follow.

* * *

“Charlie, how is she even here? How did she find our address? Thank God Grace is away. Mum will be hearing about this. Dammit, how did this happen, Charlie?” Ava tried to shake out the image of the woman’s upturned eyes as she voiced her panic aloud to Charlie, who zigged and zagged back and forth along the path in front of her. “And you! You traitor!” She scolded him as they made their way toward the riding arena. “You are supposed to be protecting me from strangers and weirdos, Charlie, not making fast friends with every pretty girl who crosses our path. She’s exactly why I have you! We may have to

Southern Lights

rethink the terms of your employment if every attractive woman sends you swooning. You're a terrible guard dog."

Ava lectured Charlie all the way back to the tack room, where she had intended to spend the morning cleaning and organizing gear. She had adopted Charlie nearly five years before, after a stressful situation with a very persistent, and slightly unhinged, so-called fan who had gone as far as to find her home address. She had been living in Melbourne at the time, cast in a supporting role in a long-running television drama that had garnered her a small but cultlike fan base in places far and wide and a few fans at home in Australia. She had also been heavily pregnant with Grace and the man's fixation on her had unnerved and frightened her. Charlie was basically her round-the-clock security detail, and she had come to rely on him for a general feeling of safety. Plus, at times like these, when Grace was away with her father, Charlie was also her best friend and constant companion. But he seemed completely smitten with the family's new tenant. A tenant, a stalker, that Ava had unknowingly invited right into her bed.

Ava had moved back to her mother's property during the pandemic, in part so that she and Grace would have a bit of space to roam, but also for the privacy. They had decided to stay on at the farm even after Ava had accepted a role in a crime show filmed in Melbourne that required her to be away two to three months of the year. She felt more comfortable in her own skin on the farm, and her childhood home felt safe. Until now. Now the façade of safety was crumbling, and she'd brought it on herself.

From the safety of the tack room, she pulled her mobile from her back pocket to call her mum. She paced around the room awaiting an answer as Charlie observed her warily from the doorway that led outside and into the riding arena.

Finally, "Hello, dear! Have you made it home?" Her mum answered cheerfully from somewhere in Bali.

"Yes, Mum, I have. Why did you agree to let the cottage to—" Ava realized she'd never found out the woman's name, "—how did this woman come to be here?" She tried unsuccessfully to temper the anger and panic in her voice.

“Bea reached out to me. You remember Bea. You and I talked many times about the teacher from the States leasing the cottage. Ava, why are you so upset?”

“Mum. She cannot stay. I don’t trust her,” Ava answered in as measured a tone as she could muster, and with as little detail as possible.

“You don’t trust her? Has something happened?”

Ava wasn’t prepared to tell her about her first meeting with the woman in Sydney. She suddenly felt like a little girl who was about to get herself in trouble.

“Mum, I just don’t feel safe with her here. We don’t really know her. What if she arranged this somehow?”

“Ava, you’re being ridiculous,” her mother said sternly. “I know for a fact that she didn’t arrange leasing the cottage to be near you. Tell me what has happened.”

Ava wondered why she wasn’t showing more concern for the situation. “Mum, I just don’t want her here. Can we leave it at that?”

Her mother didn’t immediately answer, and the moment grew into an uncomfortably long and deafening silence.

“Mum?” Ava finally asked, impatiently.

“Has Sloane said or done something?”

“Mum, who is Sloane?”

“Ava Wynn James, you don’t even know the woman’s name and you’ve already decided she can’t be trusted and needs to leave? I’m disappointed in you.”

Immediately realizing her mistake, Ava took a deep breath and stared up at the tack room ceiling. It needed a coat of paint.

“Ava, were you rude to her? We should be making her feel welcome. Were you rude to her?”

“Mum, I’m forty-six years old. I don’t need a lecture. I just don’t want her here.”

But her mother only forged ahead in her recriminations of Ava’s behavior. “Well, maybe at forty-six years of age, you need to be reminded who owns that property. She will stay. And you will make every effort to welcome her. You are behaving like a spoiled diva. I raised you to treat others with kindness and care. Do better, Ava James. Go and apologize to her. Don’t make me call her myself.”

Southern Lights

“Mum...”

“Ava, I am on holiday. You are an adult. Apologize and make whatever you’ve done right. I love you, dear. Good-bye.”

Ava looked down at the screen of her mobile helplessly as her mother ended the call. She tried to shake off the conversation as she again paced around the tack room, angrily gathering gear. She had planned to spend these next couple of weeks doing what she loved: pottering around the house, the garden, and the paddock; doing odd jobs and chores; taking Hughie out for some exercise; and grooming the other horses. Her mother would be out of town on holiday and Paul had chosen to use his custody time to take their daughter on a long holiday to New Zealand, leaving Ava completely alone. It was an incredibly rare and welcome sabbatical from both motherhood and daughterhood. She was going to miss Grace, miss the noise and the constant curiosity and the unfettered love and affection of her daughter, but Ava was also positively giddy about the possibility of being in the house alone for two whole weeks, indulging her quiet, introverted side. And now, she’d somehow managed to ruin all of that for a moment of meaningless physical release with a stranger from the beach. She stomped outside to the paddock and looked to the cottage, but the woman, this Sloane, was nowhere to be seen.

