



the
lemonade
year

A NOVEL

AMY WILLOUGHBY-BURLE



LOVE. LOSS. AND SECOND CHANCES.

Nina's once-sweet life has unexpectedly turned sour. Her marriage is over, her job is in jeopardy, and her teenage daughter is slipping away from her. Then her father dies and issues with Nina's mother come to a head; her estranged brother, Ray, comes home; and her sister, Lola, is tempted to blow a big family secret out of the water. They say the truth will set you free, but first it will make a huge mess of things.

All Nina's got left is her final photography assignment shooting images for the book *32 Ways to Make Lemonade*. Well, that and the attention of a younger man, but Oliver's on-again-off-again romantic interest in her ebbs and flows so much she is seasick. And then Jack, her ex-husband, shows up, wanting to get back together.

As Nina struggles to find a way through her complicated relationships and to uncover her true path, she discovers just how valuable a second chance at life and happiness can be.

– Includes –
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QUESTIONS



Book design © Shadow Mountain
Art direction: Richard Erickson
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SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

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*For my husband and my children.
For my parents and my siblings.
For my family and my friends.
I thank God for you all.*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Willoughby-Burle, Amy, 1972– author.

Title: The lemonade year / Amy Willoughby-Burle.

Description: Salt Lake City, Utah : Shadow Mountain, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017040905 | ISBN 9781629724119 (paperbound)

Subjects: | LCGFT: Domestic fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.I57767 L46 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017040905>

Printed in the United States of America

PubLitho, Draper, UT

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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When someone buys two dozen lemons, a box of tissues, and a whole carrot cake at midnight, you have to figure something is wrong. The cake is for the minute I walk in my condo. The tissues are for my father's funeral. The lemons mean I'm losing my job.

I'm Nina Griffin, food stylist and photographer. One of those people who artistically arranges food and then takes pictures of it. The pictures that make almond-crusted salmon look like the best almond-crusted salmon with blanched, baby asparagus that ever was. The pictures that are meant to inspire you to cook, despite the knowledge that you'll never be able to recreate the dish the way it appears in the book. Yeah, that's what I do.

I make it all seem possible.

It's just a ruse.

Right now my publishing house has me working on *32 Ways to Make Lemonade*. Seriously? Are there really thirty-two ways to make lemonade? This is why I think my job may be in jeopardy.

But I don't have time to worry about that. It's past midnight, and I'm driving home from the grocery store with a carrot cake strapped down by the seat belt on the passenger's side and there's a white owl standing in the middle of the road. I get closer and closer but all the bird does is swivel its head around like that kid in the *Exorcist* and stare at me. I start slowing down, sure that at

any moment the bird will lift off like it's capable of doing. But it doesn't. It just stands there, eyeing me, daring me. I fishtail to a halt, reaching my right hand out to catch the cake if it comes loose from the seat belt, while I watch as the front end of the car passes over the owl until he's out of sight.

I grip the wheel. Alone on the highway, forty years old, my marriage over, my teenage daughter sleeping at my sister's house to prove a point, my long-fought-over career slipping through my fingers, and my father's funeral two days away. But here I am, terrified by the possibility that there may be a dead owl on the grill of my car. So far—*so far*—I've been holding it together. But something about a dead bird with its hollow, little bird bones broken against the front of my car is the last straw. There has to be one, right?

I push open the car door in a panic, like maybe I can get there in time to give the little thing mouth-to-beak and he'll be ok—he'll be ok. It's all my fault. I should have just kept driving and perhaps the car would have just passed over him as he stood in the middle of the road, but, no, I slammed on the brakes and that made the front end go lower—like I was aiming for him, for crying out loud.

Geez, woman, I hear him say to me. Can't a bird stand in the street anymore? What's the world coming to?

I get out, slam my door, and slip around to the front of the car. It's late at night and I'm on a back road, but still a car screams past me in the other lane and I shudder. My headlights are blazing, and I expect to find the owl crushed against the grill, wings spread—trying to take off at the last second—to no avail. But there's nothing.

I should be thrilled, but panic digs deeper. Where did he go? Is he under a tire? Is there still time? Can I save him? I kneel down on the pavement to look under the car. Then *whoosh*—up

from beneath the bumper and grazing my head, the owl rises and zigzags off—its wings clipping the hood on the way up and off into the black sky, a fluttering white speck headed for the safety of the trees.

I sit down in the wash of my own headlights and cry.

On the day my father died, the lady sitting next to me at the café across the street from my office had two bites of a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich left on her plate. One of the bites had no bacon. The tomatoes were too ripe, and the lettuce was the pale green color of giving up.

When the charge nurse called, I excused myself from lunch with coworkers, saying I needed to get back to the office—that something was wrong with the layout and they need to speak to me.

“Who?” the nosy junior copy editor, whose name I couldn’t recall, questioned. “I thought you were working on the lemonade thing. That’s miles from press.”

I’m not a very good liar on the spot.

“No,” I said, standing up, trying my best to get out of there. “The other one.”

