

THE WEEKEND RETREAT

A Novel

Tara Laskowski



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For my brother Mike,
who's absolutely nothing like the siblings in this book. (Thank god.)



W-JKA BREAKING NEWS

Tragedy strikes at Van Ness Winery

SUNDAY, October 15—Multiple people have been reported dead at the Van Ness Winery after an altercation late Saturday night, our Eyewitness Team reports. Police were dispatched around 1:00 a.m. on Sunday morning after a 9-1-1 call from the estate's main house, but they were delayed hours getting to the scene because of the torrential rainstorm that flooded Rte. 8 and many of the small roads leading up to the winery.

Our news team is on-site but has not been able to verify details with officials, who are still investigating the scene. It appears the damaged substation in Parnell affected power to the estate as well as a number of neighboring homes and businesses in the Finger Lakes area.

This tragedy is the latest to befall the Van Ness family, whose matriarch, investor and philanthropist Katrina

Van Ness, died earlier this year of pancreatic cancer at the age of sixty-eight.

The Van Ness winery, known for producing high-quality, award-winning wines, has been owned by the Van Ness family for several generations. The family started the business in the 1950s, after selling their Arizona-based copper mining company founded by Benson Van Ness. The 985-acre winery and estate is now managed by the Van Ness siblings, who live full-time in New York City. Their family investment office owns interests in multiple different real estate holdings and industrial and manufacturing enterprises. The siblings are believed to have been visiting the estate for the weekend for a family celebration.

We will report more as details are confirmed.

THURSDAY

Two Days before the Party



LAUREN

Ever since Zach told me about The Weekend, it's all I've been able to focus on. Most people would naturally be at least a little nervous to meet their significant other's family for the first time.

But most people aren't dating a Van Ness.

"Earth to Lauren." Zach snaps his fingers, grinning over at me. He left work early to get on the road sooner and didn't have time to change, so he's still wearing his suit, purple tie slightly askew but knotted even after hours of driving.

"Sorry," I say, tugging the ends of my hair. "Zoning out."

"You look like I'm driving you to your death," he says, then grabs my hand and squeezes. "Don't worry. I promise it'll be fun. Even if my family's there."

All I can see out my window are trees and fields and cows, my cell phone bars ticking steadily down. We must be close. Zach is taking care on the steep, curvy roads. One bad turn could send our car into a deep ditch or crashing into a thick tree trunk.

It's so beautiful up there, my best friend Maisie said when I told her about the invitation. She had that wicked look in her eye. All the rolling hills. A vineyard. Starry sky. Super romantic. Perfect place to propose. My stomach flips at the thought, and I breathe

in deep. This weekend is not about us. It's a birthday party for Zach's older siblings, Harper and Richard, the twins, an annual tradition to celebrate at the family's winery. I can't get ahead of myself.

We drive up a winding gravel road, through patches of dense trees. Taller ones have already gone barren for the winter, but some of the smaller trees arch over the road, their branches meeting and entangling like fingers, blotting out the remaining light.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now approaching the famous Van Ness estate," Zach says in a booming voice as the car's headlights flick on. "Please, no photographs, and keep all hands and feet inside the moving vehicle at all times."

Zach had told me the estate was large—a thousand acres—but I didn't grasp what that meant until the tunnel of trees ends and the view opens to a sprawling expanse of green fields and rolling hills, stretching endlessly against the purple-hued sky. We cross a small stone bridge that extends over a stream, then bump along a rocky road. The vineyards creep closer to us now, eerie in their precise organization, each plant in a perfect row. We're inching toward winter, and all the grapes must have already been picked for the season, pressed and bottled, because the vines are bare and withered.

When I first moved to New York and waited tables at an Italian restaurant, we served the Van Ness wine. I remember those dark purple labels, the name stamped big and bold on the front. A brand that said, *We are too good for you*. But Zach is nothing like that, like the Van Nesses you read about online. Sometimes I forget he's part of that family in the day-to-day rhythm of our lives. He doesn't talk about them much, offers the scantest of information, or cracks a joke, or completely changes the subject when I bring them up. All I know of them is from the press, fleeting and superficial, like the pages of a

glossy magazine, but hazy enough that I can imagine slicing open my finger on the sharp edges if I'm not careful.

"Tell me about them," I say now, when there's no evading the topic.

He glances over at me. "My family? What more do you need to know?"

