

# HARDLY ANY SHOOTING STARS LEFT

*B. K. Froman, Beavercreek, Oregon*

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## Chapter 1

Lexi rapidly thumbed the left stick sideways while flicking the right stick forward. “No, no, no. Get out of there,” she yelled.

The twenty-six-year-old had been brushing her teeth when the drone’s alarm wailed. She’d dashed to her computer, swallowing a mouth of fluoride-foam.

On the screen, images of green pastures and clumps of black cattle wobbled and turned. She thumbed harder, yelling as though she could push her will through the controls. The view twisted in circles. Each slanted spin showing the sun glinting off ripples of a pond below.

When the drone hit, it flipped sideways, its front-mount camera casting a cock-eyed image across the water back toward the barn. Like watching a slow-moving train wreck, Lexi couldn’t pull her eyes from the screen. The view began a slow tilt, panning upward until it came to rest, showing a crisp-blue morning sky.

She threw the controller at her desk chair. A slew of curses were aimed at the fish clock on the wall, a rubber bass with the clock-face in its belly. 6:30 a.m.

Shucking out of blue slacks and the maroon silk shirt she’d planned to wear to her presentation this morning, she laid them in assembly-line order on the foot of the bed. They’d be ready to quick-change back into when she finished this nasty little task. On her way out the door, still buttoning her jeans, she passed the controller. A cow’s muzzle snuffled the screen image, stringing slobber across the lens.

*Great. Stupid cows.*

Grumbling and swearing, she trotted to the barn. Bigger than the house, the three-story white structure had obviously once been the pride of whoever had built it. Stalls lined half of the bottom floor. Well-worn ladders led to hay lofts, grain storage, and cobwebs in the upper stories.

The ATV sat in a stall, buckets, tubs, and tarps piled on top of it. Lexi arm-swept them off, coughing from the dust. She kicked a swath open in front of the vehicle.

The key was still in the ignition where her dad had left it. A quick twist. Nothing. A few more forceful torques still didn't make the engine turn over. Figures. It hadn't been used since he'd died thirteen months ago.

"Aaaargh!" She grabbed a gunny sack and jogged into the pasture, giving a two-note whistle. The paint horse lifted its head and began a slow amble. "Hurry, Molly." Lexi grabbed the halter and patted the mare. Still holding the gunny sack, she put both palms on the horse's back and jumped, rising to her chest before sliding back down.

Molly U-ed her neck and watched.

"I'm out of practice, okay?" Lexi jumped again, this time draping herself over the horse's back. Before she could sit upright, Molly began walking, snorting, and sawing her head. Lexi slid off.

"I don't have time for this. Stop barreling up." She grabbed a handful of mane, elbowed the horse's gut, making her let out air, then jumped. Teetering on top like a see-saw, she swung a leg over the horse's back and squeezed her legs. Molly took off.

It had been a while—a long while. Lexi kept her eyes open and one hand buried in the mane, recalling how the twelve-year-old version of herself rode, eyes closed, arms wide, embracing the wind.

Above her, the sun owned the Oregon heavens, drying the pastures from the thunderstorm several nights ago. The clean scent of new-washed earth clung to the morning, dewy grass muffling the sound of beating hooves.

Clusters of Black Angus, their numbers freeze-branded on their sides skittered away as she passed. She made a mental note of 717, its head hanging low as though it were ill. She'd check it against the video footage from the past two days. See if it had a worsening condition.

"Robo-beef. It's no way to ranch," her dad had said when she'd started using drones.

"It's either them or you," she'd told him. "I can't take care of both, which do you want?"

He'd given her a half-smile, then turned and looked out the window, his tubes and hoses lying against weather-creased skin.

Lexi hated those last mental pictures. Him wishing he could be outside. Her wishing she could be in her shop, running her business.

Each morning she'd sent a drone to programmed waypoints over the pastures, recording cattle. Later, she reviewed the videos. The drone had eased her chores—until today.

Molly heaved to a stop, kicking up dirt clods as Lexi slid off. The unit sat at the edge of the pond. Five cows milled around, nosing it. Slapping their hindquarters, she worked her body between them. She pulled the device from the goop of hoof-pocked manure and mud.