There is no other one. They haven’t acquired anything new in a while. All we’re doing is catching up on commitments. In my department, this lemonade thing is the bottom of the barrel. I should have freelanced, but I took the staff position because of the security.

There is no security. The news in my ear that my father had passed was proof of that.

I’m not ready for this. I’m not ready. Not ready.

The words flooded my brain in a useless mantra. Who is ever ready? Even through long illness and inevitable demise, the heart still hopes, like a child who still believes in magic.

Addled, I left without paying my bill at the bacon, lettuce,

and overripe tomato café. I texted an apology to Suzanne for leaving her with the nosy copy editor and my check. She wrote back to ask if I was ok. I tried to reply, but the whole process of written telephone communication via a handheld device capable of technological tasks beyond imagination seemed suddenly ridiculous to me. Everything seemed ridiculous. As if all the effort to create plasma-TV screens, 3-D everything, cars that could parallel park themselves, and phones that could video chat while surfing the net and washing your dog was just a distraction from the fact that none of it can make you immortal. It's all smoke and mirrors to hide the knowledge that your heart can still break, your eyes can still cry, and the people you love will leave you.

After the owl incident, the rest of the drive home takes on that surreal quality that things get after something weird has happened. Especially after something weird has happened in the midst of some life-altering milestone like the death of a parent.

A possum traipses out across the street as possums are known to do. I see it in enough time to slow down and let it pass, but it looks at me on its way across the blacktop like it has some knowledge of the owl incident of five minutes before.

Watch it, lady, the possum says to me, its voice the sarcastic rasp of a two-pack-a-day comedian. *We're supposed to be out here. You're supposed to be at home. So take your carrot cake and your lemons and get yourself back inside your empty condo with the horrible lighting in the bathroom and the portfolio you hide under the couch but pull out and dream over when everyone else is asleep. By the way, Nina, you're isolating yourself again—bad move.*

I'm amazed at the level of insight for a possum.

I make it home without turning anything into roadkill and park in my usual spot in the bowels of the parking garage below my condo building. Jack, my newly ex-husband after a matter of several expensive months, used to park next to me in sort of

a building-wide “you park there, I park here, and these are our spots” arrangement. Jack’s spot is still empty. I’m sure there’s much discussion over who will get his place, but so far no one wants to be the first to park there. They all know that parking there means my marriage is over, and they don’t want to be part of the fallout.

As promised, as soon as I get inside the condo I head for a knife and fork. As I’m slicing a piece of the cake and shoving off ideas of how I could have photographed it, my cell phone rings and a picture of my mother in a gaudy Christmas sweater lights the screen.

Mom is calling me after midnight. This isn’t good.

“I’m that woman again, Nina,” Mom says after perfunctory small talk, none of which addresses the time of night. “You know what I mean?”

“Not really,” I say and take my plate of false security onto the balcony.

I love the view from my balcony—downtown lit up in the near distance, Appalachian Mountains drawing a wavy line across the North Carolina sky. Tonight though, the mountainscape looks like the heartbeat on a hospital monitor.

“Back when you kids were little,” Mom says. “I was just so lonely.”

I go back inside to get the rest of the cake. I’m wrecked from months of visiting my father at the nursing home, from fighting with Jack, from reassuring our overly perceptive teenage daughter that everything will be fine. Wrecked from lack of sleep and tears in the middle of the day. Wrecked.

“Was Lola not awake?” I ask, back on the balcony again, looking out over the view that I’m going to have to give up now that I’m single and soon-to-be out of job—another reason for my daughter, Cassie, to hate me. Not that she cares about my job, but

this building has a pool and teenage boys who live here and if we have to go live with Grandma then she's *just going to die*, Mother. *Do you hear me—die*. Apparently this, all of this, is all my fault.

"I guess she's asleep," Mom says in confirmation that she'd rather be pouring out her sadness to her other daughter—the younger one, the more important one—but that I'll have to do. "Back then," Mom continues, "I was the only one of my friends to have kids. Everyone else was pursuing their career, and I was home changing diapers. I had dreams, too, you know."

"Really?" I ask, actually interested. "Of doing what?"

"Exactly," she says. "No one will ever know. Not even me."

I sigh more heavily than I should.

"I'd see the women in their fancy business suits and high heels buying exotic foods at the grocery," Mom continues, oblivious to me as usual. "They'd be carrying around that little basket that says 'I don't need to know what I'm eating next Tuesday because that's Ashley's bday and we're all going downtown to celebrate.'"

"Who's Ashley?" I ask.

"They're all Ashley," Mother spits into the phone and then puts on an old-school, Valley Girl voice. "Hi, I'm Ashley, I don't think I invited you. Oh, and by the way, you have baby vomit on your shoulder."

She does a fair job of sounding authentic, and I almost laugh. But I don't laugh, even though it was funny. She needs to tell someone all these things, and secretly I'm glad that Lola missed her call. I'll take being second choice right now just to be included.