She finished up her chores with the horses and climbed the hill back to the main house. A cold beer by the pool was exactly what the day called for. Maybe it would calm her nerves. And it certainly didn’t hurt at all that she had an unobstructed view of the rental cottage from a partially enclosed corner of the back patio. A little surreptitious stalking of her own wouldn’t hurt, right? She’d apologize tomorrow and tell the woman she could stay. Some small part of her hoped that maybe Sloane would be gone by then, but then she’d have to answer to her mother.

Two cold beers by the pool would be better than one. She sank sullenly into a lounge.

“Sloane.” Ava said the name aloud and thought that it seemed to fit, whatever that meant.

* * *

Early the next morning, Sloane crept to the spot she'd claimed and settled onto the grass to watch the morning light rise over the ridges. She'd spent the evening before kicking herself for what was clearly a terrible way to start her year of healing and recovery. And she had fumed at the woman's audacity to think that she had followed her here. The sex had been good, but not *stalking* good. OK, maybe it *was* stalking good, if she were the stalking kind. But she wasn't, and it was probably just that it had been so long since she'd last had sex anyway.

She considered her strategy for finding a new rental for the year. Airbnb seemed the best option for something that would last just long enough to find something more affordable and long term. Sloane was just beginning to rile herself up again about having to leave such a perfect place when she heard barking getting closer and closer. She sighed in exasperation. Sloane liked Charlie, but his owner—who'd no doubt be close behind the hound—left a little to be desired. She didn't even bother standing this time, and Charlie again plopped himself down onto Sloane's lap. Sure enough, the woman from the beach sauntered up the hill a minute or three later, all long limbs and swagger. Sloane cursed at how striking the woman was, and how confronting.

She rolled her eyes and readied herself for reproof but didn't wait for it to come. "I'm going to look for a new place today," she said quickly, determined not to give the woman time for accusations.

Clearly annoyed by her dog's overt affection, the woman gestured toward him as he sat in Sloane's lap and completely ignored Sloane's declaration. "He's normally not this obnoxiously clingy with strangers. My apologies." She sounded stiff and oddly formal.

Sloane scrunched up her face in confusion and umbrage and blurted out before she could stop herself, "But to say I'm a stranger isn't entirely true, is it?" She immediately regretted it and tried to sound conciliatory. "What I mean to say is, he's met me before."

The woman pressed her lips together, maybe in restraint, and took a long breath before continuing, "I'm Ava. As I said yesterday, Ellen is my mother. She owns the property here, and we're all just living in her world, apparently. I'm to apologize. And make you feel welcome." Her jaw clenched as she said the words, and she threw her hand out in an awkward gesture of welcome that was anything but.

Southern Lights

“Your mother is making you apologize to me?” Sloane couldn’t help but snort in disbelief. She waited for a response, but Ava only stood staring back at her with an unreadable expression. “OK,” Sloane said, unsure what else to say. “Saying you’re supposed to apologize and actually apologizing are two different things, but OK. And I’m Sloane, by the way. Now what?”

Ava responded with a tight-lipped, toothless smile and pointed across the property to the southwest. “The park is just there. On the other side of the far paddock, there’s Copper Creek and then the parkland. It’s great for walks and thinking and such. We’ve made a few tracks that join up to the main ones. There are hand-drawn maps in the notebook in the cottage.” Her tone sounded as if providing the information were causing her intense pain. And then: “Do you ride, by the way?”

“Um, I believe you know I do,” Sloane quipped in a deliberate attempt to provoke some reaction in Ava. The fake apology and rude demeanor irritated Sloane. But when Ava’s expression withered, Sloane thought better of her provocations. “I’m sorry, that was unnecessary. I haven’t ridden a horse since I was child. I do have a very healthy respect for them—I guess a healthy fear of them, really.” Sloane watched the horses grazing in the paddocks. “They are beautiful, though. Does this mean I can stay? Is your mother demanding that you let me stay?”

“It’s her property.” Ava shrugged.

Sloane closed her eyes and considered her options. She could stand firm in her indignation and leave the farm or she could swallow her pride and try to make this work. The latter was the obvious choice as she simply didn’t have the energy or the means of finding a new place on such short notice. And this place suited her needs so perfectly, with the exception of this...inconvenience.

“Listen, I’d be delighted to spend the year here in your mother’s world,” Sloane lied only a little. She wanted to be delighted and maybe that made the small fib more acceptable. “The cottage is lovely. Maybe you and I can agree to some sort of truce. Maybe we can start over? Pretend it never happened? I’ll stay out of your hair. I promise.”

Ava stood silently for what felt like minutes and minutes. Finally, she looked Sloane squarely in the eyes for the first time since that

morning in Sydney. She seemed to have made some decision. She pointed toward the paddocks and once again ignored Sloane's words.

"There's Hughie—he's my favorite fella. Bonza, just there. And Banger and Winnie out in the far paddock. They're all gentle, easy horses. Though, Banger is a bit of a clown and a troublemaker. Maybe you'll screw up the courage to ride while you're here." Ava pointed to each animal with obvious affection, though her words were strained.

