

Lisa K. Stephenson

LATE BLOOMER

Awakening from her nap, Alicia felt strange, sluggish. She knew there was a reason she stopped drinking hard liquor in the middle of the afternoon. As she turned around and squinted her eyes, she read the time. 3:44 p.m. She had not heard any commotion, which meant the ladies had not yet returned home. She was regretting the decision to remain back at the cabin. She felt as though she was allowing a man who had broken her heart time and time again to win, even if he weren't around to do it.

Alicia arose from her bed. She hated that bed, it was nothing like the mattress she had at home and already she felt her back beginning to hurt. As she stood, she sorted her outfit for the evening, showered, and headed out to face the world. And by the world, she meant the painfully attractive chef. She stepped lightly in her ocean blue strapless maxi dress, her hair in a loose bun, her makeup light and her skin glowing. She smelled of Dior J'adore, a scent which over the years had become her signature,

Angelo had not yet taken notice to her; he was seated on the sofa on the other side of the wall with the fireplace, nibbling on snacks and reading through a magazine that he seemed quite immersed in. Alicia, standing behind him, cleared her throat, startling him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," she lied. She found this to be quite hilarious as he had clearly been comfortable. He removed his shirts, exposing his toned biceps. Alicia was fascinated. Lifting her dress she stepped lightly, joining him on the couch as she set aside his chips and magazines.

"Maybe we should talk," she suggested. Angelo blushed as her beauty continued to blind him.

He simply could not focus, and without thinking, he said, "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." Again, he wished he could retract his statement, as he feared her leaving once again, but this time was different. Alicia yearned for some affection; she had not made love to her husband in over two years. She was in need of it, and Angelo seemed perfect. As her silence began to worry him, he added, "I know that I am being completely inappropriate, but I know Nathan, and if what you're

telling me is true, a man like that doesn't deserve a woman as beautiful and as charming as you," Angelo said. It was the passion in his eyes, the meaning behind every word, and his soft approach that made her lean in and give him a kiss. Every single bone in her body desired him, but she could not bring herself to explore his manhood, and so, she arose,

"Can you show me to those French delicacies?" she said, smiling. Angelo happily obliged as he stood, bowing and making a pathway for her to pass he motioned for her to head into the kitchen. Once on the other side, Angelo did not bother to put his shirt on, he was in the mood to show Alicia just what she'd been missing. Angelo, turning on the oven, began by taking her hand and walking her towards the counter where he grabbed her waist and sat her on top. A few minutes later the Coquilles Saint-Jacques were now heated to perfection, he reached into the oven after applying his oven mittens, removing them and the pan, Angelo standing between her legs, parting them with his torso, slicing into the Coquilles Saint-Jacques creating bite-sized pieces. Alicia was enjoying every moment.

Angelo's lips kissing her delicately, he then said,

"Close your eyes and open your mouth." Alicia did as she was told, feeling the warm delicacy touch her tongue. Closing her mouth, she felt Angelo's finger, sucking the taste from his fingertips, removing his finger Angelo took pleasure in watching as she began to chew slowly.

"This—is—amazing," she said, reaching for his hand, as she placed the tip of his index finger back into her mouth licking and sucking it gently after opening her eyes. Alicia waited for the next serving and seconds later she had received it. Alicia felt confident, a feeling she thought she had lost, as she reached in to kiss Angelo passionately on the lips. He reciprocated and their moment was blissful, filled with peace and admiration.

"I respect you," he said. Alicia continued to pull him towards her.

“I am a Christian woman and my vows are everything to me, but Lord knows I just want to ask for forgiveness,” she stressed.

Their moment was soon interrupted by the ladies as Abigail stepped inside,

“Well, well, well,” she teased, standing by the front door.

Angelo and Alicia panicked. Quickly the two looked to scatter as Angelo searched frantically for his chef’s coat and Alicia hopped off the counter, standing in an awkward position for she had no idea what else to do. “Welcome back,” she said nervously. But Abigail was not pleasant; instead, she stood aside as the remaining ladies now piled in. Angelo retrieved his coat and now looked like the professional he was hired to be. Abigail struggled to remove her garments as she couldn’t help but feel disappointed.