"I used to be one of them, and they knew it," Mom says, recalling a time before I can remember. "But I became a woman with a child, with spit-up on her shoulder, with a grocery cart piled for two weeks, because, let's face it, who knew when I'd get it together enough to go out into the world again to shop for

the necessities of life, never mind going downtown to celebrate someone's 'bday.' Remember when you used to go to a party just to go to a party—it didn't even matter if you knew whose it was?"

"Not really."

I picture Mom in her kitchen. She's animated, waving her arms as much as the constraints of having to hold the phone to her ear will allow. This is how she talks to Lola. When I come into the room, her body stiffens, her voice goes formal. I don't know her, and she doesn't know me.

"Is it so wrong?" Mom asks. "That when the three of you were finally asleep for the night, I'd make myself a drink? Maybe a Cosmo, or a martini, or a margarita—and pretend that I had something to celebrate too?"

It's then that I hear the tinkle of ice in a glass from the other side of the phone line. I think about my photography portfolio under the couch and my sister Lola's artwork hanging in the gallery downtown, and I think my mother and I are more alike than either of us want to admit—except for the drinking.

"Mom," I say, but am unable to follow it up with any sort of chastising comment that isn't really my place to make.

I can't ask her to be careful. I can't preach to her about self-medication with alcohol. I know she knows that she shouldn't open that door again, but Dad is dead. Thursday is the funeral.

I lift another bite of cake to my mouth, but I've suddenly lost the desire for cream cheese icing and fluffy, sweetened flour.

"Who knows," Mom says, and I feel the end of the conversation coming. "Maybe in this day and age, I wouldn't have felt so out of touch. People have their texting and tweeting—whatever that is—and their Spacebook to let the whole world know that they just did a thousand sit-ups or that their cat just ate a crayon or that little Emily has a fever of a hundred and one."

"Facebook," I say.

“What?” she says but keeps talking.

I hear her voice, but my attention wanders. She might be right. Maybe if she had had some connection to the multitude of people she once knew and all the people they once knew, then perhaps she could have posted on her wall *My youngest child, Lola, was just in a horrible accident, and if she lives, she may never walk again. And btw, she has some kind of brain damage that the doctor called the “Swiss Cheese Effect” and I could just punch him in the face.*

And people could reply *Oh, Cecilia, how awful.*

Hang in there.

We love you.

Or perhaps people could “like” her statement, thus validating her outrage and letting her know that they had at least taken the time out of their beautiful life to read her message to the cosmos and click on the little thumb before hopping to a YouTube video of a dog barking “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

I think about posting *My father has died*. I don’t know what symbols you would put in to create the appropriate little face—there must be one. Something worse than the little frown. The little face that would say *I’ve seen it happen to other people, and in theory I knew it would happen to me, but I didn’t really believe it until now*. There is no series of punctuation marks to make up such a face.

Mom is still talking, and I realize I’m several sentences behind.

“Sorry, Mom, you were saying?” I ask.

“That woman,” Mom says. “Back then, I was that young woman who other young women felt sorry for because I’d lost my sense of feminine power and had to stay home with the kids. Now I’m that woman that all those women fear again.”

“What woman is that?”

“A widow,” she says and more ice tinkles. “The poor woman

who put everything into her family and now she's all alone. And they're afraid to look me in the eye, because in the end, they all did it too, and now they see me as a trailblazer. But I'm burning down the brush of somewhere they don't want to go."

Mom is very dramatic.

I want to say something, but I'm not Lola, and I won't come up with the perfect thing that Mom needs to hear the way that Lola can. So I listen to the ice clinking in Mom's glass and know she's thinking of calling Lola again.

"I didn't think that, by the way," Mom says, startling me.

"Think what?"

"That I lost my sense of feminine power by having children," she says. "I actually felt sorry for the women who thought they should feel sorry for me. I think they were jealous. You always want the thing you don't have."

Yes, you do. I wanted a marriage and then I got one. I wanted a career and then we had a child. I wanted a child and then I got lonely. I got everything I wanted and then I was unhappy.

"I just meant that I loved having kids," Mom says, her voice pulling me out of my own head. "I just lost myself. I didn't start drinking because you guys made life tough. You made it wonderful. I just wasn't very good at it sometimes, and when things got hard, I fell down."

That's a confession she can't say to Lola. Mom is talking to me now, referencing an inside joke that isn't funny. Lola doesn't know our mother used to drink—she doesn't remember. Just Dad, my brother, Ray, and I remember the mother that Mom used to be.

"Is Cassie still at Lola's house?" Mom asks to change the subject, although it doesn't, not really.

"Yeah," I say. "This week she's picking Jack. Getting used to living away from me."

“She’s going to live with Jack?”

“Of course not,” I say, unsure. “That’s why she went to Lola’s house.”

“I don’t follow,” Mom says.

I change the subject for real and ask Mom about the dreaded details of Dad’s funeral. Mom talks for a few minutes about florists and caterers and aunts and uncles I don’t really recall. If I didn’t know better, she could be talking about a wedding or perhaps a baby shower.

“See you Thursday, Mom,” I say like Thursday isn’t Dad’s funeral.

“Good night, sweetie,” Mom says, like it is.