Under normal circumstances, Sloane's lizard brain would find hilarity and irony in that last statement. She managed to filter her words this time and merely blinked back into Ava's gaze. "I promise I'll stay out of the way," she repeated. She genuinely hoped Ava believed her.

"Right, then. I'll let you get back to it. Mum is on holiday until the first week in February. So, if you need anything, I'm afraid you're stuck with me. I'm up at the main house. The number for the landline is in the notebook as well. As for the jet lag you're clearly experiencing, drink lots of water, and the sunshine does seem to help me recover more quickly from it."

The last sentence sounded more like a question in that characteristically Aussie way that had already come to amuse Sloane. A pinched smile played on Ava's lips as she started back across the acreage. Charlie very reluctantly also said his goodbyes, pawing at Sloane's thigh and dipping his head for a pat before bounding away with Ava.

Sloane settled back onto the grass and stared up again at a dull, gray sky that she was certain should be blue. This trip was certainly not starting out the way she'd hoped.

* * *

Ava took her coffee on the patio, sitting in the same spot she had the previous afternoon, the one from which she could see the cottage without being seen in return. Doubts and fears swirled in her mind. And then memories began to flicker like firelight. A never-faraway feeling of heaviness began to lurk in the background of her thoughts. Normally, it took days, sometimes weeks, for Ava to recognize its presence, let alone acknowledge it. But she sensed its stirring early this time.

Southern Lights

The light was still rising, and the sky to the east glowed in pinks and oranges. From where she sat, she could see Sloane stretched out where she'd been the last two mornings. She had one hand thrown over her eyes and the other curled around a mug nestled in the grass. Not once did she look toward the main house or search about the property looking for someone, looking for Ava.

Charlie, however, looked as if he might go and say hello again.

“No sir, don't you even think about it.” Ava side-eyed the dog and sipped her coffee. “But maybe she genuinely doesn't know who I am, Charlie? Or she's putting on an Oscar-worthy performance. The beach incident was an utter lapse in judgment. What the hell was I thinking? But...she truly may not know what I do for a living. How—how—disappointing, Charlie.”

She scoffed in disgust at the untimely emergence of her professional ego. To feel both simultaneously fearful and pride-bruised was absurd, but here she was, spying on someone she had accused of stalking and then feeling indignant that the woman didn't appear to recognize her. The heavy emotions from earlier expanded and stirred in the dark recesses and corners of her soul. She closed her eyes and turned her head to the slowly brightening sky. Without warning nor invitation, images of smooth, tawny-colored skin moved behind her eyelids. Goosebumps on that gorgeous skin.

Memories flooded her thoughts, of Amira's thin and delicate fingertips tracing unseen paths along her own blush-colored forearm and wrist. She opened her eyes and felt the shame creep in. Sometimes it was a brief visit, sometimes a longer one—but it always overstayed its welcome. And it was never welcome. Ava breathed deeply, trying to push away the whirling, angsty heaviness but it settled deep down in her abdomen. *A lingering visit, then*, she thought to herself. She sighed and closed her eyes against it.

Her mobile beeped and buzzed from the patio table, interrupting her dark thoughts and she was happy for it, until she saw the text from her mother:

7:46 a.m.: Have you apologised?

Liz Arncliffe

Ava rolled her eyes and thought that she'd rather deal with the shame and memories of a naked and writhing Amira than a lecture about the American up the hill.

7:48 a.m.: Yes, Mum.

7:49 a.m.: And you told her she must stay?

7:51 a.m.: Yes, Mum.

7:51 a.m.: Take her around to the shops. Show her around town. So that she knows you mean it.

“Oh my God, Charlie. She wants to me to show her around the shops. Is she fucking kidding? I'm not showing her around the shops.” Ava sat up stiffly and considered how to respond.

7:55 a.m.: Ava Wynn, I can feel your thoughts. Make her feel welcome.

Pretty sure I've made her feel welcome enough as it is, she thought.

8:02 a.m.: Ava Wynn James.

8:02 a.m.: Fine, Mum. Fine.

“Tomorrow, Charlie. I'll do it tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 3

I'D HOPED I'D SLEEP BETTER here. In an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar house, under a sky full of unfamiliar stars. Maybe it really is just the jet lag. No need to panic just yet. Please, tell me I didn't pack up my life, leave my friends and family, move to another hemisphere for the same insomnia and the same colorless and muted landscape.

Sloane still wasn't sleeping more than an hour or three each night, and it was a restless kind of sleep at that, full of the usual hauntings. It had been nearly twelve months since she'd slept through the night.

On that last night of good, sound sleep, Julia had been by her side. Julia always slept on her back with one arm thrown over her head. Unless she was spooning Sloane, but it would soon be a year since Sloane had been Julia's little spoon.

Four days after arriving at her new home, Sloane was still trying to figure out how to get the coffee maker to work. As it turned out, Aussies took their brews quite seriously. As she fumbled with the tech, she thought she really should get some hardcore exercise today—shake out the cobwebs. And the ghosts. She'd have to consult the *Lonely Planet* guide if she wanted to find trail recommendations that were away from the property and that would allow her to avoid running into Ava for a day or two. She also wanted to finally connect to the cottage Wi-Fi to find local running and cycling clubs. And she needed to purchase a road bike, a trail bike, and gear. She considered a swim in the ocean; she already had all she needed for that, and she knew where to find it. Maybe that was what she needed.