One of the four V-shaped propellers was gone. The end of the boom looked as though it had been chewed off. She ran her finger over the jagged plastic. A lead shot fell into her palm.

Her glare snapped toward the good-neighbor gate separating her property from the next ranch. No one was in the pasture, but a dark-colored trail in the dew showed someone had been there.

"You hateful old coot!" Sure that he was watching from his house, she held up the drone, shaking it, making Molly sidestep away from her. "You're gonna pay for this!"

Stuffing the drone in the gunny sack, she mounted—after three tries—and kneed the horse into a gallop, thundering toward her barn.

The hoof beats had barely faded at the back of her property when a young man, his body angular and bony, stepped from behind a pine tree. He resettled his hat from its pushed-back position. His mouth tensed in a straight line and eyes narrowed, following her body across the pasture. When she rode inside the barn, he stepped back into the woods, sure that "killin' a fool" was the only way his plan could work.

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Lexi arrived at the Crusty Biscuit twenty minutes late, still brushing dog hair off her slacks. She'd driven like Batman to the fizzled burg of Telos, Oregon, seven miles from the ranch. At seven-thirty in the morning only one figure stood on Main Street. Skidding to a stop in front BrainSmith Printing, she hopped out, yelling "Hi" to Rick Tran as she unlocked the shop door, and dashed inside to grab her laptop and handouts for the presentation.

Rick had stopped brooming water across the sidewalk to watch her. They'd gone to school together, same grade, but Rick had special help to get through classes. His face usually wore a perpetual grin as though he heard the happy music of life that the rest of world couldn't decipher. He was Vietnamese and had been the scapegoat for her classmates for as long as Lexi could remember.

Each morning, Rick's father opened the door of his pizza shop and tossed two handfuls of grain on the sidewalk. Within a minute, two mallards flew in, skidding across the cracked cement, the male's teal head shining in the light. The pair greedily dabbled seeds off the concrete. When a few pigeons edged in on the feast, the drake quacked and full-flapped his wings like a Valkyrie. In five minutes, they'd vacuumed up the seed and flew off.

Same ritual, every morning—until someone complained to the county commissioners. "The fowl leave a minefield of crapsquirt on the sidewalk. If you want to eat at the picnic tables out front, it's like dining in a chicken coop. That pizza joint is probably breaking a million health codes."

It wasn't Lexi's fight, but she figured visiting waterfowl weren't any different than the dogs lying outside the diner, waiting for their owners or the feral cats patrolling the

feed store. She fought the commissioners on principle: If the rule were enforced at one shop, then it needed to be enforced at every business. "And I don't get why a few spots of duck muck would bother you fellas. All of you have ranches and step through cow flop all the time."

They'd struck a compromise: The Pizza Shop would wash the sidewalk each morning. As Lexi hurried back to her truck, Rick gave her a two-fingered salute, saying, "All is well."

"Good job." She returned the salute, their usual morning exchange. "Can't talk. I'm late." She hopped into her Ford F150, but as she started the engine, Rick was framed in her rearview mirror, pointing at her, his face dimming.

Throwing the truck into reverse, she gunned it backward, the tires sliding as she braked then rolled down the window. "Whatsa matter?"

"You have hair all over you."

"Oh, yeah, the dog—" She waved. "I'll tell you tonight. Thanks." The tires squealed as she pulled out. In the mirror, Rick's grin spread ear to ear.

It took five seconds to drive one block to the Crusty Biscuit. With one hand on the steering wheel, she beat at her slacks. Hair floated through the cab and settled back on her.

When she'd come in from rescuing the drone this morning, she'd found her clothes on the floor and the dog hiding in the bathroom, looking guilty. He was old and sick, and she hadn't interrogated him. She hadn't realized the extent he'd nested on her power outfit.

The small parking lot at Crusty's was almost full. She hurried inside. With the laptop clutched to her chest and a large canvas tote swinging from her shoulder, she threaded through tables, elbows, and pushed-out chairs, moving toward the back room where the Rotary held its meetings.

"Slow down, Shorty, before you tip the cart," Sull Wixly said as she passed.

"You! You marauding ol' coot. I'm pressing charges. Be ready to pull out your wallet." She focused a hot glare on the weathered man. His white hair stuck out like bleached broom straw under a boonie hat. He wore his usual uniform of dark-green work pants and a camo vest over a green flannel shirt.