“Welp, another Black woman loses to the Spanish,” she mumbled. Noel knitted her brows as she overheard.

“What?” she questioned.

“Oh, those two, they’re fucking now,” Abigail said as she made her way up the stairs. Noel was not accustomed to Abigail showing signs of frustration, and so decided to brush it off as pure sarcasm. Alicia greeted everyone as she trembled and hoped that no one would have noticed her brief moment of weakness. But once Abigail brushed past her, shoving her slightly, this confirmed she was doomed. Angelo quickly took notice and arose to object, but Alicia begged him not to as she mouthed the words, “Please don’t,” and continued to assist the women with removing their gear.

Flashback

It had been two months since the robbery, and as Noel turned the key to Frances's first-floor apartment, the sweet scent of her aromatherapy hit Noel's nostrils like a cool breeze on a summer day! Lavender, to be exact. The spacious twelve hundred square foot apartment had 12-foot ceilings, two bedrooms, a washer and dryer, and was two blocks from the mall house in central Harlem. The apartment came equipped with slate matte appliances, granite counter tops, ceiling fans, glass tile backsplash in the kitchen, and best of all an 11x9 square foot bedroom Noel could call her own. As she entered the front door, she placed her keys on the kitchen counter to her right. Her bedroom was to the left, and the walk-in closet, now empty, was all that she could have imaged plus more. Frances and Noel shared a conjoining bathroom, with Frances's room closest to the patio area found to the rear of the building. The dining room was large, 12x15 square feet with a flat screen television, cable, and a three-piece dark blue leather sectional. As Noel watched movies, she would see Frances just in the kitchen in front of her whipping together her famous sweet potato pie.

Noel was home.

Four short steps and she was standing in the middle of the kitchen, raiding the refrigerator for something, anything, to eat or drink aside from Cognac, lemon, or Poland Spring. No success. They were the worst bachelorettes, neither of them knowing how to cook, clean properly, or even shop for adequate furniture Noel was reminded each time she plopped onto the navy-blue bean bag located closest to the kitchen island. The same island where stools are supposed to go. But she dared not complain, she felt happy for the first time in a long time, and with fall now approaching, Frances was preparing to head back to school to teach the children of the third grade. Noel had spent another unsuccessful day searching for a job, and with no luck, her money was beginning to run out after contributing monthly to rent, furnishings, and replenishing her clothing.

Immediately it dawned on her: this is what struggling felt like. With each passing day, Noel thought of Nathan and worried that he had no idea where she was or even how to find her. Kenneth never left her mind, and although she and Abram never had a chance for that date, she missed him, too. She had sequestered herself from the outside world, socially, as she focused on strengthening her mental health, getting a job, and finding her inner peace again.

Noel now had a cellular phone she absolutely despised, the thought of paying over a hundred dollars a month to communicate with her friends, to her, was an absolute waste of money. Money she could have been using to buy clothes or repay Frances the loan she had borrowed. She was feeling defeated. Noel began to do the one thing she always did when she was feeling down on her luck, bite her nails and fondle her shoulder-length ponytail as the sound of keys began to rattle in the door. It was Frances returning home.

The night was coming down quickly and there she was, the woman of the hour Noel thought as she continued to sit by the kitchen island.

“Well, don’t you look.... pitiful,” Frances said as she made her way inside, tilting her head as she found herself standing in the middle of the kitchen. Her goal—same as Noel’s had been—food.

“What the fuck? Why are we so broke?” she cried as she opened the refrigerator, holding it open as if keeping it open and staring inside would make food appear. Noel sauntered into her bedroom as Frances closed the refrigerator door and began to prepare herself for bed. Standing now by her bedroom threshold and fiddling with a piece of thread she’d removed from her clothing, she could not help but stare at Frances. She is gorgeous, she thought.

“Maybe we can order UberEATS or Door Dash?” Noel finally said. Frances was now in the bathroom taking a shower.