Sloane stared at the coffee maker. Julia would have known how to use the contraption without a second thought, and Sloane would already be sipping a hot mug of deliciousness. Instead, she was left to her own devices, and she mashed buttons and turned levers in no particular order. Through sheer, dumb luck, the machine began to sputter and spit. She'd have to pay more attention tomorrow morning so as to be able to reliably produce this outcome.

Her coffee finally in hand, she took the mug and a banana outside to watch the horses in the paddocks, soak up some sunshine, and plan her day. Charlie met her at the edge of the terrace, and she followed him to the knoll where she had begun each of the last three days.

It was occupied.

"You're in my spot," Sloane said, with a slight tone of indignation, to the long and lithe form stretched out in the sun.

Ava took her time pulling herself upright before opening her eyes to look at Sloane. "You've been here, what, three days, and this is your spot?" She raised her eyebrows, matching Sloane's indignation with her own. "You Americans...Good morning, by the way." She shook her head, clearly annoyed, but a smirk played at the corners of her lips, and Sloane wasn't sure what to make of the exchange.

Sloane closed her eyes to the absurdity of their situation and then decided to engage the banter. "That's fair, we are a brazen bunch, aren't we? But, I daresay, so are you. And good morning to you." She eased down, careful to keep Charlie between them this time. "Would you like a coffee? Or a banana? I'm afraid that's all I can offer. A visit to the grocery store is on my errand list for today. Or maybe tomorrow."

"No, thank you. I am fully caffeinated, and I've had brekkie. Did you have a good sleep?" Ava turned her face toward the morning sky, her eyes closed, expression relaxed.

Sloane tilted her head to the side in confusion, wondering at the sudden polite tone. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Slowly opening her eyes and shielding her face from the sun, she smiled uneasily at Sloane. "Did you have a good sleep? Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, sure." These little white lies were easy after nearly a year of them. "You?"

Southern Lights

“I did. I’m going to ride in a bit, but I wanted to check in first, see how you’re going. I see you’re still badly jet lagged.”

Sloane took advantage of the opening for some teasing, hoping to ease the tension. “Yesterday, I was pale. Now I look tired? What happened to the stereotype that Aussies are aggressively friendly?” She found she enjoyed poking at Ava.

“Was I not friendly enough for you the first time we met? Or was I not aggressive enough?” Ava’s expression was completely neutral, her tone even and cool.

“Um—” Sloane considered that provoking Ava was maybe not the direction to take this morning chat as she clearly wasn’t afraid to poke back. “Choosing to ignore that.”

“You started it.”

“Nope. You started it. You will forever and always have started it,” Sloane said with conviction.

Ava fought back a smile and failed. Sloane’s own edges softened.

She changed tack to avoid wherever this conversation might be headed. “But, yes, I am still badly jet lagged. I was thinking I should start getting myself together today. I need a good long run or swim. And I need to buy a bike. Any recommendations for good running spots? I’d be happy in the city or forest. But maybe true trail running would be best today. And a bike shop? Also, where are the best grocery stores? I mean, I could google all of this, I suppose. But, well, here you are. In my spot.”

Ava grinned as Sloane rambled on and then her eyes grew more serious. “Is it possible for us to start anew? Polite and neighborly at worst? Friendly, at best? Platonically, I mean.”

Sloane closed her eyes and sighed. “Did your mother send you?”

“Does it matter? She’s often right, even when I really don’t want her to be—especially when I really don’t want her to be.” Ava looked out over the ridge to the north as what seemed like resignation, or maybe surrender, washed over her features.

“Your mother definitely sent you. How is it that mothers still have such holds on us, even at our age?”

“It’s maddening and endearing all at the same time, isn’t it? How does your mum feel about your being here for such a long time?”

“Oh, she hates it. She’s convinced some great tragedy will befall her and I’ll be 10,000 miles away.”

They laughed together this time before Sloane continued. “I could really use someone polite and neighborly in my life. A year is long time for tension.” Sloane grimaced at the thought of trying to avoid Ava for a year.

“How about I just take you? On your errands, I mean. Not trail running—that sounds quite miserable—but around town to the shops? And we could get lunch. You look like you need a proper meal.”

Maybe they really could be friendly after all.

“Oh, so, now I’m pale, haggard, and gaunt. You do know how to make a woman feel good.” Sloane realized the double meaning before the words were completely out of her mouth. “Stop. Before you respond to that, just stop.” She laughed openly at herself this time and noticed that Ava too smiled at the awkward slip. Yeah, she liked making Ava smile. “What time shall we go then?”

“I’ll pick you up at noon. I’ll drive.” Ava stood and started down the hill, throwing a mischievous look her shoulder. “I’m not sure about your driving here yet.”

Sloane shook her head at the parting jab, flinging her response at Ava’s retreating back. “Smart. I’m not sure of it myself.”