"I don't know. How can I win them over so they all love me forever and ever?" I say, trying to hide my nerves.

He laughs. "They're impossible to win over."

"Oh perfect," I say. "That makes it easy then."

"Nah, they aren't that bad. They're...particular is all."

We head up a slight incline. To the right, there's a gravel path marked Private—Staff Only. We pass it and stop in front of a large metal gate. Zach rolls down his window, fetches a key card from the glove compartment. "We had this installed years ago for extra security," he says. Once the machine reads his card, the gates swing open soundlessly. I turn to watch them rotate back and slam into place.

As we round a corner, I finally catch a glimpse of the house, a stone mansion, stoic on the hill. The long driveway curves up to an overhang in front, flanked by a series of round potted trees.

"Here we are," says Zach as we pull up. He shuts off the car, taps the digital clock on the dashboard. "And on time for dinner, too. Elle will be pleased."

My stomach does another flip.

Breathe deep.

Project confidence.

They're going to love you.

I get out. The air is chilly—it's dropped at least ten degrees since we left the city. I wrap my arms across my body.

The massive wooden front door opens, and an older man walks out, gray hair and beard, a deep purple polo shirt with the Van Ness logo stitched on the pocket, two flutes of sparkling wine in his hands.

“Bill! You are the man.” Zach trades him the keys to the car for the glasses. “Lauren, Bill and his wife Linnet have been taking care of the estate—and us—since I was a snotty-nosed kid.”

As Bill heads for the trunk to unload our baggage, I survey the house. My eyes follow the three short steps up to a wide entryway with pillars, to the archway above the door, and then outward to the wings on either side. Greenery climbs up the stonework between the windows, and I imagine Bill must trim it often to keep it so nice. I touch a pillar next to me and feel its cool smoothness.

“Where’s everyone else?” Zach asks Bill. For him, this is business as usual. I doubt he even notices the grandness anymore.

“Oh, they’re around,” he says. “Miss Elle says dinner at 6:30, and you can all meet in the library.”

I smooth down the gold silk top Zach picked out for me, hugging and hiding in all the right places, like expensive clothes do. What would my parents say if they saw me? They would never guess I’d be weekendending with a famous family like this. They never thought I’d make it in New York, thought I’d come crawling back begging to return to my night shift writing obituaries at our small-town paper.

But I’m never going back.

I take a sip of the sparkling wine. The bubbles pop, cold and hard against the back of my throat.

HARPER

I gaze at myself powering away on the bike in the mirrored wall of the gym. I always loathed the way Mother designed this gym—who wants to watch herself sweat?—but it turns out it can also be validating to see yourself, no filters, all angles.

“You definitely do not look thirty-five,” I say to myself.

“You’re modest, too,” calls Lucas, upside down, from across the room.

I climb off the bike and pat my face with a towel as I walk over to him. My quads are burning, but I squat down next to my husband anyway, run my finger along his stubble.

He’s hanging in his gravity boots for his spine decompression therapy. I like when he’s like this, tethered up and vulnerable. How easy it would be to pick up one of the weights and slam it down on his neck, crush his windpipe.

I stand. My murderous thoughts have definitely been on an uptick lately. Part of it is being back here at Mother’s house. The heavy drapery and the gold statues, like we are throwback 1680s French royalty. Everywhere with the Herend ceramic cats and dogs, Versace vases gathering dust, thick Persian carpets. Even the gym can’t escape gold-plated spotlights in the ceiling and a goddamn chandelier.

This house is a behemoth, needy and wanting, and Mother always enjoyed feeding the monster. But it's angry and sullen without her, listless, the shadows in the corners deeper and longer.

"You need to get out of those things. It's nearly time for dinner," I tell my husband.

Lucas pulls himself up, unlatches his boots from the pole, and flips himself down and upright. His face is beet red, his eyes puffy.

"I don't know how you can stand that," I say.

"Good for the back." He stretches upward. I hear the crack. "Besides, these boots are the closest thing I'll get to skiing this weekend."

I ignore his comment. He's still not over the fact that I canceled the ski trip he'd planned for my birthday. It didn't matter that *he's* really the skier. *You seriously would rather go there?* he'd asked me. *With your family?*

Of course, I said, but he knew I was lying. He knows how I feel about this place. My brothers love the estate, but my memories of summers here are complicated. All these walls do now is remind me of Mother's games, challenges that were always impossible for me to win, as if she'd set them up that way.