"Bzzzzzz. Bzzzzzz." His eyebrows lifted as he grinned at the men at his table.

"You can't shoot people's property out of the air. This isn't Vietnam," she said.

He mumbled something she couldn't make out. With a disgusted look, she headed toward the back room. Laughter followed her.

"We started without you." Bill Brandt nodded toward the twelve people eating breakfast. "We're concluding new business."

"Good. Sorry, I'm late. I had to take care of a piece of equipment that was destroyed. I'll set up while you finish."

As Lexi connected her laptop to the projector she surveyed her audience. A couple of ranchers and local business people, including a realtor. No big operations, like the hospital. That was a bread-and-butter account.

The waitress, Rosalee, cleared the dishes, and Bill Brandt stood. "I'm sure many of you have known Lexi D since she was little, in 4-H, and a champion rider. But now she's a business woman, helping rejuvenate our town by dragging us into the twenty-first century. She's here today to talk about her shop, BrainSmith Printing."

Lexi resisted pulling down her shirt, smoothing her slacks, or fiddling with her hair as she stood and cleared her throat. "When you tell your family or friends about this presentation—and I hope you *will* tell them ... this is the point I want you to remember. It's not a question of *if* you'll ever use a 3D printer. It's a question of *when* you'll use a 3D printer. This is the appliance of the future."

She showed the video of the printers in her shop, laying down thin strips of plastic, creating wrenches, vases, and statues. "Any tool, mechanical part, or thingamajig you can think of, I can design a computer program which will instruct the printers how to create it. The possibilities are endless.

"For instance, my Dad's tailgate wouldn't open. We took it apart and discovered the plastic lever that fit in a ratchet had broken. No ordering parts. No waiting for weeks. I made one in less than an hour and he was good to go.

"The hospitals in two counties are my accounts as well as a security firm, a power boat manufacturer, and an architect. La Grande high school ordered twenty-five of these for the senior class." She held up a small white tiger head. "Students stick it on a wall or inside their locker and this mascot holds their headphones or jackets. Not to be outdone, Joseph Booster Club ordered these little mascots to hold a phone while watching video."

Lexi sat small eagles in various colors across the table, their talons reaching out, ready to prop up a device.

"For permanent advertising you could give your associates and customers ..." She began handing out bottle openers, eyeglass frames, and converters to adapt AA batteries to C-battery appliances. "And these are made at a fraction of the cost you'd pay at retail."

When Lexi told them to select something and take it with them, the meeting broke into informal discussions.

A half-hour later, she packed up her laptop. As she walked out of the back room, Bill Brandt called, "Wait." In his late forties, his hair had begun thinning on top. He wore a snap-button shirt with khaki slacks. His affable smile and a quiet manner made him successful selling policies against disasters. He looked around the diner. Several tables were still occupied. Bill lowered his voice. "Have you thought any more about selling your ranch?"

"Definitely this morning! But I'm afraid if I dwell on the idea, the heavens will crack open, my Dad will roar down, and he'll chain his ghost to me like Scrooge's dead partner, Marley, making sure I never sell his life's work."

"I understand." He squeezed her arm. "It's a hard decision. Just promise you'll talk to me first whenever you're ready." He looked across the room as he spoke. Lexi followed his gaze landing on the face of Sull Wixley, who was staring back.

As Lexi passed by Sull Wixley's table, his voice became louder and more animated. "She was a bitty thing. Only eight or nine. Kept trying to jump on that horse, bareback. Bounced off like a tiddlywink. That's how she got her name. But you kept trying, didn't ya, Shorty?" He grinned as though he'd handed her a blue ribbon.

She leaned in, fixing him with an acid-stare. "I was twelve when I learned to ride, and my name is Lexi. You'll soon be calling yourself names when a thousand dollars for the drone you shot comes out of your pocket."

"Not sure what you're goin' on about," Sull said. "But I'll tell you somethin'. The buzz-buzz of your thing scares the cows."

"The cattle have seen a drone so many times, they don't pay attention unless I drop it ten feet above their heads. Then the backwash from the rotors will make them move. It wasn't even on your property, you jackwagon. It uses GPS to fly set waypoints."

"Tain't right, Shorty. Not even your dad liked it. And if he could hear the way you talk, he'd tan you till you couldn't sit."