She closed her eyes, breathed in the aroma of her coffee, and desperately wished she could get some damn sleep.

* * *

Ava had truly surprised herself with her offer to take Sloane around town. She had waited outside the cottage with the intention of having a polite conversation to satisfy her mum’s demands. The last thing she had expected was to engage in lighthearted and droll banter, but they had so easily fallen into it. There was clearly something about Sloane that had made Ava feel at ease at Bondi, and it had presented itself in a surprisingly different light here at the farm. Something about her new neighbor made Ava want to relax and to show off her hometown. And she was surprised to feel oddly open to a friendship. Or at least a neighborly acquaintanceship. Ava smiled, thinking about

Southern Lights

the exchange, wondering at her own perplexing reaction to Sloane and feeling mildly suspicious of her own judgment.

At noon, she picked Sloane up, and they zipped along the back roads of Bonogin and Reedy Creek. Ava took great pleasure in listening to Sloane try to pronounce the road and town names she saw on signage as they passed, especially with the ever-so-slight accent of the American South. She cheerfully answered Sloane's questions about traffic laws and road signs and symbols. Sloane seemed particularly wary of the clockwise roundabouts that were so common to the area, and so Ava was sure to drive slowly through those, giving Sloane time to observe and process the mechanics and flow of traffic. Ava felt useful. And she felt giddy. She tried to forget the way they had met and focused instead on being helpful and hospitable and even friendly. She discovered she had to put in less and less effort the longer the drive went on.

Their first stop was for a light lunch at one of Ava's favorite cafes. She had grown up with the proprietors, and their families were still close. They treated Ava as not only a regular customer but a friend—family even. As she expected, Maeve greeted Ava warmly with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Maeve looked Sloane over from head to toe before reaching out a hand as Ava introduced the two. "I've known Ava since she was a girl. My Deirdre once rode at Ellen's place almost every weekend. They stayed in heaps of trouble, those two. What brings you to visit the James' then?"

"I'll be teaching over at Ballard this school year. Ellen was kind enough to offer me the cottage through December."

"Only for a year, then?" She looked at Sloane intensely once more and then, "*Hmmm*. Maybe you'll like it well enough to stay. Let's get you two seated." She showed them to a table in a back corner, and Sloane sat across the table from Ava as Maeve made her way to the back of the cafe, leaving them to look over the menus.

When she returned, Ava decided on a grain bowl with greens and a soft-boiled egg and Sloane ordered avocado toast with poached eggs. Maeve approved of both their orders and asked Ava when she'd be off filming again and if there'd be another series of her last show. She asked

the question as if it were any other job, as if she were asking when the school year officially began. There was no fanfare, no exaltation.

“Yes, the third series for this one. And we start in late September,” Ava said with a hesitancy in her voice as her eyes dropped from Maeve’s to Sloane’s, gauging Sloane’s reaction to the question.

“And how long this time? Do you know yet? I know how hard it is for you to be away.” Maeve asked with compassion in her eyes.

“Eight weeks, most likely. But I’m hoping to convince the producer to compress my schedule a bit so I’m not gone quite so long.”

“Ah, good for you, dear. That probably feels an eternity as it is. Lunch will be right up.” She put her hand on Ava’s shoulder in a gesture of support and then disappeared again into the back.

“She’s adorable.” Sloane said simply, watching the older woman walk away.

“Adorable?” Ava was taken aback at Sloane’s description of Maeve. Ava had always respected and maybe even feared the woman a bit as a child. And she wondered at the fact that Sloane seemed to pay no mind to the exchange about Ava’s work.

“Yes, adorable,” Sloane said. “No?” she asked after a moment. “Is it culturally insensitive to refer to a woman of a certain age as adorable in Australia?” She leaned forward as if discussing something of great importance and sensitivity.

Ava leaned in conspiratorially and responded lightheartedly, “Don’t let her fool you. That woman is a fierce cyclone of a human being.”

“Sounds like she put you back in line quite a bit as a child.” Sloane leaned back and crossed her arms. “Yes, she’s adorable.”

“Don’t get any ideas; she’s happily married to Phil. You don’t stand a chance.”

At that, they both laughed, and Ava admitted to herself that they seemed at ease with one another. Friendship might be possible after all.

“Tell me about this series in Melbourne,” Sloane urged her. “Are you in the television industry? What do you do?”

That pulled Ava out of her thoughts. Sloane apparently hadn’t any clue at all about Ava’s career. “It’s a show called *Bleak City Gangland*.

Southern Lights

It's set in Melbourne. Have you heard of it? The show, not the city. Have you been there yet? To Melbourne, I mean." Ava was suddenly nervous, as if she was blathering on and making no sense at all.

"I'm sorry, I don't know the show. I haven't been to Melbourne yet. It is, of course, on my list to visit while I'm here. What do you do on the show? What is your job?"

Ava took note of the unnecessary apology and was surprised at the small sting of disappointment that Sloane didn't recognize her show. "I'm an actor. I play the morally questionable eldest daughter of a crime family leader." She tried to keep her voice flat. "And I'd like to hear the list of the places you wish to visit this year. I could make suggestions, if you'd like."