When she was alive, it was a tradition none of us could break—one long birthday weekend at the estate. We'd sometimes bring friends from the city, one or two each for Richard and me. Mother always tried to plan a few surprises for us. When we were kids, it was horseback riding or boat rides or, one year, a full-on circus with a tent and acrobats and a baby tiger we all got to pet until it tried to bite my friend's arm. As we got older, casino nights or live bands. And always, the nighttime games and fireworks. Once Mother got sick, though, the birthday weekend was a quieter affair, with Mother telling stories about traveling around Europe and doling out too much wine and unsolicited advice.

I'd planned on stopping it this year.

But then things changed.

I move closer to the mirror and pull the collar of my T-shirt down. In the reflection, the bruise is nearly gone now, just a faint greenish-blue outline that will barely be visible when I wear my jumpsuit tonight.

"Wear your navy suit to dinner. It'll complement my outfit," I say as I trace the bruise with my fingers.

"I still don't get why I have to wear a suit at all," Lucas says, holding a push-up. "It's just your family."

"Because it's tradition," I snap and turn away from the mirror. "We always dress up the first night for dinner."

He knows this. It's part of the package, putting up with our families' various persuasions. I put up with his family's annual beach white-out parties and cornhole tournaments. Looking nice for dinner for mine hardly seems like a big ask.

Lucas raises his hands. "Fine, fine. I just hope we get some time to just chill. You know how Elle gets about these kinds of things..."

He doesn't need to finish that sentence. My sister-in-law has always been a type A perfectionist, desperate to please—and anxious for control. This is her element, planning events, making a list and checking it twice. She prides herself on being detail-oriented, and for everyone around her, it's exhausting as hell.

I'm fine to have drinks and dinner, and I'll even smile cheerfully for the inevitable group photo. But she can't expect us all to hang out every second and sing songs by the fire. If this weekend is really supposed to be about relaxing, then we shouldn't have to deal with one another the whole time. What I need is the escape, and if Mother's house is good for anything, it's at least good for hiding away.

ELLE

I thought I forgot to pack my pill case, but here it is, under Richard's toiletry bag in our suitcase. With relief, I unroll it, pull out the CBD tincture, squeeze a few drops (and then a few extra) under my tongue. It should take effect before dinner. The edge should be good and gone by the time Harper gets her forked tongue going.

Yes, this and just a little bit of wine and I'll be good to go.

While Richard's in the shower, I run over my mental checklist again. Family time tonight and tomorrow, the big party on Saturday. We all deserve a little fun. Especially Richard. He's taken it extra hard losing Mom, burying himself in work. I want this birthday to be special, as she'd have made it. I've been in this family long enough to know there's nothing more sacred than a Van Ness tradition.

I step over to the window. Clouds are gathering, though it's not supposed to rain tonight. Bill says a big storm is coming, that the main road out of here might flood over. I'm hoping it'll hold out until after the party, and we'll be able to leave Sunday morning before it gets really bad. I would hate to have to move everything inside. I have a vision for how the terrace will look, how the food and drink stations will flow, where

everyone will gather. And with our friends coming from the city, I want to show off the spectacular views, make sure the drive is worth their while.

I pick up the CBD tincture, a few more drops on the tongue, and turn from the window as Richard steps out of the bathroom, steam drifting behind him, towel wrapped around his waist. I slide the bottle quickly back into my pill case and pop a mint in my mouth. I've been using my CBD more and more lately and I don't want him to ask questions.

"Zach's here," I say brightly. I'd spotted his car in the driveway.

But Richard doesn't answer. He's using another towel to dry his hair, whistling a tune, grabbing for his phone. He probably has work on his mind. He always gets ideas in the shower, rushes out to make notes before they dissipate with the steam.

Richard's the steady one of the family—the steerer of the ship. It's what drew me to him, his stability, his predictability. We work well together. Everyone can rely on us, always. For the most part, this is how I prefer things—I know Richard will do what I expect him to—but sometimes I wish we were the spontaneous couple who showers together before dinner and shows up late holding hands, laughing, much to everyone's irritation.

Richard locks his phone and walks it over to the charging station. "You forgot to pack my new shaving cream."

Dammit.

I encircle him from behind, lay my cheek against his back. He's still damp, but I don't mind. I like the smell of his body wash, woody and masculine. "I'm sorry."