"My dad is none of your business. You need to move on, *Coot*. Stop living in the past." She took two steps toward the door, then turned back. "You understand at one time even barb wire was new technology, don't you?" She walked away.

Mumbled words from one of the men floated behind her. "Just like her mom. All hiss and ice."

She stopped. Her eyes closed, a red heat exploding in her chest. The noise of the diner went silent in her head. She imagined turning around, her curses shooting like flames, her words scorching the old geezers till their skin blackened and blew away.

A hand touched her shoulder. "Lexi D?" Rosalee stood beside her, searching her face. "Hon, I didn't get to serve you any breakfast. Each time I went in that room, you were busy. Let me get you something to eat. A cinnamon roll to go?" She patted Lexi's back, her face wrinkling up as she pulled her hand away. "Good heavens. You've got a lotta hair stuck on you."

The fire inside Lexi went cold like yesterday's cigarette butt lying in the street. She let out a long breath. Great. She'd done a presentation, pitching her business while looking like a Yeti. "I'm fine." She shook her head and moved toward the door. "Thanks for the offer."

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Telos been built with hope. In 1918, on the whispered promise of extending the railroad line, the founding fathers had platted lots and laid out lanes on the eastern Oregon prairie. Soon, stores with clapboard fronts and brick buildings populated the Main street.

As often happened, politics diverted the rails to a burg fifteen miles away. There were lawsuits and accusations of payoffs, but Telos still dried up like its unfortunate name—ultimate end.

In the latest financial uptick, the old abandoned brewery had been divided into leased spaces. BrainSmith Printing occupied the location next to the Pizza Shop. Paul's Welding cluttered the remaining leases with rebar, sculptures, and rusty sheets of metal stacked in the side lot.

Lexi parked in front of her business and sat with the windows down. When enough breeze had rolled through the cab to cool off her anger, she got out and went inside. "I stopped at Latte-Da II and got muffins," she called out. There was no answer. She yelled louder, "Any calls this morning?"

Nine 3D printers of varying sizes sat in the cavernous work area. All were silent at the moment. Three small rooms had been partitioned in the corners of the gaping space: a bathroom, a storage room, and the Other Room. Mrs. Shirley Blackburn edged open the door of the Other Room and said through the crack, "I'm not your secretary."

"Nobody's calling you that. Do you know the sheriff's phone number?"

Mrs. Blackburn, a gray-haired widow, had spent twenty-two years as administrative assistant at the high school. Her longish hair style and the wrinkles contouring her mouth made her face appear more bird-thin than it really was. She liked pastel clothes which made her seem small and fragile. Nobody believed it. Everyone in town had been on the receiving end of her judgment at one time or another.

When one of her eyebrows arched and her mouth flatlined, it was time to shut up and cringe. She'd heard every excuse known to teens or parents, and she didn't let any of them slide without a tongue lashing. Today, she slipped from the Other Room wearing a yellow shirt over tan slacks. "These are ready to go out." She handed Lexi two small packages. "And why do you need the sheriff?"

Before Lexi could answer, a baby goat the size of a large kitten nosed through the Other Room's door and bounded toward her like a four-legged pogo stick.

The little Nubian wore an aqua sweater accented with blue triangles. The sleeves covered his front legs and the bodice reached to his belly. A disposable diaper wrapped up his back half.

"PeeWit! You little bonker." Lexi squatted, offering him a piece of muffin. He bounced past her hand, butting her calf, knocking her off balance. She rolled backward; he jumped on her stomach, two-stepping right and left.

"You want to be changing diapers all day?" Mrs. Blackburn bent and snatched the muffin from Lexi's fingers. "He can't have sugary dross. Now, what's up with you and the sheriff?"

Lexi lay on her back on the floor. It felt like the first solid footing she'd had all day, and PeeWit's attempts to chew her shirt buttons tickled and cheered her. She grabbed his

tiny head with both hands and scratched behind both of his ears. The goat's diapered bottom tap danced side to side as she described the morning's drone sabotage.