"I'd like that very much. I'll take all the help I can get. What platform streams the show? Obviously, I'll need to check out this *Bleak City Gangland*." She looked toward the kitchen as a server approached with their meals.

Ava leaned back to allow the plates to be set down and then thanked the server. She was reeling a bit from the two conversations they seemed to be maintaining simultaneously.

"BingeTV here. I forget which service picked it up in the States."

"Wait, that's why you thought I was stalking you? You're an actor? Shit. I'm sorry, I don't watch much TV. Well, I used to, but I haven't in quite some time. Completely culturally illiterate by now. But seriously, I'm not stalking you. I might have wanted to, you know, if I had known who you were..."

Ava smiled broadly as Sloane stumbled and stammered through her apology. Sloane's words slowed, and, for a moment, they simply held one another's gaze as Sloane's ears grew more and more pink.

"I'm making it worse, aren't I?" Sloane finally asked, her chest and cheeks rushing to catch the color on her ears.

"Not at all. You owe me no apology. On the contrary, I owe you one for accusing you of following me. Clearly, you had no idea. I do apologize—sincerely. I was being a bit much."

"Apology accepted. And thank you." Sloane looked at her untouched lunch on the table in front of her. "Our food is getting cold."

“Eat. And tell me where we’re headed next. What’s our next stop after lunch?”

“Bike store? Bookstore?” Sloane cut her toast into manageable bites.

“Pushbikes and books. You’re on.” Ava took a bite of her lunch and sat back in appreciation. “You’ve got to try this. It’s so simple, but the flavors are amazing.” She pushed the shallow bowl across the table.

Sloane simply eyed the dish and then locked eyes with Ava.

“Go on, then,” Ava encouraged her. “Wait, you don’t share food? Understandable after COVID. Or is it that I make you uncomfortable? You do know where my mouth has been.” She grinned impishly.

“Really? Did you really just say that?” Sloane finally relented and reached across the table to fork up a bite. Then, she, too, leaned back against her chair savoring the dish.

“Delicious, right?” Ava said enthusiastically. “We’re going to buy you a hat today too.” She smiled over the table at Sloane.

“Yes, yes, we’ll buy me a hat today.” Sloane all but rolled her eyes.

Ava grinned. “You’re gonna thank me.”

“You know what I’m really gonna thank you for? Grocery shopping with me,” Sloane confessed. “I haven’t gone yet, and I always find food shopping in a new place to be a bit overwhelming. It’ll be so much easier with you there.”

“What have you been eating?” Her expression likely showed her dismay. “You’ve been here for days.”

“Bananas, mostly. Oat bars. Melon. Trail mix. Coffee, but that was already in the cottage. And charcuterie—your mother left charcuterie.”

Ava blinked at her in disbelief. “This is unacceptable,” she stated flatly, gobsmacked that Sloane would willingly eat so meagerly over the past three days.

“You do grocery shop? Or does a big-time actor have someone do that for them?”

“I’ll have you know I do my own food shopping, thank you very much,” she said with contrived exasperation at Sloane’s teasing. “Well, sometimes I do my own food shopping. OK, so Mum does some of it here, and I have them delivered when I’m in Melbourne. But only because I’m so busy!”

Southern Lights

Sloane smiled, and Ava stopped short.

“I like that you seem not very impressed by my very minor celebrity, although I must admit that at least a part of me occasionally likes to be fussed about.”

“Let me watch this series, and then we’ll see about the fussing.” Sloane took a bite of avocado into her mouth.

They finished lunch in easy conversation about the various places Sloane wanted to visit, whether Sloane should buy a used car from a dealer or a private seller, and what their errands for the rest of the afternoon would be.

Afterward, Ava drove her to a bike shop in Currumbin, where Sloane purchased and arranged for both bikes, as well as a car rack, to be delivered to the cottage. Ava enjoyed helping Sloane gather all the gear she needed for cycling and trail riding.

Next, they walked to a bookshop, and Ava helped Sloane choose guidebooks about the flora and fauna of the area. Ava shared the locations of her favorite coffee shops and restaurants and bakeries along the way. She was bursting with pride as she spoke of her hometown and the people there. Sloane listened attentively to Ava’s incessant chattering about all things Gold Coast.

“You should definitely do a tourism campaign for Queensland—they’d never want for tourists again,” Sloane said as they were browsing a gear store for the hat Ava insisted Sloane buy. “Wait. Do people ever recognize you when you’re out like this?” It was as if she had only now realized that this was a possibility.

Ava handed Sloane a sand-colored felt Akubra and shrugged. “Very rarely. And not as often as when I was younger. Or living in LA ages ago. It happens more often in Melbourne and Sydney. If anyone does recognize me here on the Gold Coast, they typically don’t approach me. But in truth, I’m not out and about very often.”

Ava peered over Sloane’s shoulder into a full-length mirror as she tried the hat on. Warm cinnamon-colored eyes peered out from under the brim of the wide hat, and there was something vaguely balmy in their color against Sloane’s golden blonde, almost honeyed, hair. Ava wondered if the shop had its air con running because she was suddenly flushing.