"I knew I should've done it. I've been breaking out from the other one," he says. Which I know, because I'm the one who recommended the new brand—free of dyes and fragrances that irritate his skin. His comment is somewhere between a rebuke of himself and of me. He's always too hard on himself. I offered to pack for him so he'd have more time to work. He's taken on

most of the responsibilities of the family business this past year. But I won't let him start out on the wrong foot this weekend.

"Did you think any more on the candle thing?" I push the error aside and lean into his weight. "I know you like to make a wish, but I just worry it's going to ruin how beautiful the cake looks."

"I'd be fine without candles, but it's whatever Harper wants."

Harper. Of course. This is how it always is when they're together. We have to endure their meaningful looks across the room and all the stories about how they can read each other's minds. I don't know how Zach's lived with it all these years.

Richard steps away, opens the closet, and tugs his pants off the hanger. I made sure to have them delivered to our town house yesterday, freshly pressed from the cleaners. "You invited Victor and his wife to the party, right?"

"If I left them off, I'd never get invited to another one of Alicia's Sunday brunches," I joke. I would be perfectly fine if I never had to sip another mimosa with Alicia Hastings and her friends, but Victor is on the board of our investment company, so we must keep in their good graces.

"Now that would just be a *tragedy*," Richard says with a small smile as he swipes his deodorant, always three times under each arm.

"I'm so glad we're reviving the old birthday tradition," I say, fiddling my diamond earrings through their holes. "So many surprises in store for you."

"And Harper," he adds, picking up his phone again.

"And Harper," I repeat.

He tucks in his shirt, zips up his pants, and threads a leather belt through the loops. Whisks a comb through his hair and slides his wallet in his back pocket, always on the right-hand side. He'll wait to put on his suit jacket until he's heading downstairs so it doesn't wrinkle. And then he'll take it off halfway through dinner and hang it carefully on the back of a chair.

My husband is a creature of habit, a man of rules and regulations. I've been with him long enough that I know them all.

He fetches his glasses off the nightstand, slips them on, blinks as his world comes into focus. He nods his approval at my short black dress and long hair, which I've blown out into loose waves the way he loves it. "You look gorgeous, as usual."

"Thank you, my darling." I kiss his cheek, ignore the red blotches from the shaving cream.

I check my watch. "About time for drinks?"

I've also been in the Van Ness family long enough to know all their rules, traditions, quirks, desires. I know which flavor cakes to buy, which china patterns to use, which political issues they approve of, how to properly let a bottle of wine aerate. I know how to get under their skin and when to dodge the bullet. I know their sensitivities, their soft spots, their weaknesses.

I know their secrets, too.

THE PARTY GUEST

I like driving in the country. The long, quiet roads, especially at night. Gives you plenty of time to think as the miles pass with nothing but your headlights to guide you through the shadows.

And I have a lot of thinking to do.

I've waited patiently for this moment. Another person might've rushed things, acted too soon, but that would've been a mistake. I knew I had to hold out for just the right time, the right place, the right moment—there's a comfort in the plotting. A pleasure in slipping into their world, learning all about them. Gathering evidence and information.

And now here it is. This weekend. The birthday party.

Some people hate birthdays. They don't like the reminder that time, tick-tock, is clicking steadily forward, always moving, and they can't escape it. They loathe the thought of getting old, of things failing them—their eyesight, their joints, their mind, their beauty.

Me? I've always loved birthdays. A tradition, a milestone. A reminder of how far you've come and how far you've yet to go.

Another year ahead to right the wrongs that have been committed around you—to you. Because no matter how much you

try to be good, no matter how hard you try to go about things honestly, there are always people who just can't play nice.

It's so dark up here in wine country. I must go slow, watch out for wildlife that could dart into the road. Anything can be lurking in the darkness, ready to lunge out. Terrible things happen in the blink of an eye. One moment everything's fine, and the next, the world comes crashing down around you.

But I'll drive carefully. I'll arrive safe and sound.

There's a big storm coming, and I've got everything I need—rain boots, raincoat. Night-vision goggles.

Finally, the last item, right here next to me on the passenger seat, wrapped and ready to be delivered—the birthday gift.

For what's a party without gifts?

The Van Ness family knows how to throw a good party. They love to flaunt their wealth. They'll pull out all the stops. Good food, good wine, decorations, hospitality. All the details accounted for. They'll have planned for everything.

Well, nearly everything.