"A fat lot of good the Young County sheriff will do you." Mrs. Blackburn looked at her wristwatch, her mouth puckered as though the words were sour. "But you could try. Maybe he's finished collecting freebies from the diner and made it to his office by now. Oh, you had a phone call. Gavin Ceely will wire up the barn this afternoon. Isn't he a customer? The Celesto Company?" She handed Lexi a slip of paper. "Are you adding something to your barn?"

"I can't decide between a treadmill for my horse or a big turkey fryer. I hate it when turkeys stink up the kitchen. Don't you?" Lexi said.

The skinny woman gave her a sarcastic glare. "Okay, don't tell me. Just get off the floor. Good grief. Why do you have hair all over you? It's not PeeWit's. You didn't go to a business meeting looking like that, did you?"

"Why would I?"

Mrs. Blackburn's gray eyebrows arched, and her mouth went stick-straight. PeeWit, catching the edge of her glare, stopped wiggling and pulled from Lexi's grasp. "I conduct business here," the older woman chided. "You have clients. Try to act professional. This is a workplace. And I don't take messages."

Mrs. Blackburn returned to the Other Room; the goat trailed behind her, his hooves *tick-tick* on the floor. Lexi turned her head to watch them. The coolness of the polished concrete touched her cheek, spreading relief. *And yet you always answer the phone, you nosy old busybody.*

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Sheriff Cal LaCott sat in his office reading the weekly *Young County Press*. He was a barrel-shaped man, filling out the seams of his dark-brown uniform. A tiny triangle of white undershirt showed at the collar.

Lexi re-introduced herself, adding, "Darron Depriest's daughter" in case the sheriff had forgotten. "I need to file charges against Sullivan Wixly. He shot down my drone this morning."

The sheriff kept his eyes on his newspaper. "Heard about it. Got proof?"

"He's over at Crusty's, bragging to the old soldier's club."

"Just came from there. Wixly's spinning his usual Nam stories and ranting about technology. Never a word about taking a bead on your drone. Are you even supposed to fly that thing?"

"It's registered. I've got a UAV—unmanned aerial vehicle license—and have been checked out by the Traffic and Safety Administration. Why are you questioning me? It's that geezer-bucket who's the problem."

"You got proof he did it?"



"I've got a propeller arm that's been chewed off by buckshot. How do you explain that? The trail in the dew leads back to his place. He destroyed my property. The drone wasn't even over his place. I have it on a GPS-programmed route."

"So you saw him shoot it? You watched him flee the scene?"

"No. The alarms went off, alerting me. I was fighting the controls, trying to keep the drone from the pond."

"I thought you said it only traveled a programmed route. You were manually flying it?"

Lexi stared at him. "I can't tell if you're yanking my chain or just naturally thick. You got elected to this position?"

He laid the newspaper on his desk and smoothed it with his palms. "I've got reports of a missing cow, somebody trying to steal copper from the weld shop, and a yahoo peeling out along Main Street early this morning." He fixed Lexi with a stare. "You know anything about any of that?"

Lexi leaned forward, her finger tapping his desk, emphasizing each word. "Drone. Investigation. Charges."

"Okie doke. I'll put your complaint with the others in the VIP file." He picked up his newspaper. "If you find any proof, you let me know."

"What a fugspot. No wonder Dad never voted for you." She turned and left.

He stared at the paper, mumbling, "Some days, I hate this job."

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Lexi spent the rest of the day, cleaning the 3D printers and fulfilling orders. At four she drove to the ranch, letting the clean scent of the wind whip through the truck's windows. Winter still clung to the foothills above the valley. Far away, a few patches of snow dotted the ridgeline of the Blue Mountains. She pulled into her long, graveled driveway, eyeing the green Subaru Outback parked next to the barn. Rather than look too eager, Lexi pretended to ignore the car and banged inside her house through the side screen door. "Chicken! You're in trouble."

The Border Collie lay on a waterproof pad in the front room. Hearing his name, his black and white faced pinched into a sorrowful frown. He scooped his snout between his paws. Only his eyes moved, watching Lexi through her bedroom doorway as she changed into jeans, a form-fitting black t-shirt, and a red quilted vest. He whimpered.

"You okay, buddy?" She bent to inspect him. "You're a good dog but stay off of my clothes." His dismal look didn't go away. She stroked his head, berating herself. It was challenging having a dog that could solve problems, understand sentences, and lived to please its master—who had been her dad.