“This one. Definitely this one.” She made eye contact in the mirror with Sloane, whose face was pinched with doubt. “Another color? Something darker maybe? But this style, it’s the one.”

“You choose the color. You’ll choose better than I will,” replied Sloane, still looking in the mirror. She paused. “Do you like it? Being an actor, I mean. Do you like the celebrity? When did you know that this was what you wanted to do? What’s your favorite part of your job?”

Ava smiled into the mirror at Sloane’s reflection, amused by her sudden interest in Ava’s career. It seemed a delayed reaction. “Oh, I knew as a child that I wanted to be an actor. My mother signed us up for children’s theater when we were very young—me and my older brother Thomas, I mean. She wanted us to be well-rounded, not just stomping around the horse paddock and riding clubs with Dad. I fell in love with acting. I’ve always known.” Ava searched for Sloane’s size in a fawn-colored hat of the same cut. *Fawn would bring out the color of those eyes*, she thought.

“It seems such a difficult profession to get into. You just...did it? Became an actor, I mean?”

“Well, I mean, not really, not in the way I think you mean. I worked hard in high school and then uni. I did stage plays and small bits here and there. It was hard work, and I was so very broke for much of my twenties. It’s always been hard work. I’m definitely not some A-list celebrity with an entourage and bodyguards and obscene paychecks, but my work pays the bills. And I like to think I’m good at what I do.”

“Right, but it’s worth it? Right? To you? It seems so foreign to me. And grueling, to be honest.” They walked side by side to the counter so Sloane could pay for the hat.

Surprised at Sloane’s comments, Ava stopped as Sloane walked a few steps ahead. People outside the industry rarely described being an actor in those terms. Most didn’t consider the long days, the insanely early call times, the time away from family, and the difficulty in finding and maintaining authentic relationships. Nor did the public ever consider the everyday actors like herself that never achieved fame and fortune but made the industry function.

Southern Lights

Ava considered herself to be one of those actors, though she had flirted with fame at various points in her career. Being a working actor could be exhausting, more often than not.

Sloane must have realized Ava was no longer beside her as she stopped and turned back.

Ava answered her earnestly. “It is—worth it. But it is also grueling, yes. That feeling, though, of nailing a scene, of getting to its emotional gist, of convincing the audience of the capital-T Truth of a scene—there is no feeling like that in the world. And I get to be someone different, something different with each project. Each project is a new challenge. I love that challenge.”

Sloane’s expression was, impossibly, both impassive and interested.

For reasons she didn’t quite understand, Ava added, “My big break in Hollywood did not have a Hollywood ending, though. But that’s a story for another day.”

She began walking again. “I do hate the vulnerability of it all, though, if I’m being honest—when you as a person become something that exists for public consumption. It’s something that has always been hard for me. I guess that’s why I live with my mother on a horse farm in the hinterland of the Gold Coast.”

Sloane creased her forehead as if in deep thought. “Performance is not an art form I’ve ever really been able to tap into, or even wanted to tap into. I find it utterly remarkable that there are humans in the world who do it well.”

When they reached the counter, Ava reached across on impulse and took the box from Sloane. “My treat. I insist. I am the one making you do this, after all.” She smiled widely and rifled through her bag for her wallet.

A faint blush tinted Sloane’s cheeks as she smiled sheepishly and whispered her thanks.

Their next and final stop was the food shop, where Ava helped Sloane stock her kitchen with lots of healthy fare, and a few indulgent treats before they drove back toward the farm.

* * *

After Ava dropped her off back at the cottage and they unloaded all her afternoon loot, Sloane laced up her sneakers. She was ready to set out for a good, long run along a trail Ava had told her about in Springbrook Park. Sloane knew her body and mind required the exercise as much as it had needed this afternoon's outing.

The trail in Springbrook was lovely—eucalyptus and oak trees towered over tree ferns and palms. Lovely, but all of it was muted and gray, almost as if Sloane were running through a heavy fog. She ran hard, pushing herself, testing the limits of her fatigued muscles still tight from twenty-four hours of travel earlier in the week. She pushed until her chest screamed, her breath went ragged, and she nearly wheezed. During these runs, when her lungs reached this point, when they fought to pull in another breath, Sloane wondered what Julia had felt in her final days, a machine breathing for her. And she prayed to every god she could conjure that Julia had felt nothing at all. But that thought was no consolation either.

Finally, she crested a ridge that overlooked a small hollow. Quieting her breathing, she searched around, listening for other trail runners or hikers. Hearing nothing but birdcalls, she released a cry of anguish into the thick of the vegetation and collapsed down onto the forest floor in a lump of protesting muscle, sticky sweat, and bone-crushing exhaustion. The birds screeched and squawked their displeasure back at her. She relaxed her shoulders, and she realized she'd been unconsciously pulling them upward toward her ears for days. They were tight and sore from holding her anxiety and angst. She then breathed in a deep sigh of emotional release that she felt all the way to her toes.

This was why Sloane ran. Or swam. Or cycled. This moment, no matter how ephemeral, was the reason she pushed herself. For those brief minutes, she felt her limbs tingling from exertion. Her throat and lungs were burning and there was a small stitch of pain in her side. The despair loosened its grip, if only for a short time. These moments brought her out of her head and into her body, and she lived only for this too-short respite. She desperately wanted to live for more—that's what Julia would want for her—but Sloane would settle for a night's sleep, and she hoped today's exertion would earn her that.