She pushed one of Chicken's pills to the back of his tongue and kept her hand around his graying muzzle until he swallowed.

"Lexi D You want to come see this?" Gavin Ceely called through the screen door.

Specks of wood shavings stuck to his black-rimmed glasses and beard. He had nice features, straight nose and good teeth, but it was his hands Lexi had memorized. Mostly because she hadn't allowed herself to stare at his face while they were working on circuit boards in college.

On their way to the barn, he thanked her several times for allowing him to install cameras. Once inside, he keyed his laptop. A grid appeared on the screen showing ten different areas of the barn. "It's as close to the passageways of the International Space Station as I could get."

"Isn't the air different up there?"

"Air density is the same. But gravity is missing. That's why this drone is specially fitted with reversible fans on all sides. It allows movement in any direction. Watch the monitor." He set a fan-studded blue drone on a barrel, and tapped the arrow keys, watching it rise.

He flew it through loops of rope, threaded it through slats, bumped it three stories up the side of a wall, finally thudding it in a landing next to a metal tape marked in millimeters. He removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and let out a long breath. "It's not going to clear all the openings when its carrying a payload. It has to be revised—again."

"You'll figure it out. You're really close. And ... uh ... speaking of fixing things, I need a small favor that'll take your mind off this. My crotch-headed neighbor shot down my SX2 this morning. It landed in goop and cow snot. Would you mind checking the motherboard?" She smiled, tilting her head, hoping she didn't look stupid. "I've got beer in the fridge and steaks to grill."

An hour later they sat on the porch, their plates, empty except for bones. The sun was slipping behind the hills, plumes of gold streaking a purple sky. Chicken lay near them, licking steak drippings off his kibble.

Gavin had been distracted through most of the meal, making Lexi repeat her bits of talk. He stared at the land. Black-barreled cows dotted the pasture, their heads down, chewing green sprigs. "It's peaceful here," he finally said. "It's a relief. You still thinking about selling and going back to school?"

She sighed. "Maybe. Everywhere ... I see work. There's so much to do."

"Can't your hired help do more?"

"I've got a broken-down dog and a sassy horse. That's it."

"I'm sure I saw someone here this afternoon."

"They're called cows."

"It was a man." He leaned forward, a scowl overtaking his face. "This is no joke, Lexi D. This project is a highly competitive, lucrative contract. The technology has multiple applications. It could make or break our company. It's like my career and life are on a cliff ready to take off or dive into flames. There're a thousand things that can go wrong. That's why Celesto needs a big space and absolute privacy to test this. I'm sure I saw a

guy next to your shed when I came up the driveway. I sent up a V2 drone but didn't spot anything." He paused, staring at the barn. "Is there a lock for those doors?"

"I only lock it when I park the Maserati in there." She gave him a flat look, smacking his arm. "Lighten up. You're obsessing. You're in the hinterlands, you townie, or is there something you haven't told me about this project?"

He smoothed the crewcut stubble at the back of his head. "Obviously, I'm rotten company right now. I think it'd be best if I go work on a few solutions."

"We could work together," she said.

"Another time." He stood up, staring at dusk spreading between the buildings.

Lexi frowned, feeling the light go out of *both* the sky and their conversation.

She walked him to his car. Neither of them speaking. Her heart thumping in her chest, confused thoughts stirring her brains.

As he drove through the gate, she turned and looked at the dog. "Well, Chicken, another successful foot-in-mouth experience."

When the sun rose the next morning, she would remember the Subaru's taillights growing smaller down the driveway and disappearing into the night. Had she known she'd be awakened in the middle of the night, she would've figured out a way to get Gavin to stay.



### *About the Author*

B.K. Froman is an award-winning writer, radio/TV talent, and university educator who lives in Oregon after spending several decades in Oklahoma. Her titles draw readers of many genres and ages as she captures thoughtful and humorous perspectives of people and change. She especially enjoys the camaraderie and quirkiness in small towns and preserves a slice of Americana that is quickly fading.

Her recent novel, *Goodnight Oregon*, was selected as one of the Top 20 Indie Novels for 2018 by Barnes and Noble. She's a Laura Award finalist, National Willa Award finalist, and Clackamas Literary award winner in Short Works. Froman uses wry humor and clever dialogue to remind her readers that life—is all about change.

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