Southern Lights

It did not. Sloane had been optimistic the nightmares wouldn't follow her across the States and across the Pacific. But, like the gray and the quiet, they had. She was sorely disappointed in her own lack of creativity, giving her the same recurring nightmare, as well as keeping her up half the night, several nights a week. It had been happening for months and months, and at this point she just craved some variety in her dreams. She also felt a bit insulted and indignant that her subconscious mind gave her such uncomplicated symbolism to work with.

Sloane chided herself for the workings of her mind. Her trademark irreverence was by far her favorite and most successful coping mechanism. But the recurring nightmare was truly grating. And, while it wasn't terrifying in an acute sense, Sloane always woke the following day feeling cold and unsettled, her thoughts rattled, her skin prickly with anxiety, and her mind jumpy.

In the dream, she'd always awaken in the dark with a start, lying in her bed back in the States, fear and dread deep in her belly. She'd sit for a beat, trying to settle her heart rate, steady her breath, and build the courage to reach out for the lamp on the nightstand. She'd flip the switch—and nothing.

She'd lie back, her muscles tensing, heaviness and dread settling through her body. She'd stretch far to the other side of the bed to the opposite lamp. She'd flip the switch. And nothing.

She'd sit back against the headboard, waiting for her eyes to adjust in the dark. But they never did. The darkness enveloped her and everything around her, but she could hear the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen, so she knew the electricity was functional. She'd convince herself she had to climb out of bed, fearful—not of something or someone but of the darkness itself. She'd check the overhead light switch in the bedroom. Nothing. She'd check the light switch in the hallway. Nothing.

She'd force herself to walk to the electrical panel in the dark, one silent step at a time. She'd run her finger along the circuit breakers, hoping one had flipped in the night. As always, each was in its correct position. That was when a potent combination of fear and dread and resignation would grip Sloane's body. She'd find her way back to

her bed, crawl in, and lean back against the headboard, waiting for her pupils to dilate so she could make sense of the dark. But they never did. The chaos in her core would settle into a chronic kind of fear. She'd resign herself to darkness. It was always at that point in the dream that Sloane woke up. She'd immediately begin turning on all the lights. Sometimes she cried as she did this.

On this night, after turning every light on in the cottage, she snuggled down onto the sofa in the living room with a heavy blanket even though the cottage was quite warm. She floated in and out of sleep. Later in the day, she'd have to purge the nightmare and its accompanying darkness that relentlessly pulled at her edges, trying to lay claim to all of her. Once again, punish the body to reward the mind and the heart with emotional release—a grueling run or swim was what she needed. It was the only constant she knew now. And this one would need to be particularly brutal. Today was her forty-third birthday. If she didn't get up and about, Julia would be disappointed. To have Julia disappointed in her would be a bridge too far, even in this darkness.

* * *

In the days after their afternoon together, Ava hadn't seen Sloane. She'd sent one text—a funny meme about the Aussie phrase *fair dinkum* that she'd hoped Sloane would find funny. There'd been no response.

She felt a pang of doubt and insecurity each time she looked at her phone, but she couldn't articulate why. She sat on the patio in the stillness of early morning, drinking strong tea and eating plain toast. Her hair was in a loose bun, and she was still in her pajamas. Charlie curled at her feet and snored loudly. From where Ava sat, she saw that the lights were on in the cottage, all of them, it seemed. At least Sloane hadn't abandoned the rental altogether. And then she wondered if Sloane had Googled her IMDB page or maybe watched a few episodes of her series. Any of her work, really.

“I think she seemed interested in my career but not really impressed. Charlie, she's a hard one to read.”

Southern Lights

The dog stopped his snoring at the mention of his name but made no effort to move.

She huffed in disappointment at her own internal contradictions, but this was slightly unfamiliar territory for Ava, and she couldn't decide if she liked it or not. Usually, if someone asked about her profession, they grew excited and animated to find out she was an actor. They normally asked odd questions about other celebrities, *real celebrities*, that Ava had worked with. They asked what it was like, how much money she made, what her next project would be, what the kissing scenes were really like, about any drama on set. They normally asked all sorts of invasive or off-putting questions. Sloane had not.

Sloane had seemed generally turned off by the potential salaciousness of the television industry, opting instead for questions about the craft itself. For that, Ava had a deep appreciation. But it had also inexplicably damaged her pride that Sloane wasn't more...dazzled by her.

There was that heaviness deep in her chest again and she realized that her doubt wasn't really doubt at all. The shame she'd been ignoring spread around her heart and down into her gut, creeping and clinging, heavy and dripping, like wet wool. Sudden thoughts of Amira sprang to mind, and Ava threw her head back, eyes to the sky, as if searching for something to save her. She'd almost been successful in ignoring shame's arrival days earlier. But it hadn't gone anywhere—its strategy was one of persistence—always unbothered in its wait for her to engage.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

SOUTHERN LIGHTS

BY LIZ ARNCLIFFE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com